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A Portrait of Christ the Hero in the Epistle to the Hebrews

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

A PORTRAIT OF CHRIST THE HERO
IN THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN THEOLOGY

BY

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CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

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my efforts. As they take pride in this achievement, they should know it is their achievement as well.

Most importantly, I acknowledge the contribution of my wife and partner of 20 years, Kathleen “Kas” Marie Drysdale Miselbrook. Her sacrifices have been costly. Her willingness to endure this task with me has proven her virtuous character. Her love has been life-changing. I dedicate my dissertation to her.
For Kas
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BZNW</td>
<td>Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CBQ</td>
<td><em>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CD</td>
<td><em>Damascus Document</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>JETS</td>
<td><em>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>LXX</td>
<td>Septuagint</td>
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<tr>
<td>MT</td>
<td>Masoretic Text</td>
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<tr>
<td>NIB</td>
<td><em>The New Interpreter’s Bible</em></td>
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**NT**  New Testament

**OT**  Old Testament


**WTJ**  *Westminster Theological Journal*
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Subject and Research Question

The Epistle to the Hebrews has been noted as one of the most intricate documents of the NT. The author artistically employs a multiplicity of well-known images and ideas which resonate with his audience while simultaneously exemplifying Christ as the paragon of these images. The provenance of these images which appear in Hebrews has long been a subject of scholarship. The most prevalent proposed backgrounds in scholarship have been Judaism, Hellenism, Gnosticism and various combinations thereof (with ancient authors such as Philo being dominant in most cases). Additionally, the sources discovered at Qumran aid in the study of figures such as Melchizedek. The author of Hebrews presents a portrait of Christ that places him in relation to other figures known to his audience. The author places Christ alongside those characters and uses them to convey his intricate Christology.

The author of Hebrews, however, artistically utilizes references to archetypes and ideas commonly known to his audience without fully explaining or justifying his use of them. By placing Christ in the context of these ideas, the author uses these familiar concepts to show Christ’s superiority. For example, the author fills the epistle with
references to foundational figures in Jewish history\(^1\), cultic practices\(^2\), and themes\(^3\) that would be most significant to an audience familiar with those references. In every context, the author portrays Christ as the figure who supersedes and/or embodies the greatest fulfillment of the precedent referred to. In a more subtle example, the author utilizes athletic terminology in 12:1–3 that most suitably would have significance to an audience familiar with athletic terminology used in a Greco-Roman stadium.\(^4\) In this athletic context, Jesus is portrayed as both the "objective" and "standard" for "endurance" (12:1–2). The author intentionally builds upon the foundations of commonly known references such as these to display a multi-faceted portrayal of Christ.

This dissertation will investigate how the author of Hebrews places Christ in the context of Greco-Roman heroic references to portray Christ's superiority over all other heroes. The author uses heroic language and imagery that the audience would have understood to be parallel to the figures, legends, and themes of Hellenistic heroes that were incorporated into Roman mythology. The author uses these heroic references to elucidate the Christology of the epistle and to relate his portrayal of the heroic Christ to the audience.

\(^1\) Such as: Moses (ch. 3); Aaron (ch. 4); Abraham (ch. 6); and Melchizedek (chs. 5–7).

\(^2\) The most significant references in this category are the persons (priests), places (Temple/Tabernacle) and practices (Day of Atonement sacrifices) of the Jewish priesthood (Heb 4–10).

\(^3\) An example would be the failure of the Exodus generation to inherit the Promised Land (Heb 3–4).

\(^4\) Hebrews 12:1 ("put off weight" (\(\delta\gamma\kappa\nu\nu\ \alpha\pi\sigma\delta\epsilon\iota\mu\nu\nu\)); "let us run the race lying before us" (\(\tau\rho\epsilon\chi\omicron\omicron\omicron\nu\ \tau\omicron\nu\ \pi\rho\omicron\kappa\epsilon\iota\mu\nu\nu\ \iota\mu\zeta\iota\ \\sigma\gamma\omicron\omicron\omicron\alpha\)); et al.).
Overview of Literature Review

In this chapter I will provide a review of literature pertinent to the study of mythological backgrounds for the book of Hebrews. Such studies were initiated in the early decades of the 20th century as biblical research asked how early Christianity was affected by the world into which it was born—namely a world steeped in Hellenistic thought and familiar with Judaism. Concerning backgrounds for early Christology, scholars began to posit that the life of Jesus as attested to in the gospels was drawn in part from the biographies of other legendary figures, including pagan deities.

When the Christology of Hebrews was considered by subsequent scholarship, particularly the references to the incarnation and saving acts of the Son in 2:10–18, scholars offered a variety of archetypes for its unique contribution. Initially, this chapter will review two proposals for the mythological backgrounds of Hebrews 2 that have been seriously considered in scholarship: the Gnostic Redeemer and the Hellenistic Jewish speculative system models. However, one of the most prominent developing models has been that of a Hellenistic-hero archetype. This chapter will review major contributions which support some form of a Hellenistic-hero archetype for Hebrews 2, and indicate how my dissertation further develop the study.

Literature Review

The Argument for an Archetype in Hebrews

As will be noted in chapter two of my dissertation, early Christian writers recognized similarities between the Greek (or Roman) “gods” and the “god” or “hero” of Christianity (i.e. Jesus Christ). However, the search for potential mythological parallels
in the NT itself was undertaken much later by scholars seeking to determine the narrative contours of the “historical” Jesus. Beginning with the gospels, several scholars found numerous parallels between Hellenistic heroes and Christ—in particular Heracles (*Latin Hercules*). It was some time later before scholars began looking for heroic paradigms as potential sources for Hebrews’ Christology.

Some Prominent Proposed Archetypes

**Gnostic Redeemer**

Ernst Käsemann (1937)

One particular proposed archetype for the figure of Christ in Hebrews was the Gnostic redeemer model. It is an issue of debate in NT scholarship as to what degree, if any, Gnosticism could have influenced Christian literature or ideas. Regardless of the state of this debate, the significance of Ernst Käsemann’s contribution to the study of Hebrews should be mentioned here. Regarding the Gnostic redeemer model, the general premise of this position is that it involves the figure of one who offers redemption from ignorance into enlightenment. Käsemann sees evidence of “the way to heaven” Gnostic motif in Hebrews. Following this schema, he notes the Gnostic myth of the “redeemed

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5 Of course, not all scholars believe that such a study is warranted or fruitful. (See Victor C. Pfitzner, *Hebrews* (Abingdon New Testament Commentaries Series; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 70.

6 There are a number of differing definitions and explanations for Gnosticism. While the issues surrounding Gnosticism were issues for the 2nd-century C.E. church (e.g. Irenaeus) it is debatable that Gnosticism or the beginnings of Gnostic philosophies were an issue to the NT writers. Scholars who help to form this debate are Ben Witherington III, Elaine Pagels and Karen King. See Witherington III, *What Have They Done With Jesus?: Beyond Strange Theories and Bad History* (New York: HarperOne, 2006); Pagels, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* (New York: Vintage, 2004); King, *What is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).
Redeemer” in which the Urmench leads the faithful in a return to heaven whence they all came.7

Scholars have responded that the Gnostic redeemer myth contains many elements which resonate with Christian soteriology, most notably the absolute-dualistic imagery (light/dark) as applied to the ideas of knowledge and salvation.8 However, there are numerous differences, such as the concept of physical suffering, which mark how the two idea-worlds differ significantly.9 Harold W. Attridge sees a degree of parallel between his definition of the christological portrayal in Heb 2 and the Gnostic redeemer model, however he believes that the portrayal in Heb 2 predates the latter.10

**Hellenistic Jewish Speculative System**

Lala Kalyan Kumar Dey (1975)

Lala Kalyan Kumar Dey posited that the image of Jesus in Hebrews could best be understood in light of the intermediary speculative system evident in the writings of Hellenistic Judaism and Philo of Alexandria in particular.11 Philo placed major figures of

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10 Attridge, *Hebrews*, 81. It is just this point of Attridge's ambiguity that I am attempting to alleviate.

Judaism (such as angels, Moses, Aaron and Melchizedek) in the realm of heavenly mediators, whose degree of mediation for humanity was enabled by their proximity to God. Dey proposed that the audience of Hebrews was grappling with several combined concepts such as the Hellenistic concept of intermediate states, the Jewish concept of heavenly mediators, and the Christian concept of Christ as mediator. Dey highlights how the author of Hebrews places Jesus in this context of the discussion as the superior mediator by virtue of Christ’s perfected state which allows unparalleled access to God. Dey believes that the author of Hebrews pointed to Jesus’ humanity in chapter 2 as a key element in Christ’s achievement of a perfect state.\(^{12}\)

Dey correctly notes that the author of Hebrews used a conflation of Old Testament images and Hellenistic concepts to shape his message. Certainly, Dey’s work contributes significantly to the study of ways in which Christ’s perfection could be understood in light of the author of Hebrews’ thought world. Still, in addition to the metaphysical approach, I believe that Dey’s assessment of the thought-world of the author and audience also needs to be informed by knowledge of the legends of Hellenistic heroes.

The Argument for a Hellenistic Hero Archetype in Hebrews

**Significant Hero Sightings**

Friedrich Pfister (1937)

In his article, Friedrich Pfister proposed that the life of Jesus as told by the author of the *Urevangelium* (or basic source text for the synoptic gospels) was based on a Cynic-\(^{12}\) Dey, *Intermediary World*, 219.
Stoic biography of Heracles. Pfister chose to focus his study on Heracles, as he was the most universally recognized and accepted hero in the Hellenistic world. In support for his argument, Pfister listed 21 suggested parallels between the figures of Christ and Heracles. Pfister arranges the parallels into four categories to cover the major segments of the figures’ stories (Birth, Youth, Maturity, Death/Ascension). Several of the parallels that Pfister notes will be discussed in greater detail in chapter two, while some do not qualify as actual parallels.

Although Pfister’s work does not deal specifically with potential parallels in the Epistle to the Hebrews, his work supports the argument for Hellenistic backgrounds for portrayals of Christ (and thereby indirectly supports the subject for my dissertation). However, scholars have noted that Pfister’s argument does not sufficiently support his thesis. Many of Pfister’s suggested parallels are not adequately warranted. Furthermore, Pfister’s argument is tenuously based on two bodies of work whose

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14 Pfister, “Herakles,” 42.

15 Although Aune characterizes Pfister’s article as “the most bizarre attempt to link the figure of Heracles to that of Jesus,” he does rate some of the scholar’s parallels as “excellent.” See Aune, “Heracles,” 11–12.

16 See Rose’s article “Herakles” discussed below. Also see Aune, “Heracles,” 11–12.

17 For example, Pfister suggested that Jesus’ flight to Egypt was parallel to Heracles’ victory over the serpents in his nursery. See Pfister, “Herakles,” 47.
existence cannot be adequately supported either—a singular *Urevangelium* and a Cynic-Stoic *Herakles-biographie*.

Herbert Rose (1938)

The next step in the development of the Hellenistic-hero concept came in the form of a critique of Pfister’s article by Herbert Rose. Herbert Rose responded to Pfister’s article and, while supporting the notion that the world of Hellenistic-hero legends obviously was influential on the formulation of Christian portrayals of Christ, believes that Pfister incorrectly singled out Heracles as the sole source of legendary material.\(^{18}\) Rose addressed each of the parallels that Pfister suggests and offers his opinion on them. In some cases, especially regarding the figures’ dealings with death, Rose has little or no argument against them being parallel.\(^{19}\) However, in most cases, Rose further expounds on the stories of Jesus and/or Heracles to indicate that either Pfister’s argument is inadequate, or at least, there is a more fitting parallel to Jesus in Hellenistic birth-legends than solely the legend of Heracles.\(^{20}\)

Rose correctly supports the reasonableness of the influence of the Hellenistic-hero concept on the writings of Christianity. His article also succeeds in broadening the heroic base beyond that of Heracles for potential engagement with a larger class of heroes.

\(^{18}\) Rose, “Herakles,” 115.

\(^{19}\) For example, their submission and beneficence. See Rose, “Herakles,” 120.

\(^{20}\) Particularly in the birth narrative, Rose suggests a much closer parallel to the story of Jesus’ parents than Amphitryon and Alcmene. Instead, Rose suggests the birth narrative of Deianeira (future wife of Heracles) as a closer parallel to the birth of Christ in the Synoptics. Deianeira is the result of a union between the divine Dionysos and the mortal Althaia. In addition to the divine-mortal union, the chief parallels which Rose feels supersedes parallels with Heracles are the knowledgeable consent of the woman’s husband (King Oineus) and the birth of a single child. See Rose, “Herakles,” 116.
Although my dissertation will focus mainly on Heracles, scholars such as Rose contribute to the future expansion of this study to include some of the better known legendary figures of the ancient world.  

Wilfred L. Knox (1948)

In his article, Wilfred L. Knox also addresses the issue of Hellenistic influence on the Christology in the NT. He correctly recognizes that many of the themes of Hellenistic heroes—Heracles in particular—are also recurrent themes found in the writings of Paul and the Epistle to the Hebrews. Knox states that Paul and the author of Hebrews share an “identical” Christology whereby Jesus is seen as the incarnate Wisdom-Logos. Knox seeks to indicate how this shared Christology could have been informed by Hellenistic legends, and yet in some cases differs greatly from them.

Knox begins by summarizing the major points of the NT’s christological perspective on the “savior,” namely his “celestial origin” and intentional acceptance of coming in the form of a human to serve, be tempted and ultimately face crucifixion and death. In this way, the Christ “attains perfection” and “wins exaltation” and thusly ushers in a “new age” as the reigning Wisdom-Logos. Knox argues that the key Pauline passages for this perspective are Rom 1:3, Phil 2:6, and Col 1:15–20. Likewise, the

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21 Rose’s article expands possible parallels to include many ancient hero-figures such as Paris, Achilles, Plato, Pythagoras, and Augustus.


perspective of Wisdom-Logos can be seen in Hebrews, though the epistle cannot unequivocally be attributed to Paul (Heb 2:10, 18; 5:7–10).\(^{25}\)

Knox describes Paul’s perspective on Jesus as very Hellenistic sounding, for it was common in the Greek world to hear of gods who at one time were human and “earned” their divinity.\(^{26}\) Figures such as Asclepius and Dionysus could serve as examples of merited apotheoses, but none more so than Heracles. However, Knox points out that this is not to say that Paul promoted an “adoptionist” Christology, for it was evident that the Christ was divine before his incarnation—and in that respect the traditions significantly differ.\(^{27}\)

Knox discusses the “earning” element of Christ’s divinity in relation to that of Heracles’ attainment.\(^{28}\) After Heracles’ body was consumed on the funeral pyre, the legend speaks of those seeking to gather his bones afterwards discovering that there were no remains to be found. Hence, it was concluded that his mortality had ceased, and even more so, that his “perfection” had obviously been attained as all connection with the physical realm had been severed. Such a concept of “earning” divinity would seem to resonate with the Pauline promotion of Christ’s having attained perfection through suffering in the flesh. Followers of Christ would likewise be called to reject the material world in favor of heavenly perfection.


\(^{27}\) Knox, “The ‘Divine Hero,’” 231, in particular footnote 3.

Knox indicates several points where NT Christology would have differed from forms common to Hellenistic thought. The first issue, as mentioned earlier, would be the pre-existent nature of Christ. Knox states that Paul and the author of Hebrews essentially do not deal with the “apparent inconsistency” of divine origins and the human birth element, and choose rather to focus on Jesus’ heavenly nature and suffering human nature without going into details about how the transition between the two extremes can be explained.\(^\text{29}\) Furthermore, Knox makes the point that a Hellenistic audience would be comfortable without an explanation, since they readily accepted the existence of beings which were born of divine and human conjunctions. Still, there is no pagan parallel to a descent of the hero from the divine plane. Knox rejects the notion of Christ executing a post-mortem \textit{descensus} into Hades, which leaves him to discuss the heavenly “descent” of Christ in the Incarnation as the sole “descent”.\(^\text{30}\)

Another significant difference between commonly held Hellenistic ideas and NT Christology is Christ’s crucifixion. While facing death was a common idea, death by crucifixion does not appear in any Greek writings as the means by which the hero faces death.\(^\text{31}\) Knox, alluding to Paul, states that the idea would have been considered “foolishness” to the Hellenistic world.\(^\text{32}\) Knox also alludes to another crucial difference

\(^{29}\) Knox, “The ‘Divine Hero,’” 234.


\(^{31}\) Knox, “The ‘Divine Hero,’” 238.

between Christ and Heracles here: the death of Heracles was not a martyr’s death but rather the means by which Heracles shed his mortality.33

Knox then returns his focus to the parallels between Christ and Hellenistic heroes—Heracles in particular. There is a change of name and/or status that occurs for each of the two figures. Dealing specifically with Philippians 2, Knox notes that the “acclamation” of Christ would have sounded similar to those familiar with the Hellenistic concept of declaration and acclamation of divine beings.34 Although the idea of divinity itself would have differed greatly between Hellenistic and Jewish-Christian conceptions, the achievement of such divinity as recognized by acclamation (of the people and of the gods) would have been seen as familiar to the world at large, whether pagan or Jewish-Christian.35

Knox repeatedly denies that his study may be interpreted as advocating the view of any direct connection or “borrowing” of the ancient legends by the NT authors.36 Still, the language that is used by Paul (and Hebrews) shows an “affinity” for the Hellenistic legends that is too similar to ignore.37 The Hellenistic hero-legends provided a reasonably universal basis for discussing the human-divine Christ. Knox concludes that the NT uses ideas from familiar Hellenistic views of heroes (though never directly borrowing from them) to reconcile the notions of a human Jesus with a monotheistic

divinity. In fact, the notion was so popular that Knox does not in the least seem surprised that Christianity contained a similar set of themes. Essentially, the Christian (NT) “solution” to worshipping a human was to equate him with the pre-existent Wisdom-Logos.

Knox calls the two-sided claim that Jesus was both inherently divine and worthy of being granted divinity an “inconsistency,” albeit a familiar one in Hellenism. Rather than “inconsistent,” I would say that the ideas were in “tension” with one another, a tension that is found throughout Christian documents—including the gospels themselves. Rather than being polar opposites, the NT as a whole (and Hebrews in particular) holds these perspectives on Jesus’ divinity as being essential to understanding the person of Christ. Knox mentions three elements of the Christian confession which are without parallel—namely, the pre-existence of Christ, his crucifixion, and his resurrection. None of these elements appear in the Heracles legends (or any other Hellenistic legend for that matter). Indeed, Heracles is conceived as semi-divine, dies willingly and is apotheosized. But the NT proceeds on a very different trajectory when it comes to these points. However, since the discussion of my dissertation centers on Hebrews, I will be paying special attention to how these three cornerstones of the Christian confession are evident within Hebrews. It may be that the Heraclean legends actually provide a foil for the author’s portrayal of Christ. My dissertation will show that all three elements of the

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39 Knox, “The ‘Divine Hero,’” 244.
Christian confession (pre-existence of Christ, crucifixion, and resurrection) are indeed present, and thus offer an intrinsically Christian interpretation to the Christian hero.

Knox does not deal extensively with the role of the crucifixion in shaping the Christian interpretation of the hero. The scandalous nature of death by crucifixion may have made it difficult for an average audience to view such a death as heroic. However, Christians familiar with the gospel traditions would have known that Christ’s death was carried out by means of crucifixion. Possibly, the author of Hebrews does not make obvious references to Christ’s crucifixion in the same way that Knox holds that the author avoids referring too strongly to the birth narratives. My dissertation will indicate, however, where Hebrews directly references Christ’s crucifixion, not only as a reference to Christ’s heroic death, but as a means to describe his heroic suffering and endurance.

Overall, Knox supports a relationship between Hellenistic hero-legends and NT Christology. In fact, he asserts that the NT promotes the connection between certain forms of Christianity and pagan figures such as Heracles as a familiar way to express divine Christology in the context of monotheism. In my dissertation I will build on some of the base assertions of the Christian texts, as highlighted by Knox, to help further explain Hellenism’s role in shaping the Christology in Hebrews.

Marcel Simon (1955)

In his monograph *Hercule et le Christianisme*, Marcel Simon addresses the issue of Christianity’s possible dependence on the myths of Hercules in the formation of Christology. Simon acknowledges that some early Christian writers such as Justin

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Martyr saw analogies between the figures of Hercules and Christ as initially nefarious attempts by demonic forces to imitate Christ in hopes of promoting paganism. However, Simon points out that many Christian writers of the Middle Ages viewed the analogies to be “providential” in order that the Hellenistic hero-models would serve as a “premonition” to the coming of the hero-Christ.42

Simon notes that an honest look at the historical contexts of the hero-figures of Hercules and Christ reveals an ancient understanding of the divine-human that points clearly to the likely relationship of the figures. There are obvious points of comparison between the supernatural saviors being described with “mythical language” as “messiahs” fighting evil in the world. However, Christianity distinguishes its hero by being set in a monotheistic system, whereby a resurrected hero redeems the world by his death.43

Ultimately, Simon answers skeptics about the relationship between Herculean myths and the stories of Christ by explaining how the Christian idea of a Christ portrayed in Herculean terms is not strictly duplication (portraying Christ as a replica of Hercules). “For the reality of dependence does not require that two elements are thus faced with an exact replica of each other: dependence does not mean parentage.”44 The Christian idea of Christ is therefore neither plagiarism, nor is it completely original in its presentation.

Simon’s monograph accomplishes two main tasks which aid the direction of my dissertation. Firstly, Simon promotes the reasonableness of seeing the potential analogies

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44 Simon, “Herakles,” 201.
between Hercules and Christ as being intentional by the early Christian writers.

Secondly, Simon promotes reasonable moderation concerning the number and degree of analogies from becoming too extreme (contra Pfister).

The Benchmarks (the Main Dialogue Partners)

Although the previously mentioned scholars have certainly contributed to this topic, the scholars to whom I now turn to are the main dialogue partners for the direction and content of my dissertation.


Harold W. Attridge initially addresses the subject of mythological backgrounds to Hebrews in his commentary in an excursus on “The christological Pattern of [Hebrews] 2:10–18.” He offers a synopsis of some of the more prominent proposed backgrounds for the “incarnational myth” model, stating that none of them are fully adequate. The models included in his synopsis are the Gnostic-Redeemer model, the Hellenistic hero model, and a form of a Hellenistic-Jewish model that is rooted in an Old Testament apocalyptic model. Attridge begins to answer the question of similarity—indicating that Hebrews shares a common Hellenistic-mythic scheme with various viewpoints and philosophies. In his excursus, he even begins to point to some of the unique features of the author of Hebrews’ reinterpretation of the myth. In his subsequent article, Attridge goes into much more detail to discuss how the author of Hebrews contributes to Christology by addressing one particular early Christian tradition. Attridge proposes a

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45 Attridge, Hebrews, 79–82.

46 Each of the models surveyed has already received a treatment earlier in this chapter.
model for the Christology in Hebrews 2, which he develops more fully in his article “Liberating Death’s Captives.”

The Hellenistic basis for Attridge’s model would have been familiar to the Greco-Roman world, and thus to the audience of Hebrews. Attridge explains that the “classic Christian” model would have been derivative of a Hellenistic mythic source that was adopted and modified to fit the needs of the Christian community. The key storyline of the Greek myth, in particular the “descent of the hero,” was modified by early Christians to address the incarnational doctrine of the Christ and the salvation that is wrought through his victories.

Attridge addresses the “descensus tradition” and its potentiality for influence on Hebrews. In short, the tradition involves a hero “descending” into the realm of the dead to perform some “literal activity” which results in liberation of those held captive to death in some way. Attridge explores in greater detail the “mythologoumenon” of the descensus tradition upon which Hebrews’ model of Christ is built in Hebrews 2, and in particular attempts to use the initial mythological reference in 2:15 (liberation of death’s captives) to begin to trace the development of the myth.

Attridge notes that the descent and salvation elements are evident in several sources; hence the various proposed models to explain the background of Hebrews 2.

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50 The “descensus” tradition is so named because it refers to Christ’s descent to the underworld. See Attridge, “Liberating,” 103, 114-15.
Attridge specifically addresses the issue of a Gnostic perspective on the basic mythic storyline.\(^{51}\) Although Attridge denies the validity of the Gnostic-Redeemer as a source for the model in Hebrews 2, he does hint at points of connection whereby the Gnostic view similarly addresses issues that his own proposed model presupposes—and which likely indicate that they each are based on a “common” myth. Attridge states that the Gnostic redeemer myth contains an element which resonates with Christian soteriology—the dualistic imagery (light/dark) as applied to the ideas of knowledge and salvation.\(^{52}\) Furthermore, the Gnostic-Redeemer model emphasizes the view that the earthly plane is to be understood as equivalent to Hades. Otherwise, Attridge notes, however, that there are several points whereby the Christian model would not fit into a Gnostic scheme. The greatest differences would be the Christian doctrine of a physical incarnation, as well as the motif of suffering. Similarly, the concepts of combat and “fear of death” evident in Hebrews would differ from the Gnostic disposition to rather fear ignorance.

Attridge notes that scholars have traced a potential tradition which involves Christ’s descent into the underworld (Hades/Tarturus) in Hebrews and in 1 Peter 3:18–20. Part of the discussion has revolved around the subject of Christ’s “literal” or “actually performed” actions during his time in the descent. Although there has been much debate as to what these actions might have been (literal, metaphorical, and otherwise), all scholars have agreed that Christ’s preaching was the primary action (if not the only one). In this article Attridge seeks to show that present in Hebrews is a

\(^{51}\) Attridge, Hebrews, 81.

\(^{52}\) Attridge, Hebrews, 81.
contribution (or at the very least a witness) to a particular Hellenistic form of the
descensus tradition that not only incorporates battle imagery into the tradition, but also a
metaphorical identification of earth with Hades.  

Attridge explores the “liberation from death myth” that occurs in Greco-Roman
sources. Although the “liberation from death” element in Hebrews parallels a few Greco-
Roman liberators (such as Orpheus), the figure of Heracles shares many elements with
the Christ of this passage in Hebrews. In particular, each of the two characters liberates
(literally), is perfected through suffering and, in turn, liberates others from their fear of
death. Attridge notes that this philosophical view of Heracles—whereby a mortal
character achieves immortality after contests within and without—is most obvious in
Seneca’s plays of Heracles.

Attridge notes that Seneca’s tragedies contain the key points to the storyline: the
achieved glorification through suffering, the “stoic” acceptance of death and the resultant
liberation. Attridge provides a succinct overview of Seneca’s plays—highlighting what
he believes to be relevant parallels between Heracles and the Christ of Hebrews (2:10—
18 in particular). Each confronts an enemy whose domain is death, and the result of the
confrontation is that captives are released. Each figure experiences “educative suffering”

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53 Attridge, “Liberating,” 105-06.

54 Attridge also lists others, “Liberating,” 110.

55 The parallels and their critiques will be addressed in more detail in subsequent chapters of my
dissertation.


(see Heb 2:17–18; 5:7–9). By their own actions of self-sacrifice and the acceptance of their own deaths, each conquers Hades/death (respectively) and “achieves” divinity.\(^{58}\)

Attridge further notes that not only are the stories of the characters’ lives similar, but the expected responses of the audience are also parallel.\(^{59}\) The apotheosis of Heracles and the exaltation of Christ each elicit (or solicit) cultic worship. Furthermore, the characters and their actions are idealized as exemplary and excellent foundational stories upon which to build the basis for model lives.

Attridge makes it a point of stating that the two characters of Christ and Heracles have not simply been harmonized by either Seneca or the author of Hebrews, for there is no clear indication of source dependence between Seneca’s plays and Hebrews.\(^{60}\) Furthermore, the author of Hebrews develops a presentation of Jesus that differs significantly from how philosophers depicted Heracles. Overall, however, there is strong indication of a “generic source of the mythical imagery” and the author of Hebrews interprets (or at least communicates) how the imagery is applied to Christ in Hebrews 2 in a way that is consistent with Hellenistic forms of thought.

Attridge points out that the author of Hebrews characterizes Christ in a way which resembles a larger mythic-theme, and the point of interest should be to understand how the author reinterprets the mythic-theme and uses the theme to inform his point about Christ.\(^{61}\)

\(^{58}\) Concerning Christ, exactly when (or if) Christ “achieves” divinity is a matter of much debate.

\(^{59}\) Attridge, “Liberating,” 112.

\(^{60}\) Attridge, “Liberating,” 112.

\(^{61}\) Attridge, Hebrews, 82.
an introduction to the epistle’s discussion on the priesthood of Christ by defining and characterizing this priesthood, while simultaneously exhorting the audience to faithfulness.

Attridge mentions various Christian texts which expound on the traditional activity of Christ in the underworld. When examining Hebrews, Attridge notes that certain elements of the text certainly denote a Jewish-Christian influence (such as the naming of “the devil” as the antagonist or adversary). However, Attridge further proposes that the descensus tradition in Hebrews carries particularly Hellenistic elements both in the language used and the actions described. The author of Hebrews employs the terms for “leader” (ἄρχων; 2:10), “combat” (καταργέω; 2:14–15) and “help/guide” (ἐπιλαμβάνω; 2:16)—all of which describe actions that echo ancient and widely known traditions of certain Hellenistic heroes. Attridge believes that the literal nature of the actions distance the tradition in Hebrews from being considered metaphorical (which would make the tradition a later development) or from being narrowly Jewish in origin.

A particular issue for Attridge is the “missing” reference to Hades in Hebrews. If Christ “descended,” and such a descending was not simply metaphorical, into what plane did he “descend” to carry out the literal actions of liberation described in Hebrews. Attridge therefore proposes that the author of Hebrews intends for the incarnation of Christ into

62 Such as Irenaeus, Against Heresies 1.27.3; and other works such as Odes of Solomon 42:12, 15-17; Apocryphon of John (NHC II, 1) 31, 13-21; (NHC VII,4) 110, 27-29; and Melito of Sardis, On Pascha 102.

63 I will explore the varied definitions and implications for this term in chapter 2 of this dissertation.

this world to be considered the literal descent, and thusly the literal actions occur in this world—as does the resultant liberation.\textsuperscript{65} Attridge notes that such a perspective would also account for the subject of liberation, namely from the “fear of death” (2:15). The objects of liberation (the audience) are liberated by Christ’s victorious conflict over such a pervasive fear of death.

Attridge notes that the subject of liberation is further indication as to how the author of Hebrews modifies the descensus tradition as well as the Hellenistic thought-world behind it. By interpreting the subject as the “fear of death” instead of death itself, the author of Hebrews addresses a topic that Attridge calls “common” to the Greco-Roman world (again, as opposed to narrowly attributing the descensus tradition to Hebrew/Jewish sources).\textsuperscript{66}

Attridge then brings his discussion back to the descensus tradition itself and how the author of Hebrews interprets or reflects the tradition for the audience in an “existential” way (as being grounded in actual events or reality).\textsuperscript{67} Attridge points to multiple indications where the author of Hebrews places Christ’s descensus and combat within an earthly realm—namely the obedience and sacrifice of Christ (10:1–10). Furthermore, the author of Hebrews emphasizes the earthly plane as where Christians worship and commune with Christ (13:10, 13, 15–16), and where they personify faithfulness through solidarity and fellowship. Interestingly here, Attridge hints that the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{65} Attridge, “Liberating,” 108–09.
\item \textsuperscript{66} Attridge, “Liberating,” 109.
\item \textsuperscript{67} Attridge, “Liberating,” 113–14.
\end{itemize}
“preaching” element of the descensus tradition, as seen in 1 Peter 3:19–20, may be indicated in 2:12–13.

Attridge’s study certainly reinforces the position regarding a likely Hellenistic background for the portrayal of Christ in Hebrews 2. It is significant to compare how the author of Hebrews connects with common Christian traditions (such as with the alleged descensus tradition evident elsewhere (1 Peter, perhaps even Philippians 2). Attridge correctly draws upon the context of the passage in Hebrews to observe elements of the descensus tradition.

The notion of the incarnation as a “descent” is clear within Hebrews (chapters 1–2) and elsewhere in the early Christian writings (Philippians 2). In Hebrews 2, the “descent” to earth is meant to solidify the solidarity that the suffering Christ has with the audience. Attridge rightly points out that the literal acts of Christ (both on earth and in the underworld) play an important role in the liberation of the audience from the fear of death. It would even seem that the author could exhort the audience to courage and fidelity by reminding them that they have already been liberated. But does such a move necessitate portraying life on earth as “hell”? The author in Hebrews may present Christ’s “descent” as a temporary demotion of sorts, but apparently it was a necessary one. The audience of Hebrews may be asked to follow their leader’s example of fidelity in suffering, but in Hebrews 2, the emphasis is on the qualifications of Christ to be the High Priest who greatly benefits the audience. Ontological questions of his nature, personhood and actions are important aspects that are developed in tandem with his role as High Priest.
Attridge concludes that the author conveys in Hebrews an early (if not the earliest) rendition of the descensus tradition. He states that the tradition in Hebrews emphasizes earth (as a plane of existence) as death’s prison (by fear of death) and destruction of the prison’s lord as the liberating act. Overall, such elements have more in common with widely-known Greco-Roman traditions and myths than with Jewish traditions. Attridge states finally that what remains to be discerned is where the author of Hebrews contributes to the tradition and where he transmits it.

In summary, Attridge correctly affirms that the “early Christian tradition” of the descensus mythologoumenon which testified that Christ descended into “hell” and performed actions there, such as preaching, combat and rescue, is present in Hebrews 2. In essence, Attridge not only reinforces the opinion that the Christology of Hebrews is connected with Hellenistic forms of thought, but that those forms revolve, at least partially, in the world of Heraclean myths. Attridge helped to formulate a significant connection between the Greco-Roman myths and the Christian form of the descensus tradition evident in Hebrews. I will show many more points of connection between these thought worlds which will illuminate the uses of the myth in Hebrews.

David E. Aune (1990)

David E. Aune has contributed to the subject of Heracles and Christ and his contribution has proven to be a foundational work on that relationship. As Attridge sets

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the framework for discussion of the proposed models and reinforces the likelihood of
Hellenistic thought, Aune furthers the discussion of Hellenistic influence by addressing in
some detail the question of how much influence Hellenistic-Heraclean myths have had on
the NT. As such, Aune produced a benchmark article on the discussion of proposed
parallels between NT writings on Christ and the Greek myths of Heracles.

Aune’s article seeks to discover whether or not the NT contains and uses
Heraclean mythological material.72 Aune begins by addressing the ancient parallels that
were noticed by the church fathers. He states that both Christian and pagan writers of the
2nd–3rd centuries C.E. recognized Heracles and Christ “as religious rivals.”73 As the
major elements of the Heraclean myth were established before Christianity emergeses,
any parallel that occurred would either have to be the result of an accident (which he
thinks to be unlikely), or the parallel would have been a deliberate move by Christian
writers to portray Jesus in Heraclean terms.74

Aune provides an excellent summary of early conceptions of Heracles—from the
crude collections of stories of his brutal exploits to the philosophic allegorization (or
adoption) and subsequent idealization of his virtues. In addition to this, Aune highlights
certain characteristics of the Heraclean legend that make it unique. For one, the legend is
more pervasive than any other Greco-Roman hero-legend.75 The pervasiveness of the

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73 Aune, “Heracles,” 3.
Heraclean tradition has even led some scholars to assign Samson as a member of a “Levantine Heracles tradition.”

Aune also points out that Heracles’ place in the context of heroes is somewhat unusual as evidenced by the cultic worship surrounding him. Unlike typical hero-worship, there was no tomb involved. Heracles’ body was completely consumed on a funeral pyre and thus, there were no remains around which to form the typical hero-cult. Furthermore, the lack of localization in worship led to a more wide-spread pursuit of hero-worship for Heracles. Study of how Heracles was viewed becomes even more complex when one considers the types of sacrifices that were offered—which in some cases was suited to the classical expectation for Greek heroes, while in other cases it could be more considered to be worthy of an Olympian deity.

Aune reiterates some of the more universally known characteristics of Heracles that would have been characteristic of “Greek social and cultural values”—most of which he later uses in his discussion of parallels between Heracles and Christ. In brief, the characteristics are his strength, his inclination for excesses, his characterization as conqueror and civilizer, his victory over death, his virtuous inner-life, and his apotheosis. Aune argues that the pervasiveness of the Heracles legend is due to its message that humans can achieve divinity through hard-work and suffering.

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Aune then moves from the more general stories of Heracles to the particular way in which later Hellenistic philosophers used the legends.\textsuperscript{80} Cynics and Stoics propagated the hero’s life as exemplifying their own views of simple lives which are elevated above merely physical concerns through suffering. The lives of historical figures that were courageous in life and in death were said to be imitating Heracles.\textsuperscript{81} Although Aune believes the references to be political, rather than religious in nature, Heracles is referred to as “savior” to the world.\textsuperscript{82} The hero was lauded as the ideal to which any person can aspire who is willing to live and die virtuously. Cynics further defined virtuous living to involve “voluntary suffering” as well as training in morality—a kin to “divine sonship.”\textsuperscript{83}

Aune then summarizes some of the obvious parallels between the Heraclean myths and the NT writings concerning Christ. Beginning with the canonical gospels, Aune reviews some of the earliest attempts made by scholars to see a connection between Heracles legends and the stories of the Christ. While acknowledging a few of Pfister’s perceived connections between the two characters, Aune characterizes the work overall to be “bizarre.”\textsuperscript{84} Aune resists seeing evidence of close borrowing of any particular hero-myth, and prefers to side (for the most part) with scholars who see more general concepts of Greco-Roman heroes as influencing the gospels.\textsuperscript{85}

\textsuperscript{80} Aune, “Heracles,” 8–10.

\textsuperscript{81} Aune notes Philo’s reference.

\textsuperscript{82} Aune, “Heracles,” 9.

\textsuperscript{83} Aune, “Heracles,” 10–11.

\textsuperscript{84} Aune, “Heracles,” 11. See my own analysis of Pfister’s 1937 article above.

\textsuperscript{85} Such as Rose and Knox. See Aune, “Heracles,” 12–13.
In his discussion of Hebrews, Aune identifies the legends of Heracles as being influential on the christological traditions reflected in Hebrews. Aune states that Hebrews concerns itself with the historical Jesus more so than any other NT book (Gospels-Acts excluded, of course). This leads Aune to consider that the author of Hebrews was using unknown sources and traditions—unique within the context of the NT—which integrate Heraclean themes into their Christology. Ultimately what results in Hebrews is a characterization of Jesus done in language and forms similar to that of Heracles—reflected largely in the language and virtuous attributes described—and modified to reflect the author’s ideas concerning the sonship and high-priesthood of Christ.

After his analysis and comparison of the material, Aune concludes with two major points. First, although the gospels do contain some affinities with Greco-Roman hero traditions, they do not contain anything which would suggest their material is derivative strictly of the Heraclean mythology. However, Aune’s second point is that some characteristics specific to some of the Heraclean myths were specifically applied in similar terms to Christ by the author of Hebrews, including references to Heb 12 among others. Both Christ and Heracles receive: divinity at the conclusion of their lives (1:4–5; 2:9; 5:5; 6:20; 7:28); education/discipline that produces perfection (2:10; 4:14–16; 5:8–9; 10:5–10; 12:3–11); and heavenly enthronement (1:3; 2:9; 4:14–16; 10:12; 12:2).


I agree with Aune’s assessment in indicating the parallels, particularly between Heraclean myths and the Christ figure of Heb 2. Furthermore, Aune addresses a significant theme of Christology that is “missing” from Heraclean traditions—namely, the resurrection. Aune also expands the potential impact of the Heraclean tradition in Hebrews beyond chapter 2 alone—including references throughout the epistle to the life (and afterlife) of Jesus.

Aune’s article serves as a primer for my analysis of Christ and Heracles in Hebrews. Using Aune’s assessment (in conjunction with Attridge’s) I will expand the characteristics of the heroic paradigm. I will then be able to compare the author of Hebrews’ portrayal of Christ in Hebrews to the heroic paradigm as well as highlight the heroic Christology present throughout Hebrews.

Pamela Michelle Eisenbaum (1997)

It is precisely at this point that the conversation about Hellenistic language and imagery must leave the confines of Heb 2 and expand its scope to include the entire epistle. As will be elaborated upon in chapter 5 of this dissertation, Heb 2 is linked in important ways to Heb 11–12. Pamela Michelle Eisenbaum’s monograph discusses the importance of Heb 11 and links it intrinsically to the overall message of Hebrews.

Eisenbaum refers to Heb 11 as a “hero list” since the Greco-Roman equivalents are comprised of ancient Hellenistic heroes. In such lists, which were commonly

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known to the larger world, the heroes comprising the list would be held up as examples of whatever quality the composer of the list sought to extol. When examining Heb 11, scholars have typically seen the quality being extolled solely as “faith.” Eisenbaum seeks to expand that perspective by analyzing how the “hero list” is conveyed in Heb 11, and consequently she sees a larger number of shared characteristics between the selected heroes than the single element of faith.

Eisenbaum begins by analyzing how Jewish historiographies and hero lists compare to those in the Greco-Roman world. Unlike Jewish hero lists, Greco-Roman lists did not always emphasize strictly ethically virtuous qualities, but rather chose examples of those characteristics which were thought to lead people to public success whether they be particularly ethical or not.\(^90\) Hebrews, however, shares one characteristic in particular with Greco-Roman lists in that the characters in both are presented as less-than-perfect humans while at the same time presenting them as exemplary in the realm of “faith”.\(^91\) Ultimately, however, Eisenbaum argues that the “hero catalog” of Hebrews 11 most closely resembles lists of heroes in Hellenistic-Jewish literature which served the purpose of retelling biblical history.\(^92\)

Eisenbaum then seeks to discover the “agenda” of Hebrews 11 by analyzing the hermeneutic of the epistle as it deals with scripture quotations and narrative re-tellings.\(^93\) She gives the author of Hebrews credit for contributing a unique perspective in this

\(^{90}\) Eisenbaum, *Jewish Heroes*, 86.

\(^{91}\) Eisenbaum, *Jewish Heroes*, 87.

\(^{92}\) Eisenbaum, *Jewish Heroes*, 88.

matter. She sees the hermeneutic of the epistle as one which deliberately uses scriptural quotations of Old Testament speeches (oracles) as vehicles for trans-historical truths, while using paraphrases of Old Testament historical narratives as a means of naming certain national (Jewish national) elements or themes (e.g. priesthood, temple, the exodus) which no longer define the Christian experience for the audience of Hebrews.

For example, national leaders such as Abraham or Moses are not commemorated for their leadership roles, but rather for their individual acts of faith. She argues that Hebrews 11 fits into the overall hermeneutic of “de-nationalism” and salvation-history of Hebrews by providing a “heritage” for the community based on faith, and not national affiliation with Israel. For example, Abraham never received the physical promises of land or national progeny in his lifetime, but according to the author of Hebrews only had the promise of his faith fulfilled in Christ. By characterizing Abraham in this way, he makes a fitting and legitimizing member of the Christian heritage. Following this description, Eisenbaum analyzes Hebrews 11 more closely to see how it functions within the hermeneutic which she had described as functioning in the epistle as a whole.

Based on Hebrews 11, Eisenbaum establishes a “profile” for the heroes in Hebrews. Eisenbaum points out that the author of Hebrews intentionally chose the heroes that he did to convey a particular message to the Christian community. All of the figures have a key experience in which they face death or near-death, each anticipates the...
future in some way, each experiences a change in status, and each shares the common element of marginalization. Eisenbaum proposes that essentially all of the heroes in chapter 11 lived lives of suffering in hope without a dependence on any sense of national hope for Israel. In this way, the author of Hebrews was forming a connection between these figures and Christians by basing their relationship on faith—something which transcended national boundaries.

For Eisenbaum, the author of Hebrews is also concerned greatly with showing the supremacy of Jesus, so that the author cannot risk showing the heroes as sharing the same perfected status as Jesus. It is at this point that Eisenbaum defines “perfection” as it is used in Hebrews as relating more to fulfillment rather than any moral achievement. In this way, Eisenbaum shows that the heroes of chapter 11 await their “completion” (or “perfection”; Heb 12:40) in Jesus—again showing solidarity between the heroes and the Christian community reading Hebrews. All find perfection in Christ.

In her conclusion, Eisenbaum summarizes what the author of Hebrews intended to accomplish with the heroes list in Hebrews 11. Essentially the author wanted to bind together a marginalized Christian community and to show them that—in spite of the brief history of Christianity—they were part of a “supra-national” history that spanned all of human history. Thereby the Jewish traditions—formerly applied to strictly those of the

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98 Eisenbaum, *Jewish Heroes*, 177.

Jewish heritage and faith—could immediately be transferred to Gentile Christians. Jewish heroes became Christian heroes.

As my dissertation will argue in more detail in chapter 3, the portrayal of Jesus in Hebrews 12 is structurally, linguistically, and thematically linked to the author’s portrayal of Jesus as a hero in Hebrews 2. Eisenbaum’s work therefore indirectly supports the heroic element of Jesus’ portrayal, as well as informing elements of the portrayal insofar as it places Jesus as the capstone hero figure.

Kevin B. McCruden (2008)

Of the various authors reviewed, Kevin McCruden’s monograph most directly addresses the likely purpose of the author of Hebrews’ use of Heraclean imagery in Hebrews 2. Essentially, McCruden explores an aspect of the Christology of Hebrews which portrays Christ as being divinely philanthropic or beneficent. The basis for McCruden’s exegesis is the theme of Christ’s “perfection” (τελειοῦν; Heb 2:10; 5:9; 7:28).

Within his study, McCruden addresses the idea of parallels between Hebrews 2 and certain Greco-Roman concepts—the Heraclean myth in particular. He notes how scholars have generally agreed that the parallels between Christ and Heracles are comprised of the themes of suffering (2:10) and testing (2:18), with the subsequent result of them being that both figures were “perfected” (i.e. received heavenly status). While

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agreeing that seeing the use of Heracles as a benefactor thematically informs the christological portrayal of Christ in Hebrews 2, McCruden does not believe the two forms of perfection as shown in Christ and Heracles to be equal. Christ is presented in Hebrews as exemplifying a greater extent of *philanthropia* than Heracles.\(^{103}\)

McCruden shows, through a sampling of literary references to Heracles, that the parallels between both figures can readily be seen regarding how they both have victory over death, are regarded as heroic champions, and even serve as deliverers from adversity and/or death. However, McCruden advocates a portrait of Jesus in Hebrews that surpasses Heracles in the degree of commitment and self-sacrifice. While on one hand the paradigm of Heracles would correctly exhort people to solicit help from the beneficent Christ, one should not ignore the “theological commitments” of the author of Hebrews that demand that Christ’s levels of beneficence and self-sacrifice (literally offering himself as a sacrificial death) be regarded as superior to that of Heracles.\(^ {104}\)

McCruden advocates the notion that Hellenistic myths play a significant role in understanding some of the elements of Christology (both obvious and subtle) of Hebrews. He credits the author of Hebrews with developing elements of the heroic tradition in a way appropriate to the context of a Christian document. In essence, the author of Hebrews shows Christ to be superior to the beneficent Heracles as he is superior to all other things.

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\(^{103}\) McCruden, *Solidarity Perfected*, 61.

McCruden’s study provides a complementary basis for my dissertation and its study of the connections between Heracles and Hebrews. My objective is to build upon the connections that McCruden confirms as well as his particular perspective on the beneficent aspect of Christ’s portrait. I will explore in chapter 4 how this particular heroic characteristic is comparable between Christ and Heracles.


In recent years the discussion of the use of the heroic motif in Hebrews has been more or less assumed by many scholars as feasible. Through several of their individual contributions as well as their combined published and edited works, scholars Ellen Bradshaw Aitken and Jennifer K. Berenson Maclean have promoted the study of heroic motifs and have indicated the definite presence of the Greco-Roman hero-motif in the NT. 105 The Aitken-Maclean contribution (which includes a collection of essays by other scholars in the field) helps to raise several questions regarding the heroic theme and how that theme is present (or absent) from portions of the NT. The first area of their study involves the narrative of Christ in Hebrews and how it relates to the narratives of Greco-Roman heroes. The second area deals more with the hero-cult practices in the NT, and how they are evident in the NT. Regarding Hebrews, I will examine their contributions and highlight how they are relevant to the study of my dissertation.

Firstly, these scholars show how Jesus can reasonably be identified with a Greco-Roman character. Regarding Hebrews, part of the issue is whether or not there is a traceable narrative of Jesus’ life in Hebrews, and how that life story has parallels with Greco-Roman heroes. In her 2003 essay, Aitken examines the narrative of Jesus’ actions as depicted in Hebrews as a means of pinpointing ethical directives for the audience. Insofar as Christ is depicted as one who travels “outside the camp” (Hebrews 13:12–13), Aitken proposes that the audience of the epistle is being exhorted to likewise traverse boundaries ethically and to change their identity to conform to Christ. Aitken believes that the motif applied to Christ in Hebrews is informed by the travels of prominent Greco-Roman heroes, one of whom is Heracles. Aitken acknowledges that scholars have successfully shown allusions to the life of Heracles within Hebrews. In particular, she sees the Heraclean motif suggested in the “descent into hell” references (Hebrews 2), as well as the tie between the labors of Heracles and the “sufferings” (ὀγκοῦ) of Jesus (Hebrews 2). She also notes that the motif is expanded to the sufferings of believers as well (Hebrews 11–12).

Although the journeys of Heracles can be compared to those of Jesus, Aitken indicates that Odysseus is an even stronger representative figure due in part to the language used and the degree of emphasis placed on the character’s travels and shifting identity. Aitken more generally applies the “travel” motif to Greco-Roman heroes, and

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108 In particular, Aitken mentions Attridge’s works and Aune’s work noted above.
identifies the travelling and travailing elements of the hero legends, and indicating how those elements lead to the heroes’ successful completion (or perfection). Aitken believes that the author of Hebrews is entreating the audience to “join” or “follow” Jesus—the model traveler who “crosses cosmic and civic boundaries.” Such emulation of Jesus’ model journey highlights the relationship in the epistle between the narrative of Jesus’ life, and his exhortations to the audience. Aitken makes the point that understanding the journeys of Greek heroes (such as Odysseus or Heracles) helps in understanding the journeys of Christ portrayed in Hebrews, because they underline the themes of crossing boundaries, entering new worlds and cultures, and the necessary changes that the travels require of the traveler.

Aitken’s approach adds nuances to the “descensus tradition” which Attridge previously addressed. Aitken outlines the specific journeys of Jesus related in Hebrews. Jesus’ first journey is identified as his crossing of boundaries from heaven to earth. Aitken emphasizes that it is not only the destination, but the “crossing of boundaries” element that informs the theme. Jesus’ second journey is basically “a story of travel” that includes homecoming tales as well as what will be referred to elsewhere in this dissertation as the “descensus tradition.” Here in particular, Aitken endorses Odysseus as a foundational character who “is continually entering new worlds, adopting new identities, forming new relationships, until his arrival and showing of

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himself back home…”113 In respect to Jesus, his “homecoming” or “safe return from death and travail” plays an integral part in his perfection.114

Aitken believes that Hebrews defines the character of Jesus in Heb 1:1 with the same epithet that Homer uses to describe the character of Odysseus in the opening line of the Odyssey, as one “of many forms” (πολύτροπος).115 Although Jesus becomes “singular” at the end of his journey, the journey itself requires versatility of the traveler. Aitken’s point is that the exhortation of Hebrews calls the audience to cross “from the world of perceived honor into the world of shame” by being counted among the suffering (Heb 10:32–34; 13:13).116

Aitken’s article certainly highlights the “movement” motif in Hebrews. Although the movement imagery is steeped in Jewish temple imagery—she shows it has some connection with Hellenistic themes as well. However, her argument for seeing the terminology of the Odyssey (Odysseus) paralleled in Heb 1:1 (πολύτροπος) seems to overlook that the reference to “many forms” (πολύτροπος) applies to those who preceded Christ, and not Christ himself.

In discussing Heracles as a heroic model for Jesus in Hebrews, Aitken finds the “descent” and “liberation” motif is a more compelling parallel than the travel motif. She is critical of scholars who point to the term ἀρχηγός as informative in showing a parallel between Heracles and Jesus. As I will discuss later, the term itself is not adequate in

itself solely to base the connection on. However, the fact that the term appears within the context of the Heraclean themes and motifs in Hebrews 2 and 12, makes the term very revealing in my opinion. In contrast to Aitken, I will argue that these factors provide enough cause to posit a likely connection between Heracles and Christ.

Secondly, Aitken and Maclean’s collection of essays present knowledge gained from their studies of hero-cults to identify how certain cultic beliefs and practices are evident in the NT. In their co-edited work, Aitken and Maclean, in addition to their own contributions, include the articles of Hans Dieter of Betz and Jackson Hershbell who each discuss the role of the hero-cult in the search for heroic references in the NT. The essays focus mainly on how Jesus is portrayed in the Gospels and in Acts, but many of their conclusions have shed light on the interpretation of Hebrews regarding my topic of study. For example, Aitken discusses how Jesus’ death—as part of the general passion narrative—is discernable from Hebrews to be viewed as part of a cultic worship practice. Therein, she notes that just as Moses’ tomb location was lacking, so the “early Christians lacked the body of the hero in their cult.”

Evidence of certain parallels between Greco-Roman hero-cult practices and NT Christology reinforces how Greco-Roman hero motifs are present in the NT. Maclean examines the evidence for hero-cult in Johannine literature. She sees the Johannine literature essentially as exhibiting a defined pattern of Christian worship of Jesus in terms

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117 Aitken, Jesus’ Death, 170.

of the hero-cult. Jesus—like the hero Protesilaos in Philostratus’s *Heroikos*—brings comfort, wisdom and guidance for life to his worshippers in the midst of grief.\(^\text{119}\)

Maclean acknowledges that certain aspects of Johannine Christology required that certain “non-heroic” elements—such as the incarnation or mediation by Christ—be incorporated into the Christian literature.\(^\text{120}\) Ultimately, however, Maclean believes that the Johannine Christian community worshiped Christ as a hero.

However, some scholars believe that the NT goes to great lengths to avoid association with the hero-cult. In one of the essays, Hans Dieter Betz argues that early Christianity and Mark’s Gospel in particular, “consciously avoided” promoting Jesus as a hero—as evidenced by the fact that the term “hero” does not appear anywhere in the NT.\(^\text{121}\) Betz believes this to be such an important goal of the Marcan gospel that—as aside from the absence of the term—several steps are taken by the evangelist so as to negate heroic veneration.\(^\text{122}\)

Betz continues his article by offering a summary of Flavius Philostratus’s *Heroikos*, which is generally accepted to be one of the most detailed and insightful documents about heroes and hero-worship.\(^\text{123}\) It contains the narrative story of how a vinedresser’s life is changed by the appearance of, and intervention by a hero of the

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\(^{119}\) Maclean, “Jesus,” 217.

\(^{120}\) Maclean, “Jesus,” 218.


\(^{122}\) Betz, “Hero Worship,” 26–27.

\(^{123}\) One of Aitken and Maclean’s most significant contributions to the field of hero study has been their translation of this work.
Trojan war named Protesilaos. *Heroikos* provides many helpful insights into how heroes were perceived in the early centuries C.E. Betz notes many of the parallels between Protesilaos and Jesus, including the manner and occasion of their deaths (violent, premature, seemingly arbitrary but divinely approved), their relation to the themes of “divine descent” and ancestral ties, their “helpful” acts for humanity, their “revelatory” teachings, and their resurrection appearances that included seeing, touching, and a communal meal.

Betz then takes the primary element of hero-cult worship and uses it to show how the Marcan gospel intentionally dispelled any mistaking of Jesus as a hero.\(^\text{124}\) Hero worship centers around the grave of the hero. On some occasions, an empty grave or multiple graves could also be considered to be the focus of the cult if other “signs and wonders” attest to its connection with the hero. The Marcan gospel reports that an angel explicitly declares Jesus’ tomb to be empty, (Mark 16:6) as well as limiting the time period of post-resurrection appearances of Jesus before his ascension to “God’s right hand” (Mark 16:19). Taken as a whole, Betz believes that Mark represents the conscious work of early Christianity to dispel the notion that Jesus was a hero.

Betz is correct in claiming that the gospel presentation of Christ would clearly set him apart from most Greco-Roman heroes who were worshipped. However, this does not necessarily mean that the gospel writers were not interacting on some level with heroic legends. One could argue that the reason that Mark avoids obvious heroic references is because there are all of these elements of comparison. Still, his contribution

\(^{124}\) Betz, “Hero Worship,”46.
offers more subtle characteristics to the lives of Greco-Roman heroes which I apply to the Christology of Hebrews.

Even as discernment of Christ’s role in Hebrews can be improved by knowledge of hero-cults, so can the role of the heroes in Hebrews other than Christ be further elucidated. Jackson Hershbell makes another contribution to the compilation on *Heroikos*. Unlike Betz, Hershbell is less willing to state that early Christianity propagated a non-heroic view of Jesus, although it seems that later patristic writers were more outspoken in their views. In particular, Hershbell addresses the veneration of Christian saints (martyrs) as being comparable to that of heroes. The writings of Augustine reinforce the apparent conflation of forms of Christian veneration with that of hero-worship. In fact, Augustine notes how fitting the term “hero” would be for martyrs, if only the term was not so inappropriate. Hershbell’s contribution will have some impact on my discussion of heroic references in Hebrews, in particular how the hero-list at the conclusion of Hebrews 11 refers to martyrs who achieve heroic status by their actions and set the scene for Christ’s depiction in Hebrews 12.

Taken as a whole, the Aitken-Maclean contributions speak to the growing inclination of scholars to see heroic references in early Christian literature. Even though stories and parallels and even early Christian practices may help elucidate this area of study, I will propose that a closer analysis of Hebrews will also greatly augment our understanding of early Christology.


126 Hershbell, “Heroes, Saints and Martyrs,” 178, referencing *The City of God*. 
The Next Steps

A number of scholars have engaged the issue of heroic language and imagery in the NT. While the bulk of the interest has been in the gospels, scholars have increasingly become aware of the presence of heroic language in Hebrews. In the following section, I will summarize my methodology and approach for the argument of my dissertation. I will begin with a chapter on establishing the criteria for heroic language including Heracles as the primary example. I will then analyze the passages of Hebrews that contain elements of heroic language (Heb 2 and 11–12). I will then apply the points of the heroic paradigm to the portrayal of Christ in Hebrews. I will conclude by presenting an overall portrait of Christ the hero of Hebrews.

Methodology

Chapter Two Overview

Chapter two of my dissertation will seek to establish criteria for recognizing heroic references in Hebrews. I will begin by describing the concept and criteria for heroic references, which will serve to elucidate the heroic theme in Hebrews. Since the focus of my dissertation will be on parallels between Christ and Heracles, I will examine the portrayal of Heracles in the literary and cultural life of the Greco-Roman world. I will specifically examine the mythic Heracles as presented by the 5th century B.C.E. Greek tragedian Euripides (Alcestis and Heracles\textsuperscript{127}), and the philosophic Heracles/Hercules of 1st century C.E. Seneca (Hercules furens) and the author of

\textsuperscript{127} Euripides’ Heracles is also known as Hercules furens. To avoid confusion, I refer to Euripides’ work as Heracles and Seneca’s as Hercules furens.
The reasons I have chosen these authors and titles is that they contain pertinent elements of interest to my dissertation and that the writings are related to one another. Euripides’ *Heracles* portrays a mythic version of the hero who was popularly known throughout the world. Of particular interest to my study is Euripides’ *Alcestis* which contains a tale of Heracles’ rescuing of a person from Death.

Furthermore, Heracles forms the basis for Seneca’s philosophic version of the hero in *Hercules furens*. Even though recent scholarship has determined that *Hercules Oetaeus* was not written by Seneca, the content and style of the work pertains also to the 1st century C.E. philosophic version of Heracles.

In the first section of chapter 2, I will begin to define the Greco-Roman heroic paradigm by examining the classic definition and criteria for Greco-Roman heroes. The classic definition for a “hero” (ἥρως) of the ancient Greco-Roman world was a human who was posthumously worshipped as a semi-divine or apotheosized being, to whom super-mortal abilities were often attributed. Such beings were often called upon as intermediaries and it was thought that they influenced the lives of mortals—for good or ill. Given the mixing of divine and mortal elements in Hebrews concerning the mediator Christ in the NT, it is not surprising that there should be numerous points of parallel between Christ and various Hellenistic heroes.

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128 Although *Hercules Oetaeus* has been attributed to Seneca in the past, most scholars deny Seneca’s authorship of this work. Further details on this point will be discussed in chapter 2.

Heracles has been seen as the prominent hero to be compared with portrayals of Christ in the NT. Aune states that evidence of the popularity and pervasiveness of the Heracles legends can be found around the world in various forms.\textsuperscript{130} The popular and pervasive nature of the Heracles legend may be due partially to its uniqueness. Heracles was different from other Greek heroes in that there was no localized tomb around which to center the hero worship.\textsuperscript{131} The legendary stories of Heracles largely claimed that his physical remains were destroyed and his immortal being was transported to heaven. Thus, Heracles was revered as dead hero, and even as an Olympian god.\textsuperscript{132}

In his study on Heracles and Christ, Aune points out that finding parallels between Christ and pagan figures is an ancient pursuit of biblical scholarship dating to the early church fathers. Aune holds that most likely Jesus was “conceptualized” in Heraclean terms by Christians. Aune states that there is no convincing evidence that the Gospels contain material derived from the Heracles myth. However, Aune states that Hebrews does contain evidence that the epistle shared at least a common traditional heritage which portrayed Christ in a way characteristic of the Heraclean myth.\textsuperscript{133}

Some scholars doubt that the Heraclean myth and the portrayals of Christ in the NT share a common heritage. This is likely due to the view that sharing such a heritage would support the Greco-Roman polytheistic pantheon and make Christ simply one semi-

\textsuperscript{130} Aune, “Heracles,” 4–5.

\textsuperscript{131} Aune, “Heracles,” 5.

\textsuperscript{132} Aune notes that dual forms of worship and objects of worship resulted from the dual conception of Heracles. See “Heracles,” 3–5.

\textsuperscript{133} Aune, “Heracles,” 19.
divine being among many. Knox uses this point to emphasize the significance of the historical Jesus. He concludes that any human attainment of godhead would promote polytheism and would be contra-Christian “unless he was in some sense also a manifestation of the one divine Logos.” Knox believes that due to the anti-docetic alignment of Hebrews (as well as Paul’s writings), the author must be presenting a Hellenistic idea of a human who attains godhead. In other words, Hebrews emphasized Jesus’ humanity as one who attains “victory” by “a life of service and suffering unto death.”

In the second section of chapter 2, I will show how Heracles (Latin Hercules) is the exemplary Greco-Roman hero. I will present some of the more widespread myths of Heracles—including the epic stories which formed the basis for his legend—in order to show how Heracles could be considered the most notable example of a Greco-Roman hero. Even as the earliest stories of Heracles still exist in culture today, they would have formed a backdrop to any subsequent interpretation of the figure. In order for the character to be adequately analyzed in comparison with Christ, some reference must be made to the legends which formulated, in some small part at least, the magnanimous hero of antiquity. I will also trace how the mythic figure of Heracles is portrayed throughout the 1st millennia B.C.E. Most specifically, I will analyze how Euripides portrays the mythic Heracles in his works Alcestis and Heracles. Using Heracles as a template, the characteristics for Greco-Roman heroes will be summarized.

134 Knox, “‘The Divine Hero,’” 248.
135 Knox, “‘The Divine Hero,’” 248–49.
Of course, the philosophical and early symbolic adaptations of the Heraclean hero myths must also be analyzed. Attridge notes that the basic patterns of the drama such as Heracles’ defeat of a personified Death. This particular element receives “metaphorical application” by many Greco-Roman philosophers. Attridge notes such adaptations in the writings of the Cynics, the Stoics, and the tragedies of Seneca. The legends of Heracles’ labors and subsequent deification were used as a model by certain Stoic and Cynic philosophies which idealized suffering as necessary for salvation. The permeation of the Heraclean redeemer myth into Hellenistic Judaism is also recognized in the works of Philo (the Testament of Abraham and the Prayer of Joseph). At first glance, philosophical or Christian analogies drawn from heroes such as Heracles might appear to be contrary to the virtues typically valued by philosophical communities, such as piety and humility. However, such analogies emphasized the virtuous aspects of the heroes—such as “love” which was held as the highest of virtues. In this way, communities which adopted and adapted such images of ethical heroic references could utilize the characters to propagate their own messages.

As the author of Hebrews was obviously highly educated and capable of drawing multidimensional portrayals of the characters he mentions in Hebrews, the main focus of

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136 Attridge, Hebrews, 79.


138 Attridge, Hebrews, 80.


the analysis will be on examining the philosophical world’s perspective on Heracles. As both Attridge and Aune have noted, Seneca’s tragedy and *Hercules Oetaeus* are some of the best sources for seeing an incorporation of the philosophical Heracles into the hero tradition. I will examine more closely Seneca’s philosophical portrayal of Heracles in *Hercules furens* because it uses Euripide’s *Heracles* as source material. Furthermore, the philosophical Heracles is presented in *Hercules Oetaeus*, where the Heracles legend is concluded with the hero’s self-immolation and exaltation to divinity. If the author of Hebrews did indeed draw upon the figure of Heracles to formulate parallels with his portrayal of Christ, the parallels would have been drawn to a holistic and sophisticated Heraclean figure, but one known to all as well. Given the high Christology of Hebrews, any such comparison would necessitate that the parallel figure be obviously worthy of a degree of comparison with Christ.

In the final section of chapter two, I will reinforce the thematic link between Christ and Heracles as evident by the term ἄρχηγός. Nowhere in the NT does the term “hero” ( Ἱρως) appear. It is possible that the term was intentionally omitted from the NT to avoid blatant association with hero-cult worship. If the NT would have called Jesus a “hero” outright, it may have conveyed that Jesus was identical to heroes in every respect. In any event, the author of Hebrews draws connections between Christ and heroes in a way which does not require such obvious measures. He uses the themes and undertones of heroic imagery to form a base for his Christology without creating an exact replica of Hellenistic heroes.

I will establish criteria for understanding Hebrews’ use of the term ἀρχηγός (2:10; 12:2) in its contexts as indicative of “heroic language.” In approaching this study, it is necessary to establish some lexical and thematic criteria for what this project calls “heroic language”—that is, language that informs the understanding of Hebrews’ use of ἀρχηγός and the themes which could be linked to extraordinary figures such as Heracles. The traditional definitions for ἀρχηγός in Hebrews—such as “pioneer”—do not adequately convey the heroic tenure of the term.

I will turn to discussing the key term ἀρχηγός as it is used in secular and religious texts. More specifically, I will begin by asking how the term is applied in ancient texts to Heracles and also to Christ. I will seek to discover whether or not the author of Hebrews employs an understanding of heroic references in his portrayal of Christ in the contexts in which ἀρχηγός is used (which appears in Heb 2:10 and 12:2), and begin to form a basis for “biblical heroic language.” This will, in turn, help us to see the richer tradition that further indicates how the heroic theme would have been an appropriate part of Hebrews’ Christology.

Chapter Three Overview

In chapter three, I will discuss the major exegetical and hermeneutical issues of Hebrews 2 and 11–12, and begin to indicate how the heroic Christology developed in them fits into the overall message of Hebrews. The issues in these passages center around three elements which are intrinsically linked: Christ’s identity, Christ’s actions, and Christ’s relevance for the audience. Key to understanding these elements in Hebrews
is placing them within their immediate contexts in Hebrews 2 and 11–12, and within the larger context which requires seeing these passages next to each other.

In the first section I will present an overview of the structure of Hebrews and how that structure indicates the message of the epistle. Various structures have been proposed for the epistle based on thematic, rhetorical, literary and/or discourse analyses. The literary approach of Albert Vanhoye set the standard for discussion of the structure of Hebrews.142 His work noted how segments of the epistle related to one another under an overarching chiastic structure. Vanhoye’s approach highlighted how stylistically sophisticated the epistle was as compared to previous approaches.

Using discourse analysis, George H. Guthrie developed an approach which accounted for the interrelation of segments of the epistle as well as the alternating transitions from exposition to exhortation.143 Guthrie’s work incorporated elements of previous scholarship such as the cohesiveness of the passages. Semantic and thematic cues exist which indicate the relationship of passages throughout the epistle. For reasons such as this, I have adopted Guthrie’s structure for my approach to the structure of Hebrews.

In the second section I will discuss the temporal-spatial framework in Hebrews. In order to understand the message of Hebrews, it is necessary to see how the author discusses matters of time (past, present and future) and space (heaven and earth). For

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instance, the author portrays Christ as one who was pre-existent, who became human, to be exalted in heaven with all in submission to him. And yet, the author acknowledges that these realities are not apparent to the audience (Heb 2:8). Similarly, the author speaks of heavenly realities of which things apparent on earth are only shadows (Heb 8:5; 10:1). The author discusses concurrent realities with the intention of helping the audience to “perceive” the sovereignty of the Son in spite of the world they “see” around themselves.

In the third section I will analyze the author’s message in Hebrews 2 and begin to indicate the heroic elements present there. In the message of the epistle, Heb 2:5–18 forms a transition from the portrayal of the heavenly and preexistent Christ (1:5–14) to the Christ who serves as High Priest for the believers (3:1–5:10). In Heb 2 the author brings together two polar concepts—namely divinity and humanity—to portray Christ as a worthy mediator for the community. For Christ to serve as a mediator, he must exist as a bridge for these extremes while at the same time being both fully divine and fully human. In support of this concept, the author of Hebrews utilizes the Psalmist to portray Christ as the ideal person for this role.

As the author expounds Christ’s identity, he highlights the heroic acts which Christ performs in this pivotal role. His actions as mediator support his identity and indicate its significance. The author also builds a layer of exhortation into this section. Hebrews 2 begins with a paraenetic section which encourages the community’s steadfastness to the confession (2:1–4). Furthermore, the author directly and indirectly
exhorts the audience to emulate Christ whose faithfulness is portrayed in his identity as Son and his actions as a hero (2:5–18).

In the fourth section of this chapter I will exegete the author’s message in Hebrews 11–12. This section will initially deal with placing Hebrews’ portrayal of Christ in the context of the “witnesses” of Hebrews 11. Michelle Eisenbaum has done helpful research on the understanding of Hebrews 11 in light of other forms of historical-lists such as the Jewish listings contained in Sirach and 1 Maccabees.\textsuperscript{144} In Hebrews 11, the author combines the community’s shared legacy with the heroes with an underlying exhortation to emulate the commemorated heroes. Furthermore, the writer employs an eschatological theme that portrays the “heroes of faith” as being “witnesses” to the consummation of the community’s shared hope—namely, Christ (12:1–2).

Eisenbaum’s study begins to indicate the intricate layering of the epistle’s christological portrayal in Heb 12. The author of Hebrews builds upon the hero-list of Heb 11 and the virtue of faithfulness to shape the eschatological hero Christ as a unique, yet worthy goal for emulation. Thereby the author of Hebrews creates a passage in Heb 12 similar to that of Heb 2, wherein an expository passage carries an exhortatory force by revealing the source and goal of faithful adherence to the confession. Further connections between the related passages of Heb 2 and 11–12 will be highlighted in the final chapter of the dissertation.

\textsuperscript{144} Note the thesis of both Eisenbaum’s article and monograph noted above.
Chapter Four Overview

In chapter four, I will apply the heroic paradigm to Christ to indicate how the author’s portrayal of Christ in Hebrews integrated christological elements seen elsewhere in the NT with the characteristics of heroes. In order to understand how the author of Hebrews portrays Christ as a hero in Hebrews, it will be necessary to view NT Christology through the lens of heroic imagery. I will use a four-step approach to show how the author of Hebrews drew from elements of Hellenistic heroes and combined them with christological concepts. I will address each of the eight points of the hero paradigm and discuss the attributes as they appear in classic hero stories and the stories of Heracles. Then I will highlight select NT texts (excepting Hebrews) which provide christological concepts like those the author of Hebrews addresses. Finally, I will discuss how the author of Hebrews portrays Christ by integrating the heroic and christological elements.

The first step will be to discuss classical examples of the heroic elements. In chapter two the Hellenistic hero paradigm is described as having some, if not all, of the following attributes: (1) they were deceased; (2) they had a divine-royal parentage; (3) they shared solidarity with humanity—they were mortals also; (4) they exhibited extraordinary deeds during their mortal lives; (5) they experienced suffering and death; (6) they were worshipped as divine beings; (7) they were considered beneficent forces in the world; and (8) they were portrayed as examples of virtue.

The second step will be to briefly highlight how the hero Heracles embodied each heroic characteristic. As will be discussed in chapter two, the mythic legends of Heracles formed a basis for philosophic reflection during the period when Christianity first
emerged. The hero’s *philanthropia* and courage in the face of death were of particular interest. The legends of Heracles were so prevalent in the Greco-Roman culture that any discussion of these issues would naturally involve him.

The third step will be to highlight NT texts outside of Hebrews that deal with similar christological elements. In order to place the Christology of Hebrews in the context of the NT, it will be necessary to see how certain christological elements (e.g. the significance of Jesus’ death) is reflected upon in the NT. My discussion of heroic imagery will be limited to the epistle of the Hebrews, so I will not contend that any of the NT texts portray Christ to be heroic at this point (see Areas for Further Study in chapter five).

The fourth step will be to indicate how the author of Hebrew incorporated heroic and christological elements into his portrayal of Christ. As discussed in chapter three, Heb 2 and 11–12 contain the most obvious and concentrated portions of heroic imagery in Hebrews. The heroic references form the basis of the author’s Christology and his discussion on Christ’s role for the audience.

Chapter Five Overview

In my final chapter I will present the heroic portrait of Christ in Hebrews. In my first section I will show the heroic portrait of Christ differs from the classic portrayals of heroes. Considering the many points of comparison noted above, it will be shown how the author of Hebrews places the actions of Christ in the context of great and mighty deeds which would have sounded familiar to the Greco-Roman world. However, the author of Hebrews intentionally indicates how the acts of Christ, in the context of his
Christology, were the greatest and mightiest actions ever performed. By forming a basis of comparison between the figures, the author of Hebrews sets the stage for highlighting how Christ was superior to other heroes.

For instance, Hebrews greatly emphasizes the divine and preexistent status of Jesus and not merely the humanity of Jesus at the point of his suffering. It would seem that the author goes to great lengths to emphasize Christ’s descent from the highest of planes in Heb 1. The author does not place Christ in a pantheon of heavenly beings; rather he emphasizes Christ’s superiority over all except God alone. While Christ’s “apotheosis” may seem similar to the Heraclean tradition, the similarity does not necessitate simple agreement with that tradition. Moreover, the author’s presentation of Christ as singular, superior and all-sufficient may well impress even more the pagan converts and the world-at-large by making use of familiar religious myths to form a common connection and to show superiority.

As part of my pursuit to highlight the heroic image of Christ in Hebrews, I will also point out the Christology of Hebrews significantly diverges from common Hellenistic concepts of heroes at distinct points such as Christ’s pre-existence, crucifixion and resurrection. Pagan heroes were born of deities and humans, and for all intents and purposes, did not exist before their mortal conception. Hellenistic heroes never met their noble deaths by the dishonorable means of crucifixion. And, although heroes had influential afterlives, they did not experience a bodily resurrection. Hebrews does not simply skirt these points of difference; rather the author deals with them as further means
of indicating Christ’s superiority to all other forms of mediation—including Hellenistic heroes.

In the second section of chapter five, I will present the heroic portrait of Christ that emerges in Heb 1 and 11–12. Hebrews 2 and 11–12 are related to each other thematically, linguistically, and structurally. This section will explore the relationship of these texts to each other and to show the close linkage between the detailed subject matter of these passages. There are several reasons to consider the relationship of Hebrews 2 and 11–12. The most obvious reason is their use of the unusual term ἀρχηγός. The passages structurally comprise “bookends” around the heart of the epistle’s central message, namely the priesthood of Christ. Both passages present a commiserating Christ who is exalted and who redeems those who hold fast to him. Such apparent christological connections as these between Heb 2 and 11–12 are adequate in themselves to show a relationship between the passages, but I will show that the heroic dimensions of the passages link them together in such as way as to have direct implications for the Christology and the audience of the epistle.

In the third section I will discuss the significance of Jesus as a Christian hero. The author of Hebrews built upon a heroic (even Heraclean) image that corresponded with the audience’s understanding of an exemplary liberating savior. This image, portrayed in concert with the Christian message of Christ’s incarnation, sacrifice, and victory in all things, results in a heroic portrayal of Christ the Champion. The author’s portrayal informs the Christology of the audience and simultaneously provides encouragement for the audience to endure as their champion has endured.
I will conclude the dissertation with some areas for further study. Given all of these considerations, my dissertation will give a more complete view of the Christology of Hebrews by consolidating and expanding upon the current state of scholarship concerning the Hellenistic-hero aspect of the author’s portrayal of Christ. When all of the aspects of the author’s portrayal are considered, we see the author’s portrayal as that of the Christ who is worthy of devotion and emulation—the likes of which the worlds of Hellenism and Judaism (combined or separate) had never encountered.
CHAPTER TWO

ESTABLISHING CHARACTERISTICS FOR HEROIC REFERENCES

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to establish characteristics for recognizing heroic references in Hebrews. I will establish the major shared characteristics of heroes, as well as how these characteristics interact with the hero Heracles. By using the derived heroic paradigm, I will be able to indicate parallels between Heracles and the author’s portrayal of Christ in Hebrews.

The first section describes the classic understanding of the Greco-Roman world of heroes as well as their identifying characteristics. Section two will examine Heracles as the exemplary hero as well as the contributions of authors over the centuries who developed the well known and philosophic portrayals of Heracles. The portrayals of Euripides ¹ will be analyzed to help construct the mythic view of Heracles, and the portrayals of Seneca the Younger ² and his contemporaries will be analyzed to show the philosophic portrayal of Heracles. Section three will analyze the use of the term

¹ My dissertation will include a discussion of Euripides’ works Alcestis and Heracles. Note that in this dissertation, the alternate title Heracles will be used to represent Euripides’ Hercules furens (The Madness of Hercules) so as to avoid confusion with Seneca’s Hercules furens.

² While Hercules furens (The Madness of Hercules) is the work of Seneca, some scholarly opinion resists the notion that Hercules Oetaeus (Hercules on Oeta) was written by him. Cedric A. J. Littlewood lists prominent scholars who are for or against Senecan authorship of Hercules Oetaeus in Self-Representation and Illusion in Senecan Tragedy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 61 n. 106. Still, the works will be considered in tandem as they each redress the mythical portrayal of Heracles in philosophic terms.
because it serves as one of the most obvious and significant indicators that the author of Hebrews had heroes (and Heracles in particular) in mind when constructing his portrayal of Christ in Hebrews.

Describing the Greco-Roman Hero

Classic Description of Greco-Roman Heroes, Heroines, and the Hero-Cult

Classic Description for "Hero"

The classic description for a “hero” (ἡρώς) of the ancient Greco-Roman world was a human who was posthumously worshipped as a semi-divine or apotheosized being, to whom super-mortal abilities were often attributed. Throughout ancient Greek literature, the term “hero” is applied to a multitude of figures such as Greek warriors, notable participants in the Trojan war, humans worshipped as demigods and localized patron-deities of guilds and cities.³

Consideration of a person as a “hero” in the Greco-Roman world contemporary with the writing of the Epistle to the Hebrews generally involved several characteristics. The primary characteristic of heroes was that they had transitioned from a mortal existence to the divine realm. The populace considered them to be the “powerful dead.”⁴ Heroes were believed to exist as an intermediate class of beings between mortals and divine beings.⁵ It was believed that from their new position of divinity, the hero or

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⁵ Kearns, "Hero-cult," 693.
heroine could exert a direct influence on the mortal realm, especially when properly solicited. Furthermore, the hero could “affect” the world indirectly by association. It became prestigious for mortals to claim a special relationship with a particular hero or heroine.

Crucial to the character’s status as “hero” was the extraordinary life that the hero led. Once a person was considered a hero after their death, it gave a whole new meaning to the exploits of their lives. The status of hero was something to be recognized, but not achieved. Usually the figure was a divine-mortal hybrid who possessed super-mortal abilities of mind and/or physique beyond those of mortal persons. Homer’s Iliad views the superhuman attributes of the ancient heroes as distinct from the qualities of humanity in his own time. The divine-mortal being would inevitably perform exploits that involved both the mortal and divine realms. In the heroic tales, gods would influence life-events for the hero—whether they be in the mode of blessings or curses. Likewise, the life-events and choices of the hero would affect the world at large, and even the lives of the gods themselves.

As a result of their influence in life, the heroes were venerated in their post-mortem state by mortals who desired some form of a continued relationship with them. In a few special cases, the heroes were said to have become immortal or to have achieved apotheosis. In every case, heroes achieved some degree of divinity by being considered

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6 Nock, Essays, 577.

to have power beyond their mortal lives. While conceptions of the hero-realm may have been varied, the belief in the hero’s ability to exert power after their deaths was the most common trait among them.

As a result of the remarkable nature of their lives and their notable deaths, heroes continued to be viewed as relevant beings because they could affect the world from beyond the grave to a greater extent than the average deceased person.⁸ Especially by the earliest participants in hero-worship, heroes were considered to be beneficent. They were called upon to serve in an intermediary role and to exercise their supernatural powers on behalf of their supplicants. Heroes also were often considered to be benefactors and founders of social and cultic institutions.⁹ City founders and other persons significant to civil development were often recognized as heroes.⁰ Such benefactors and even royalty claimed descent from a legendary Greek “hero-race” of their past.¹¹

Overall, the general appeal and acceptance of heroic tales was very likely due to their entertainment and moral value. The legends of the heroes’ lives did not always indicate that the person, while living, was aware of their heroic destinies. In fact, if one could point out a recurring moral message the stories contain, it might be that the heroes’ “heroic” choices were made most of the time without consideration of future reward.¹²

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¹² There are certain exceptions to this. For instance, as discussed below, Heracles performs the Labors in an effort to achieve his immortality.
Concerning mortal sacrifice and suffering, heroes were exemplars of the human beings who achieved the goal of immortality in the face of difficult circumstances in their lives. For example, the hero Odysseus was best remembered for his journey home following the Trojan Wars.\textsuperscript{13} He endured many hardships and delays, but he ultimately reached his goal—unknowingly earning eternal renown along the way as well as a reputation for being wise.\textsuperscript{14} Such figures set the example for such virtuous characteristics as perseverance and longsuffering.

**The Early Hero-Cult**

Heroes were worshipped in the ancient world as early as the 10\textsuperscript{th} century B.C.E. Historical evidence indicates that the Greek cultic worship of heroes peaked in the 8\textsuperscript{th} century B.C.E.\textsuperscript{15} There were a variety of forms of hero-worship, ranging from that normally directed to dead relatives to that worthy of a god.\textsuperscript{16} Shrines and forms of worship designated for particular heroes were most often located at the reputed burial sites of the heroes whether they be at singular or multiple locations.\textsuperscript{17} In the case of Heracles, there is evidence of widespread hero-worship. This is probably due to the fact that the cult was not confined to a central burial site. As will be mentioned in further detail below, the legend of Heracles’ apotheosis provided an explanation for why Heracles did not have a burial site (unlike most heroes).

\textsuperscript{13} See Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

\textsuperscript{14} Sophocles *Ajax* 1374–75.

\textsuperscript{15} Kearns, “Hero-cult,” 693–94.

\textsuperscript{16} Kearns, “Hero-cult,” 694.

\textsuperscript{17} Kearns, “Hero-cult,” 694; van Wees, “Heroes,” 425; Graf, “Hero cult,” 249.
Concerning the nature of heroes, they were usually considered to be more generous and understanding than the gods because of their humanity. In this way heroes were often considered benefactors. However, their overall beneficence did not necessarily imply that the hero was completely benevolent. In fact, the cultic rituals of hero-worship were often performed in an attempt to appease the semi-divine patrons (or matrons) who might otherwise punish the community. Sometimes, the hero was referred to as a “spirit” (διώμων) who had to be appeased—in much the same way as the patron gods.

Once “founders” were recognized as heroes, members of their respective institutions (cities, cults) assumed close association with their respective heroes. Prominent political and religious groups promoted their connections with legendary heroes of the past in order to legitimize themselves. For example, some of the most powerful and politically-elite families claimed (or adopted) a Heraclean ancestry for themselves.

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19 Kearns, “Hero-cult,” 693–94.
21 Kearns, “Hero-cult,” 694.
22 Second-century C.E. geographer Pausanias relates such an example in his Description of Greece (6.6.4–11).
23 van Wees, “Heroes,” 425. Plato mocked such promoted associations as vain attempts at notoriety, but did not demean the legends themselves (Theaetetus 175a–b; Lysis 205c–d).
The Hero Concept Developed (Later Applications)

Over time, the concept of “hero” evolved. The appellation of “hero” was more generously applied to the average deceased person. Archeologists have uncovered more widely used "heroic" epitaphs in later burial sites than were found on earlier generations of graves. Even though the term "hero" seems to have been more generously applied over centuries, there is evidence that certain heroes were in a class by themselves. Ancient Greek historians sought to distinguish earlier heroes from those of their own times. In essence, a class-system for heroes emerged. For example, the historians Herodotus and Thucydides distinguished between certain larger-than-life heroic myths and those of average human history. They did not disregard the grandiose myths, but recognized them to be in a class by themselves.

Over the centuries, the prominence and practices of hero-cults varied with the socio-political environment of the Greek world. Many hero-cults diminished because heroes changed from being national symbols to being benefactors for the individual. However, the proliferation of literary and artistic works which addressed the subject of heroes shows that the idea of heroes did not diminish over time. In fact, heroic legends became the most common subject of artistic expression in the Greco-Roman world.

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27 Kearns, “Hero-cult,” 694.


Characteristics for Greco-Roman Heroes Summarized

In summary, consideration of a person as a “hero” in the Greco-Roman world contemporary with the writing of the Epistle to the Hebrews generally required the convergence of several characteristics: (1) they were deceased; (2) they could claim divine-royal parentage; (3) they live life as mortals (have solidarity with humanity); (4) they lead extraordinary lives which interacted with both divine and mortal realms; (5) they endure suffering and experience a notable death (and some achieve perfection); (6) after their deaths they become objects of worship and sacrifice; (7) they are revered as beneficent forces for supplicants; and (8) they become exemplars of virtue and courage for mortals to emulate.

**Heracles: The Exemplary Hero**

Introduction

Heracles (Latin Hercules) is considered the “greatest” of the Greek heroes.\(^{30}\) His legends were some of the most pervasive and notable in the ancient world.\(^{31}\) More than any other Greco-Roman hero, the figure of Heracles has been compared to the New Testament’s portrayal of Christ.

Several heroes have been mentioned as possibly contributing to the heroic references alluded to in Hebrews.\(^{32}\) Each of the legendary characters listed here were

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\(^{32}\) Justin Martyr (2\(^{nd}\) century C.E.) defended the uniqueness of Christ against other supposed divine offspring, especially Hercules (see Apology 1.54; Dialogue With Trypho 69); Wilfred L. Knox, “The ‘Divine Hero’ Christology in the New Testament,” *Harvard Theological Review* 41 (1948): 247; and Harold W. Attridge, “Liberating Death’s Captives: Reconsideration of an Early Christian Myth,” in
considered to be of divine or semi-divine origin. They also performed great feats and, as a result, were often punished by the gods. Asclepius was known for possessing healing powers and being capable of bringing people back from the dead. Another myth tells of how Orpheus travelled to the underworld to retrieve his beloved, but ultimately failed in the attempt. Perseus faced many dangers in his quests and was aided by some of the gods and cursed by others. However, it is the figure of Heracles who shares the most in common with the author of Hebrews’ portrayal of Christ.

Heracles, as a figure in Greco-Roman literature, developed in two stages or “versions.” In the beginning, there was the early mythic version which centered mainly on his martial exploits. Ethical (or perhaps political) elements began to be combined with his martial character over time. Eventually, there emerged a more refined, sophisticated version of Heracles. In addition, a more explicitly philosophic interpretation developed in parallel with the mythic version, and which over the course of time interacted with it. And although the brutish tenor of Heracles’ character was muted to suit a more refined hero-type, the virtuous power and courage exhibited by the hero remained intact.

The first part of this section will trace the development of the mythic version of Heracles, in particular how this mythic version relates to the hero’s identifying characteristics. Euripides was one of the most significant Greek authors of tragedy in the

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5th century B.C.E and his works contribute greatly to the mythic version of Heracles. The heroic elements present in his works *Alcestis* and *Heracles* will be highlighted. *Alcestis* is significant because it tells of Heracles’ rescue of a person from Death. *Heracles* is significant for two reasons: first, because it summarizes the exploits of the epic Heracles, including his endurance following his madness and homicidal rage against his own family; and second, because this story is believed to have formed the basis for Seneca’s *Hercules furens* to be analyzed below.

The second part of this section will analyze the more refined version of Heracles. If we assume for the moment that the author of Hebrews does interact in some form with the 1st century C.E. version of Heracles, then it would be appropriate to assume that the author interacts with the philosophical version (or “high view”) of Heracles. In his seminal work on the subject, Ragnar Höistad traces the development of Heracles as a hero whose myths were adapted to fit various philosophic texts. Höistad’s contribution helps to set the scene for the 1st century C.E. emerging Cynic hero. In their searches for connections between the Christ of Hebrews and Heracles, both Attridge and Aune mention texts that present the philosophical version of Heracles as the most relevant to this study. Attridge points to parallels between the 1st century C.E. writings of Seneca

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the Younger—or those attributed to him— and the descensus tradition which may be present in Hebrews. Aune draws upon a variety of philosophic texts wherein the writers exalt the figure of Heracles as exemplary.

To synthesize the major points of Attridge’s and Aune’s comparisons, the parallels between the philosophic portrayals of Heracles and the author’s portrayal of Christ in Heb 2 center on the following two characteristics of the figures. Firstly, they each serve as models of the rewards of discipline, self-sacrifice and perfection through suffering. Secondly, they each represent liberating saviors who promote courage in the face of life’s challenges, including death.

Perfection through suffering and overcoming the fear of death are the most apparent parallels between Heracles and Christ in Hebrews. However, when we further expand the description of heroic characteristics, we begin to see a number of parallels between the two figures. I have expanded the parallels to include all of the major characteristics for heroes (listed above). When all of these points are taken together, we get a more accurate idea of what the 1st century C.E. Heracles (or Hercules) looked like. This is the first major step in exploring possible connections between the figures of Heracles and the author’s portrayal of Christ in Hebrews.

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36 As stated above, it is unlikely that Hercules Oetaeus (Hercules on Otau) was written by Seneca according to scholars.

37 The descensus tradition or the “descensus ad inferos” (“the descent into hell”) concerns the tradition that Jesus “descended” into the underworld after his death. The principal NT texts for this tradition are Eph 4:8–10 and 1 Pet 3:19–20; 4:6.
The Widespread Myths of Heracles

Heracles shared the basic characteristics of other Greek heroes. Being recognized as a hero, he was accordingly worshipped by cults after his death. Likewise he was credited with founding cities, fostering civilization and fathering royal lines.

Heracles, however, transcended the traditional category of hero in many respects. For instance, he belonged to a more exclusive group of heroes who achieved apotheosis. The legend of Heracles’ apotheosis supported the founding of worship centers dedicated to the hero all over the Greek world. Unlike most other heroes of his time, he lacked a localized burial site and was therefore equally available to receive rites and dispense favor all over the world.

The level of his fame exceeded other heroes, as evidenced by his widespread cultic influence. W.K.C. Guthrie notes that unlike other Greek heroes who were usually confined to Greece’s national borders, Heracles had an international appeal. Even more exclusively, Heracles was worshipped by some as an Olympian god—one of “The Twelve” (Δωδεκάθεοι). While dozens of heroes achieved apotheosis, Heracles was

38 See the previous section for a summary of characteristics of heroes.
40 Heracles was called the “founder” of Tarsus. See Knox, “‘Divine Hero,’” 232 n. 8.
41 Aune, “Heracles,” 7; W.K.C. The Greeks and Their Gods (London: Methuen, 1950), 232. Examples of deified Greek heroes or heroines in addition to Heracles include Asclepius, Dionysus, Helen of Troy, Io (who became the Egyptian goddess Isis), and Theseus.
44 Herodotus, Histories 2.43–44. See also Lucian.
among the very few who received such a high level of deification.\textsuperscript{45} The influence of his mythic status as a hero and a god set him apart from other heroes in the minds of Greek historians such as Herodotus.\textsuperscript{46} Furthermore, Heracles—and at times Asclepius and/or Dionysus and the Dioscuri—seemed to be in a class of heroes by themselves, who were each credited with returning the dead to life and by some recognized as Olympian gods.\textsuperscript{47}

What perhaps set Heracles apart from an already distinguished class of gods was, as W.K.C. Guthrie suggests, his humanity.\textsuperscript{48} Although the legends of his divine ancestry and epic feats certainly contributed to his fame, elements of Heracles’ humanity (like suffering) were perhaps even more responsible for his popularity. Furthermore, the prevalence of subsequent poetic and philosophic traditions indicates that the myths of Heracles were more prominent than those of like-class heroes. The following sections detail main elements in the myths of Heracles derived from the sources most often used by scholars in reconstructions of his mythology.\textsuperscript{49}

\textsuperscript{45} Schachter, 684; Kearns, 694.

\textsuperscript{46} Herodotus, \textit{Histories} 2.44.

\textsuperscript{47} Cicero, \textit{On the Nature of the Gods} 2.24


\textsuperscript{49} The most prominent sources for the myths of Heracles are the following: Apollodorus’ \textit{Library}; Apollonius of Rhodes’ \textit{Argonautica}; Aristophanes’ \textit{Frogs}; Diodorus Siculus’ \textit{Historical Library}; Euripides’ \textit{Alcestis}, \textit{Heracles} and \textit{Children of Hercules}; Herodotus’ \textit{Histories}; Hesiod’s \textit{Theogony} and \textit{The Shield of Heracles}; Homer’s \textit{Iliad}; Pausanias’ \textit{Description of Greece}; Pindar’s \textit{Olympian Odes} and \textit{Phthian Odes}; Seneca (the Younger’s) \textit{Hercules furens} and (as attributed to him) \textit{Hercules Oetaeus}; Sophocles’ \textit{Philoctetes} and \textit{The Women of Trachus}; Virgil’s \textit{Aeneid}; Ovid’s \textit{Metamorphoses}; and Xenophon’s \textit{Memorabilia}. 
The Epic Story of Heracles

Birth and early childhood

Heracles was born Alcides as the result of a sexual union between the chief-god Zeus (head of the Greek pantheon) and the mortal woman Alcmene of Thebes. Zeus masqueraded as Amphitryon of Thebes (Alcmene’s husband) and had sexual relations with Alcmene while being disguised as her husband. Alcmene had refused relations with Amphitryon until her brothers’ deaths had been avenged. While the actual Amphitryon was carrying out his wife’s wishes elsewhere, Zeus masqueraded as Amphitryon and claimed that he was returning victoriously to her. The following day, the real Amphitryon returned and also had relations with Alcmene. As a result, she conceived twins, Heracles by Zeus and Iphicles by Amphitryon. Thus, Heracles grew up calling Amphitryon of Thebes (Alcmene’s husband) “father” and his maternal twin Iphicles “brother.”

Although various suggestions have been made concerning the etymological meaning of “Heracles,” one of the most intriguing is “glorious through Hera.” In an ironic twist, the human parents might have sought the divine goddess’s protection by endowing the child with such a name, however the circumstances of the child’s conception would preclude any beneficence from her. As a result, his heroic name

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50 Mike Dixon-Kennedy notes that the concept of twin births consistently occurs in Greek legends and elsewhere around the world. See Dixon-Kennedy, “Heracles,” in Encyclopedia of Greco-Roman Mythology (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-Clio, Inc., 1998), 153.


52 According to the common tradition of the relationship between Heracles and Hera, the goddess sought to confound and at times even destroy Heracles. Some scholars have concluded that the legend of the competing figures was the result of clashing cults. See Price and Kearns, “Heracles,” 251.
would incorporate the name of the one who was to become his divine nemesis (whose animosity toward Heracles would ultimately contribute greatly to his “glory”). Hera never confronts Heracles face to face, but she sent agents, storms, and any number of creatures that prove to hinder his progress.

Before Heracles was even born, Hera interfered with Zeus’ kingly plans for his offspring. She cajoled a promised kingship from Zeus for a child born on a particular day to a descendant of Perseus—which in the course of nature would have been Heracles. However, Hera set about to interfere with the labor of Alcmene, causing the delay of Heracles’ birth. This resulted in the promised kingship falling to Eurystheus, king of Argos, who would later play an important part in Heraclean legend as the one who sent Heracles on his Labors. Indeed, Heracles’ own mother left him out in the elements to die because of her fear of Hera’s wrath. However, his immortality was assured when Hera—unaware of the child’s identity—found him and nursed him.53

A few months after his birth, Hera sent two serpents to kill the infant Heracles. Hera’s attempted infanticide was foiled by his early exhibition of strength and courage, when Heracles killed the serpents with his own infant hands. Her attempt thwarted, Hera set about other means to punish Heracles (and, indirectly, to punish Zeus). Thus began the epic life-long battle between Hera and Heracles.

Youth

Chiron the Centaur supervised Heracles’ education, which included the use of various kinds of weapons as well as some forms of martial arts. It is said that he received

training from the best practitioners of various fields, including warfare, archery and even 
lyre-lessons. His “education” was concluded when he killed his own music teacher Linus 
for correcting him. It was during this period that he determined his weapons of choice, 
the club of wild olive and the bow and arrow.\textsuperscript{54} It is possible that the weapons 
represented both potential ends of the spectrum of warfare, from the brutal club to the 
strategic bow and arrow.

Some legends attest that Heracles’ slaying of the lion of Mount Cithaeron was his 
first act of beneficence. When he was 18 years old, he was asked by the king of Thespiae 
to destroy a lion which was terrorizing his land. Heracles agreed to do so if he could be 
allowed to have relations with each of the 50 royal princesses over the 50-day time period 
it would take to hunt the lion.\textsuperscript{55} Some legends claim that the hide of this lion became 
Heracles’ signature clothing and helmet, though most would attribute the adornments to 
the first of the Labors.\textsuperscript{56}

That said, other legends claim that Heracles’ first beneficent act was the freeing of 
his home city of Thebes from foreign rule. He led his home city in a revolt against a ruler 
who was forcing them to pay tribute.\textsuperscript{57} As a reward for his act, King Creon of Thebes 
gave princess Megara in marriage to Heracles, and she bore him three children. This 
story sets the scene for a crucial part of the life story of Heracles.


\textsuperscript{55} The sole princess who refused Heracles’ request was forced to be forever a virgin in service to 
the cult of Heracles as priestess. See Dixon-Kennedy, “Heracles,” 154.

\textsuperscript{56} Dixon-Kennedy, “Heracles,” 154.

\textsuperscript{57} It was in this battle that his “stepfather” Amphitryon was killed. See Dixon-Kennedy, 
“Heracles,” 154.
The madness of Heracles

The “madness” episode occurred when Hera decided Heracles’ greatest enemy would be himself. She orchestrated events so that a violent form of insanity fell upon Heracles, whereby he mistook his first wife Megara, and their children, as his mortal enemies and slew them all. In an attempt to seek atonement, Heracles sought the oracle at Delphi to find the means to redeem himself. He is told that if he serves King Eurystheus of Mycenae and Argos, he would win the right to claim his inheritance of immortality.

The labors

Heracles was instructed by the oracle to submit himself for twelve years to serving Eurystheus, whom Hera had earlier sought to supplant Heracles before he was born (see above). Some legends included that Heracles initially rejected the idea of being a slave and went through a period of denial that was eventually ended by his decision voluntarily to enter the service of Eurystheus and thereby serve humanity.

Eurystheus set a series of tasks, each thought to be impossible and intended to bring about Heracles’ destruction. Although the exact number, content, and placement of the labors themselves in Heracles’ life varies between authors, the Labors are commonly referred to as the Dodekathlon (Δωδέκαθλον; “the Twelve Labors”).

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58 In some legends his wife Megara is spared. See Dixon-Kennedy, “Heracles,” 154.


61 The formal tasks included: (1) killing the Nemean lion; (2) killing the Lermaean Hydra; (3) capturing the Erymanthian boar; (4) capturing the stag of Ceryneia (some sources reverse order of tasks 3 and 4 as listed here; See Dixon-Kennedy, “Heracles,” 155); (5) killing the Stymphalian birds; (6) cleaning
In most cases, the Labors involved the subduing or killing of various kinds of beasts or monsters that had proven themselves a mortal danger and a pestilence to mortals (e.g. the Boar, the Bull, the Horses, and the Birds). Heracles dealt with monsters such as the Lion and Hydra, which were the offspring of Titans (forces that the gods of Olympus had to subdue to come to power).\(^{62}\) Such feats served to highlight that Heracles was dealing with elemental powers who were the enemies of gods and humans alike. In some cases, the feats were obviously set for him merely to fulfill some desire of those to whom he was in service (e.g. the Belt, the Apples); in other cases, it was simply because they were considered impossible for mortals to accomplish (e.g. the Stag, the Stables, the Cattle, the Hellhound).

Furthermore, as opportunities arose in this travels, Heracles would also deliver the oppressed, rescue endangered innocents, and defeat abominable foes as additional elements to the main tasks of the labors.\(^{63}\) For example, some sources state that between the fourth and fifth Labors, Heracles joined the crew of the Argo.\(^{64}\) Heracles left the expedition in order to search for one of the crew that had gone missing.

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\(^{62}\) The Lion and Hydra were offspring of Typhon who was himself the son of the Titans Gaia and Tartarus. In his task to retrieve the Cattle of Geryon, Heracles also had to defeat the two-headed guard dog Orthros who was also a descendant of Thyon. See Dixon-Kennedy, “Heracles,” 156.

\(^{63}\) For example, Heracles saved Hesione from a sea monster on is journey home from having captured the belt of the queen of the Amazons. See Guerber, *Greece and Rome*, 195.

\(^{64}\) Dixon-Kennedy, “Heracles,” 154.
Heracles’ success in the tasks owed as much to his strategies as to his strength. The seemingly indestructible nature of the monsters was circumvented by Heracles in a variety of ways. Not only did he succeed in his tasks, but in some cases he used past success to further his future endeavors (e.g. dipping his arrows in the bile of the slain Hydra and using them subsequently to mortally wound enemies/prey). Both aspects of Heracles’ character (strength and strategy) led to his successful accomplishments.

Heracles’ strategy and cleverness are particularly evident in his quest for the Hesperian apples. Eurystheus commissioned Heracles to retrieve the golden apples that had been entrusted to the care of the daughters of Hesperus, the god of the West. Unsure of the location of the apples, as they had been removed to a secret location by the daughters (a.k.a. the Hesperides—a triad of nymphs), Heracles had to undergo more journeys and encounter more characters than usually in typical Labor-journeys.

Among the beings questioned about the location of the apples was Nereus, (Proteus) a god of the sea, whom Heracles successfully captured and held until helpful information was offered. The god of the sea directed Heracles to find Prometheus who would surely be able to aid him in discovering the location of the garden. He found and freed Prometheus, who had been sentenced to perpetual torment for stealing fire (representative of technology) from the gods and giving it to humanity. Prometheus said that his brother Atlas—on whose shoulders the heavens were said to rest—would know

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65 The impenetrable skin of the Lion was susceptible to injury from its own claws, and the reproducing heads of the Hydra could be cauterized to prevent their re-growth.
the location of the garden. Along the way, Heracles had to use cunning to defeat a giant whose physical strength matched that of his own.66

When he reached Atlas and explained his mission, Atlas agreed to retrieve the apples for him if only Heracles would take his place in the interim supporting the heavens. Heracles gladly agreed, and Atlas completed the task of defeating the dragon Ladon,67 which had been placed as guard over the apples. But on the return journey Atlas found that his new freedom appealed to him so much that he devised a means of prolonging it. Atlas returned to Heracles with the apples and said that he would undertake the task of taking them to Eurystheus and leave Heracles to hold up the heavens. Using his cunning again, Heracles agreed to do so on the condition that Atlas briefly take the load until he could put a cushion on his shoulders. Once the weight had been transferred back to Atlas, Heracles continued with his mission. Eurystheus gave the apples to Heracles, who dedicated them to the goddess Athene.68

In his performance of the Labors, Heracles traveled the known world and beyond, even to the underworld.69 Perhaps the greatest of the Labors of Heracles was his victorious return from the underworld. For the final task of the Labors, Heracles was commanded to capture the hound Cerberus—the three-headed dog which guarded the

66 Antaeus was the son of Gaea—or Mother Earth—who could be defeated only after Heracles discovered an opportunity to weaken him by separating him from his “mother” element (soil). See Guerber, *Greece and Rome*, 198.

67 Another offspring of Typhon. See Dixon-Kennedy, “Heracles,” 156.

68 Dixon-Kennedy, “Heracles,” 156.

69 Price and Kearns note that the geographical placement of the labors may also help in tracing the origins and growing popularity of the legends. See Price and Kearns, “Heracles,” 251.
entrance to Hades. In this first “descent” to the underworld, Heracles successfully completed his task and brought the beast before Eurystheus who was so terrified to remain in its presence that he hid himself until the beast could be returned to the underworld. Thus, Heracles had completed his period of service.

Other deeds of Heracles

Free from the confines of his servitude, Heracles travelled around the world and performed a great many services for humanity in keeping with his overall character as a powerful, influential, and often beneficent hero. He was credited with founding the Olympic games. As stated above, he participated in the exploits of other heroes, as when he traveled with Jason and the Argonauts. Legends refer to his continued involvement in epic wars, such as the war against the Centaurs, a battle between gods and giants, or in a war against Troy.

Heracles’ violent nature, however, led him into another period of servitude. He committed a homicide in anger, and was subjected to servitude for a time with Omphale, the queen of Lydia. She ordered him to dress effeminately and to perform domestic tasks commonly assigned to women of the time. Heracles’ personal devotion to Omphale led him to desire this assignment indefinitely, but the gods released him in order that he might continue to perform his mighty works throughout the world.

Heracles and Alcestis

Traditionally, the story of Alcestis takes place during the Eighth Labor. The story of Alcestis begins with her husband, Admetus, who was given the opportunity by

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70 This play is treated in greater detail at the end of this section, in particular how the play contains the mythic heroic elements of Heracles.
Death for longer life if he could find someone to take his place. After unsuccessfully soliciting his parents and friends, his wife Alcestis volunteers to take his place. As she dies, Heracles arrives at the house of his friend Admetus and finds the household in mourning. Not being immediately informed of the person being mourned, Heracles graciously prepares to leave lest he be a burden to his mourning host. Admetus, still not disclosing the particulars, insists that Heracles receive his hospitality. Heracles accepts the hospitality of his host.

Some time passes before Heracles is finally told of Alcestis’ death, whereupon his attitude completely changes. He commits himself to saving Alcestis from Death in order to help his friend Admetus. He contrives to “descend”\(^{72}\) to Hades and wrestle Death himself for the right to bear Alcestis home. Completing the task, Heracles returns Alcestis to the world of the living. He presents a veiled Alcestis to Admetus and leads him to think she is another woman that Admetus must agree to marry without knowing her identity. Heracles reveals that the veiled woman is Alcestis at the conclusion of the play.

Deianeira

Some time after the Labors, Heracles met, fell in love with, and proposed marriage to Deianeira, daughter of Oeneus. However, the river god Achelous had already received Oeneus’ consent to marry Deinaeira, who did not desire the union. So Heracles challenged Achelous to a wrestling match for the right to marry Deianeira.

\(^{71}\) Dixon-Kennedy, “Heracles,” 56.

\(^{72}\) Hence the *descensus* tradition of Heracles.
Able to change his form during the battle, the river god finally took the form of a mighty bull and sought to gore Heracles with his horns. But Heracles successfully outmaneuvered the bull, and even seized one of the horns and broke it off. Ultimately Heracles was victorious, and he and his new bride journeyed from that place.

The couple came upon a river that was too dangerous for Deianeira to cross unassisted. A centaur named Nessus arrived and offered to carry Heracles’ wife across the torrent. The couple consented to the centaur’s help and Nessus began to cross with Deianeira on his back. Along the way, however, the centaur decided to keep Heracles’ wife for himself. So when he reached the opposite bank of the river, Nessus began to gallop away with Deianeira helplessly holding on. Her screams alerted Heracles, who immediately fired one of his poison arrows, mortally wounding the centaur. As he lay dying, the centaur offered Deianeira his robe, stating that if ever she felt Heracles’ love for her diminish or falter all she need do is place his robe upon her and his love for her would be magically restored to its full fervor. But the centaur secretly knew that the robe was cursed—stained with a mixture of his own blood and the poison of Heracles’ arrow. Deianeira received the gift and kept it secret.\(^73\)

In subsequent years, Heracles continued to travel abroad, offering help and answering requests for help around the world. As the particular tasks were completed, he would return to his wife. On one journey, however, he was reunited with Iole, whom he had loved since his early exploits, but whom he had not been able to marry at the time.

\(^73\) In some sources, Nessus gave Deianeira some of his blood, which she later would apply to a shirt to be given to Heracles. See Dixon-Kennedy, “Heracles,” 156.
due to his obligations. Now Heracles refused to leave Iole to perform any heroic tasks, and after a time began the journey home taking Iole with him.

Deianeira was enraged and sent the centaur’s robe to Heracles with the message that she desired that he wear the robe on his journey home so that he could arrive in style. Once the ornate robe arrived, Heracles put it on, wanting to impress Iole. Instantly the cursed robe began to cling to Heracles’ flesh and to cause him unbearable burning pain. He killed the messenger and threw his body into the sea.

Heracles was tormented physically by the agony of his pain, and he was tormented psychologically by the thought that his heroic life would end as the result of his wife’s cursed garment. Yet, rather than endure such an end, Heracles commanded—even begged—that his servants build a funeral pyre for him. Their love for their master would not allow them to, so Heracles set to build the pyre alone on Mount Oeta. Some legends even state that once Deianeira learned of the robe’s true effects, she committed suicide.

Death and afterlife

With the poison robe burning his flesh, Heracles decided to end his life on his own terms. Rather than spending his ending days dying in the agony and dishonor of such a death, Heracles chose to die on the funeral pyre. His final earthly act was to complete his own pyre. Once his final earthly deed was completed, he placed himself on the pyre and asked his friend Philoctetes to set fire to it. Philoctetes was initially reluctant, but was finally compelled to assist Heracles when Heracles promised him the famous poisoned arrows. Thus the mortal remains of Heracles were turned to ash.
The legend of Heracles’ immolation also speaks of Zeus descending to take hold of his son’s soul and bearing it to Mount Olympus—the abode of the gods. In the heavenly realm, Heracles was reconciled with Hera and was given her daughter Hebe in marriage—the goddess of youth—to live perpetually as he was in the prime of his life, in bliss and power. In the mortal realm, Heracles’ children (the Heracleidae) and Heracles’ mother Alcmene were pursued by Eurystheus. Though they were persecuted, and Eurystheus sought to punish them by expelling them from Greece while attacking any who offered them refuge, they endured. Eurystheus was ultimately killed by Alcmene.  

Summary of the mythic version of Heracles

In summary, Heracles was portrayed as a figure with great courage who contributed beneficially to the world by his legendary actions. In addition to his numerous acts on behalf of mortals, he even delivered other semi-divine beings from peril (such as Prometheus). Unlike most mortals, he could challenge the gods themselves. In some cases he successfully battled beings in their native surroundings—whether they be the god of the sea, or Death in Hades. Heracles also reportedly affected nature itself, diverting rivers (the Stables task) and he was responsible for single-handedly creating the Strait of Gibraltar, thus allowing the Atlantic Ocean (the Sea) to connect with the Mediterranean Sea (Oceanus).  

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74 Dixon-Kennedy, “Heracles,” 159.

75 Guerber, Greece and Rome, 199–200.
Heracles was victorious in situations where most mortals would have been destroyed. He undertook tasks that very often rid the world of threats, whether they be supernatural or not. He accomplished tasks that impressed the gods themselves. Yet, all this time, he was essentially mortal and subject to death. As a result, Heracles met all of the characteristics of a hero, including that he was a mortal whose earthly life would eventually come to an end.  

**Tracing the Early Development of the Portrayals of Heracles**

Beginning as early as the 8th century B.C.E., various authors contributed to the portrayal of Heracles. Homer (8th century) portrayed Heracles as a mighty martial hero (βίος Ἡρακλῆς) who conquered ferocious monsters and performed amazing feats. Homer’s contribution helped to lay the groundwork of the basic portrayal, confirming Heracles’ semi-divine character as well as his sometimes selfish qualities. Homer’s *Iliad* reported some of Heracles’ epic feats, including his physical and strategic prowess.  Two of the most notable categories of Heraclean accomplishments are the Twelve Labors and the founding of the Olympian games. For most traditions, the Twelve Labors constituted Heracles’ attempt to reclaim his honor which he lost following a homicidal act of rage.

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76 For instance, see Homer, *Iliad* 18.117.


79 Although the number and constitution of the labors varies in the ancient sources, the traditionally accepted Twelve Labors are those listed by Apollodorus in *The Library* 2.5.1–2.5.12.
Hesiod (8th–7th century B.C.E.) reflects much the same martial-champion Heracles found in Homer.\(^{80}\) Hesiod also uses the epithet “mighty Heracles”\(^{81}\) to refer to the character. In other literature from this time period, the author of the Homeric Hymn collection summarizes the epic story of Heracles in a fashion similar to Homer and Hesiod in twelve lines:\(^{82}\)

**TO HERACLES THE LION-HEARTED**

I will sing of Heracles, son of God (Zeus), who is greatest of men. He was born in Thebes— with the beautiful dancing lawns. Alcmene had intercourse with the dark-clouded Son of Cronos (Zeus). He (Heracles) used to— the immense earth and sea— wander at the bidding of lord Eurystheus. He, on the one hand, did much violence, but, on the other, many [violent acts] did he endure.

However, he now lives happily on snowy Olympus; dwelling delightedly and having fair-ankled Hebe (as wife).

Hail, lord, God’s (Zeus’) son; give me excellence (ἀρετήν) and happiness.\(^{83}\)

\(^{80}\) Höistad, *Cynic Hero*, 23.


\(^{82}\) *Homeric Hymn* 15.

\(^{83}\) *Homeric Hymn* 15. Translation mine.

![Greek text](https://example.com/greek_text.png)
In these few lines we have reference to his: courageous character
(ΛΕΟΝΤΟΘΥΜΟΝ; title); divine lineage (Διός υἱόν; Ins. 1, 3 (ref.), 11); and his
mortality (ἐπιχθονίων; ln. 2; also ref. to mortal mother Ἀλκμήνη ln. 3). The ode
references his labors (πλαζόμενος; Ins. 4–5) and martial exploits (ἔρεξεν ἀτάσθαλα; ln.
6). The ode also references the themes of Heracles’ suffering (ἀνέτλη [ἀτάσθαλα];
ln.7); his reward and divine status (καλὸν… τερπόμενος; Ins. 8–9); and his role as a
heroic benefactor of excellence (ἀρετήν; ln. 10) and happiness (ὀλβὸν;ln. 11).

Beginning with Pindar (6th–5th century), Heracles is portrayed as a more civilized
figure. His warrior attributes remained intact, as did his hedonism. However, according
to Höistad, Pindar’s portrayal represented a shift somewhat from the portrayal of
Heracles as a wanton warrior to a culture-bringing philanthropic defender of humanity
against monsters and villainous men. As such, Heracles is credited with being the chief
founder of Greek athleticism. He founded the Olympic games as the “firstfruits of war”
(ἀκρόθινα πολέμου). He was also responsible for introducing the olive tree to Greece,
and the olive wreath as the “most beautiful memorial of the Olympic contests” (μυνάμα
tῶν Οὐλυμπία κάλλιστον ἄξθλων) for victory in the games. During this period,
epithets refer to Heracles as “the Victorious” (Καλλίνικος) and “Averter of Evil” ('
Αλεξίκακος).

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84 Höistad, Cynic Hero, 23. See also Pindar, Nemean Odes 1.62–66.
85 Pindar, Olympian Odes 2.3.
86 Pindar, Olympian Odes 3.15.
87 Höistad references Archilochus fragments (see Cynic Hero, 24).
The Greek historian Herodotus (5th century) mentioned aspects of the legend of Heracles throughout his *Histories*. Herodotus notices parallels between the legends of Perseus and Heracles, but notes that Heracles—unlike Perseus—had a mortal stepfather.\(^88\) Herodotus makes note in much of his writings of the cultural effects of the Heracles legend on his world.

Herodotus mentions how certain royal families of the Mediterranean claimed to trace their lineages to Heracles, in particular a line of Spartan kings.\(^89\) He also visited historic sites associated with Heracles’ travels. He makes reference to the “Pillars of Heracles” (the Straits of Gibraltar) as the western point of the known world.\(^90\) He also mentions an 18-inch footprint stamped into a rock as a “marvel” of Scythia (likely central Asia).\(^91\) Some cities such as Marathon (and possibly Athens) had a “precinct of Heracles” (also known as “the Heracleum” (‘Ἡρακλεῖον)), which were likely connected with temples or significant altars.

Specifically, Herodotus contributed to our understanding of the worship of Heracles which was occurring in his world. He interviewed priests of temples devoted to Heracles in Tyre and Egypt and noted their contributions to the legends.\(^92\) Not only was Heracles’ divinity recognized, but inherent within it was a recognition of his beneficent

\(^{88}\) Herodotus, *Histories*. 5.43.

\(^{89}\) *Histories* 1.7; 4.8–10; 5.43; 7.204.

\(^{90}\) *Histories* 2.44.

\(^{91}\) *Histories* 4.82.

\(^{92}\) *Histories* 2.44, 113.
role for humankind. For instance, in Egypt, runaway servants who joined the cult to serve at Heracles’ temple could not be harmed by their former masters.93

Herodotus contributed to our understanding of the “Heracles phenomenon” as it was evolving in the Greek world by the 5th century B.C.E. We will discuss below in more detail Herodotus’ contribution to our understanding of the Heracles cult. It is clear by the 5th century B.C.E. that the legends of Heracles were a significant cultural, political and religious force in the Greek world.

The 5th century tragedies of Sophocles and Euripides continue to exhibit a somewhat hedonistic (and at times unethical) Heracles, but one certainly also renowned for his philanthropy.94 However, one of the most important contributions of their works concerning Heracles is their display of the human side of Heracles, who must learn to deal with suffering that the gods dispense to mortals. Heracles begins to be seen as a beneficent figure upon whom evil comes without provocation. As will be shown in the next subsection, Heracles’ endurance of suffering is seen as a virtue of his character.

As Höistad points out, Sophocles’ Trachiniae essentially reinforces that mortal suffering must be accepted, but does not condone “insensitive” (συγγρωμοσύνην) and “abusive” (αἰσχρὰ) divine forces that are responsible for imposing suffering.95 Meanwhile, Euripides portrays a philanthropic benefactor who suffers because of

93 Histories 2.113.

94 Höistad, Cynic Hero, 24–27.

external forces he cannot control. Höistad notes that Euripides’ tragic portrayals of Heracles conveyed something of the religious doubts of his time by not giving a satisfying resolution to Heracles’ plight at the end of *Heracles*. Euripides’ *Alcestis*, while contributing greatly to the refining of the mythic version of Heracles, continued to use many elements of the base portrayal. Still, Euripides’ contribution of a person literally rescued from Death showed both the amazing power as well as the philanthropic aspects of his character. More detail about how these works of Euripides contributed to the refinement of the mythic portrayal of Heracles is discussed in the next section.

Overall, the mythic version of Heracles changed from bloodthirsty brute to beneficent benefactor over the first-half of the first-millennia B.C.E. The noteworthy tales of the hero became common knowledge for numerous writers to draw upon. As will be seen in the next section, certain aspects of Heracles’ character would prove most useful for the agendas of subsequent writers.

**The Mythic Heracles of Euripides**

Euripides was one of the most significant tragedians of the classical Greek period. His portrayals of Heracles represent the mythical version of the character who is well known for his martial exploits in bringing about order in the mortal realm. The heroic characteristics mentioned above are mostly present in his works *Heracles* and *Alcestis*. First we will examine *Heracles*, which alludes to the main characteristics we have

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96 In Amphitryon’s opening speech in Euripides’ *Heracles*, Heracles’ mortal father states that Heracles’ toils are the result of either Hera or fate (line 20).

97 Höistad, *Cynic Hero*, 27.
identified as heroic. Second, we will examine *Alcestis*, which adds support to Heracles’ role as a savior from death.

*Heracles*

In *Heracles*, the play opens with the title character in absentia and presumed to be dead by most of the principal characters. His mortal father (step-father) Amphitryon relates in the opening monologue that he and Heracles’ family in Thebes must contemplate the demise of Heracles during his latest challenge, to retrieve the hell-hound from Hades. Meanwhile, the usurper Lycus threatens to kill Heracles’ family to prevent them from rebelling against his rule. Although Heracles returns, saves his family and kills the usurper, his real challenge occurs when the goddesses Iris (Hera’s co-conspirator) and Madness cause insanity to come upon Heracles. Thinking his own wife and children were his enemies, he kills them all. Once he recovers from the madness, he is informed by his step-father what he has done, which drives him to the point of seriously considering suicide. At this point, Theseus, king of Athens, arrives and encourages Heracles to regain his honor rather than losing to this final act of madness. Ultimately, Heracles agrees to live and to regain his honor in further service to humanity.

At this point, we will analyze the play more closely to see how it reflects some of the heroic characteristics which we have established previously. For the audience of the play, Heracles is deceased but not without power. However, the play is set in history at a time when Heracles was living and victoriously confronting death and the underworld. He had considered suicide as a means of atonement or self-retribution for slaying his wife and children, but instead he chose to live. He achieved victory in the underworld in his
journeys to and from there, as well as in his personal choice to atone for himself in life rather than death.

The heroic characteristic of an extraordinary life is very present in *Heracles*. The fact that Heracles could descend to the underworld is discussed by every character in the play. The most recurring issue in the first part of the play is best addressed by Megara, Heracles’ wife, when she asks “who ever has come back from the dead out of the halls of Hades?” For the average mortal, the journey to the underworld is a one-way trip. Those who are familiar with the Heracles legend, however, would know that Heracles would successfully return, thereby re-confirming his super-mortal abilities.

Heracles’ tasks were characteristic of his constant battle with evil and chaos. In the play’s opening section, there is a summary of Heracles’ mighty deeds, most notable among them the deeds he performed for Eurystheus (who was in fact carrying out the will of Heracles’ true antagonist, the goddess Hera). The deeds are recounted in greater detail in a series of choral strophes and give further testimony to his super-mortal abilities. His battles with monsters were performed to “tame” or “civilize the land”

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98 *Heracles*, 297.


100 The order of the recounted deeds of Heracles in the early section of the play is as follows: The Lion; Battle of the Centaurs; The Horses of Diomedes; Defeat of Cynus; The Apples (defeating the Dragon); holding the earth in Atlas’ place; Amazon’s Girdle; the Hydra; slaying of the Shepherd of Erytheia; and his final recounted act was his journey to Hades. See *Heracles* 359–429.
The epitome of his “toils” (πόνους) was the victorious return from Hades with the three-headed hell-hound.\textsuperscript{102}

Yet, as the story progresses, it is Death that is the real threat to Heracles and his family. In his own words, Heracles “the victor” (Ὣ καλλίνικος) as he calls himself, seeks to “struggle for” (ἐκπονέω) his own children and save them from the death for which they were preparing.\textsuperscript{103} They were clothed in funeral dress because Lycus had promised that he would be returning soon to kill them (i.e. to “give them to the underworld” (νερτέρᾳ δώσων χθονί) to be with their father).\textsuperscript{104} Heracles rescued them from death by returning from his final task and killing Lycus. Heracles reaffirms himself as the savior of the innocent from death and the bringer of death on the unworthy.

As the emissary (and co-conspirator) of Hera, Iris brings Madness (Λύσσα) to Heracles.\textsuperscript{105} Madness counsels against bringing down the honor of this champion who has established a reputation “among the gods (i.e. in heaven) and on and earth” (ἐν θεοίσιν...γέ) and whose deeds “alone raised up the honor of the gods” (θεῶν ἀνέστησεν μόνος τιμᾶς).\textsuperscript{106} Iris dismisses the protests and states that if Heracles is allowed to continue foiling Hera, “the gods will be nothing, and mortals will become great” (η θεοὶ

\textsuperscript{101}Heracles 20.

\textsuperscript{102}Heracles 24–25. Note that the term which I translate as “three-headed” is literally “three-bodied” (τρισώματον) which is also used to refer to other monsters Heracles faces such as the shepherd of Erythia (line 423) and the Typhons (line 1271).

\textsuperscript{103}Heracles 581–82.

\textsuperscript{104}Heracles 335.

\textsuperscript{105}Heracles 822–73.

\textsuperscript{106}Heracles 850–53.
These gods defend their place by bringing harm to Heracles. This is in contrast to how Heracles defends his honor by helping humanity.

In the aftermath of the madness, it seems as though Heracles will surrender to death. After the madness leaves Heracles to witness the fallout of his rage (the death of his wife and children), his grief drives him to contemplate suicide. Earlier in the play there is a brief reference to Heracles’ rescue of Theseus (King of Athens) from Hades. Very little is said in regard to how Heracles helped rescue Theseus, but as we will see below, the saved king helps to deliver Heracles from his own despair through his counsel. The rescued king Theseus enters to repay Heracles. Once aware of the events, Theseus rightfully places the blame for the murder on Hera. Then, Theseus essentially reminds Heracles of who he is: not just an “ordinary person” (ἀνθρώπος)111; “the much enduring” (ὁ πολλὰ δὲ τὰ εὐρείτα)112; and a “benefactor and great friend to mortals” (εὐεργέτης βροτοῖς καὶ μέγας φίλος).113 Theseus offers Heracles the opportunity to regain his honor and by doing so compels him to live victoriously even in the midst of

107 Heracles 841–42.
108 Heracles 1146–52.
109 Heracles 619.
110 Heracles 1191.
111 Heracles 1249.
112 Heracles 1250.
113 Heracles 1252.
this tragic defeat. Heracles agrees to join him and, in essence, defeats death again by choosing to live.

By saving Theseus, Heracles made it possible for his own life to be spared. The honorable option of victorious life prompts Heracles to exclaim, “Whoever prefers wealth or strength more than good friends, thinks poorly” (ὄστις δὲ πλοῦτον ἢ σθένος μᾶλλον φίλων ἀγαθῶν πεπᾶσθαι βούλεται, κακῶς φρονεῖ). The sorrow surrounding his children’s death and his role in carrying out the murder is not lessened, but the decision to remain mired in his own grief and self-destruction is abated. Heracles regains an opportunity to carry out his life as a victor and benefactor for humankind.

Another heroic characteristic found in Heracles is the hero’s experience of suffering and his dealings with the issues of death. Heracles is familiar with the underworld, and in his greatest moments of despair, considers returning to that world. He does not “die” in this play. He does, however, suffer greatly as a result of the death of his family. As discussed above, no fault is attributed to Heracles (except by himself). And it seems that even with all of his powers to save, he appears helpless. Ultimately, his desire to live and regain his honor gives him the fortitude to endure his suffering.

For Euripides’ audience, Heracles’ divinity and eventual apotheosis were not questioned. The story served to highlight certain qualities of his life that supported his status as a hero. Raising people from the dead (ἀνίστημι) was a divine quality that was evident because he accomplished it for himself by his return as well as for others (such as

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Theseus) by his deliverance. Heracles shows himself to be a savior, and Zeus is likewise referred to as “savior” (σωτήρ). Such characteristics would be support for subsequent cultic worship.

Heracles is also shown to be beneficent. His great deeds and ridding the world of threats indicates his beneficence. Furthermore, he saved Theseus from the underworld, who in turn also saved Heracles from his own self-destruction. As stated above, Theseus—as one who benefited from Heracles’ heroic actions—reminds Heracles of his importance in the world as its benefactor.

Finally, Heracles shows the hero to be of exceptional value as an example of virtuous behavior. The term ἄρετή (verb form ἄρετάω) refers to the “goodness,” “excellence,” “manhood,” “valour,” or “prowess” of an individual (mortals and gods). In an ethical or moral sense, the term means “goodness” or “virtue” and can be used to describe an individual’s actions or character. Heracles contains several references to the ἄρετή of the hero and uses ἄρετή (or the verb form ἄρετάω) four times.

The author reaffirms the view that Heracles was cunning and skillful. Lycus questioned Heracles’ bravery by challenging his choice of the bow for a weapon as that of “a person of shame” or “a coward” (ἀνδρός δ’ ἔλεγχος). Yet Amphitryon insists that Heracles’ choice is “the most wise” (σοφὸν μάλιστα).  

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115 See Amphitryon’s comment to Lycus: Heracles 19.

116 Heracles 48.

117 Liddell-Scott, “ἄρετή”.

118 Heracles 162

119 Heracles 202.
All of Heracles’ actions are placed in the context of his ἀρετή. The Chorus offers general praise of Heracles’ accomplishments, chief among them being his passing (and return) through the underworld. “For the virtue (ἁρεται) of noble (γενεὰςών) deeds is honor (ἄγαλμα) to the dead.” In this view, the author categorizes all of Heracles’ labors as “virtuous.” The final use of ἀρετή in Heracles occurs when the Chorus again praises Heracles, whose “actions of virtue/prowess” (ἁρετῶ)—including “suffering” (μοχθήσας)—are worthy of higher honor than his “high birth” (εὐγενίας) as a “son of Zeus” (Διὸς ὁ παῖς).

Furthermore, as stated previously, Heracles shows the hero to be beneficent in nature. Even during his journey to the underworld—which at first glance may not seem to benefit humankind—he saves Theseus. Such beneficence eventually returned to him in the form of Theseus, a friend who brings him back from the brink of self-destruction.

Alcestis

Alcestis opens with a narration by the god Apollo who is in exile from Olympus, during which time he lives in service to King Admetus. Apollo provides the narrative context for the story. Apollo explains that King Admetus was given the opportunity to

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120 Heracles 352–53.
121 The term ἁρετῶ or ἁρετῶς is uncertain.
122 Heracles 695–700. Two of the occurrences of ἀρετή in Heracles are not directly applied to Heracles. Before Heracles’ deeds are listed, Amphitryon states that his own caretaking of his stepson’s children (Heracles’ children), shows his ἀρετή to be greater than that of Zeus, who essentially abandoned his son Heracles (see Heracles 342). The Chorus then uses the term to refer to a rebirth. The Chorus postulates how beneficial it would be if the “good [people]” in the world (ἀγαθοὺς χρηστοὺς) were given a second youth to enjoy as a means of distinguishing the worthy from the “bad [people]” (κακοῖς). This second youth would be an “obvious mark of virtue” (φανερον χαρακτήρ ἁρετῶς) (see Heracles 655–72).
find a willing replacement for himself when Death came to claim him. The only person to volunteer for this task was his noble wife Alcestis. Death personified (θάνατος) appears and expresses his will to carry out his task without interference from Apollo (who was responsible for tricking the Fates into granting Admetus the opportunity to have a replacement die for him). Much of the first section of the play communicates the grief of Admetus and his household at the immanent death of the virtuous Alcestis.

The foe this time is Death itself, who has been given the task by the fates to bring death to Admetus, or to whoever has volunteered to die in his place—in this case, his wife Alcestis.\textsuperscript{123} Admetus loves his “good/brave” (εὐσθαλής) wife, and must now suffer the permanent “pain” (.inflate) of losing his wife which he laments to be “worse than death” (θανάτου μείζων).\textsuperscript{124} Admetus laments that his is unable to rescue her as Orpheus rescued—at least temporarily—his wife Eurydice.\textsuperscript{125} Alcestis dies.\textsuperscript{126} The Chorus-Leader points out that death is inevitable for mortals.\textsuperscript{127} The household enters mourning, and Heracles enters the play.\textsuperscript{128}

\textsuperscript{123} Alcestis 13–14.

\textsuperscript{124} Alcestis 197–200; 274.

\textsuperscript{125} Alcestis 357–62. In the story of Orpheus, the protagonist plays music so beautifully that he charms Hades and Persephone into releasing Eurydice under the condition that he must not look back on her shade until both are returned to the world. Orpheus fails at the last of the journey and is thusly unsuccessful in his attempt to rescue his wife.

\textsuperscript{126} Alcestis 393–95.

\textsuperscript{127} Alcestis 419.

\textsuperscript{128} Alcestis 475–76.
Heracles states that he is presently undergoing the task of retrieving the Thracian Steeds. In a conversation with the Chorus-Leader, Heracles confirms that this task (as most) could result in his death. Heracles replies “this is not the first such race I have run” (οὐ τὸνδ’ ἀγὼνα πρῶτον ἀν δράμοιμ’ ἔγώ). All of Heracles’ tasks involved mortal danger, so Heracles had spent most of his life in the company of death.

Admetus enters and converses with Heracles, who understands that a death has taken place in the household—though he does not yet know who died. In a conversation with Heracles about death, Admetus states that “those who are about to die and those who are dead are no more” (τέθνηχ’ ὁ μέλλων, κοὐκέτ’ ἐσθ’ ὁ κατθανόν)—in essence, Admetus is stating that those who are destined to die are dead already. Heracles states that there is a difference between being alive and being dead. After all, Heracles has been in numerous situations where he was destined to die, yet he survived them. Admetus insists that Heracles stay, but as yet does not tell Heracles about Alcestis.

When Heracles re-enters the scene, he immediately follows a servant who was suffering at the death of Alcestis. Heracles, still thinking the dead woman is a stranger, attempts to give the servant some perspective by speaking of the “nature” (πρᾶγμα) of mortality: “All mortals are destined to die” (βροτοῖς ἀπασι κατθανεῖν ἀφείλεται).

129 Alcestis 483.
130 Alcestis 489.
131 Alcestis 527.
132 Alcestis 528.
133 Alcestis 782.
In the course of their discussion, the servant reveals to Heracles that Admetus’ wife is the one whom the household mourns. Heracles immediately adopts a sober attitude, and appoints himself a new task: “It is necessary for me to save this woman who has just died” (δεῖ γὰρ μὲ σῶσαι τὴν θανάτους ἀρτίως γυναῖκα). Heracles’ plan for rescue is to ambush Death as it comes to partake of the blood-sacrifice, and if Death does not come as planned, to demand that Hades himself relinquish Alcestis.

When Heracles returns, he is leading a veiled woman. As the play unfolds, it becomes clear that Heracles was successful in his ambush of Death and has returned with the living Alcestis. He does not disclose her true identity to Admetus, however, until he has agreed to marry the veiled woman. Heracles is attempting to teach Admetus a lesson, perhaps in response to Admetus’ earlier non-disclosure of Alcestis’ death. Alcestis’ identity is finally revealed to Admetus.

In explaining his victory, Heracles explains that he “joined in battle with the spirit who was her master” (i.e. Death) (μάχην συνάψας διαμόνων τῷ κυρίῳ) and seized

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134 Alcestis 821.
135 Alcestis 840–41.
136 Alcestis 843–60.
137 Alcestis 1087.
139 Alcestis 1126
him “with his hands” (χεροῖν). Heracles states that his personal victory over death was also meant to be shared by his friend Admetus (and Alcestis).

In *Alcestis*, Euripides portrays Heracles as the martial champion of legend, tempered to a degree by his empathy. His compassion and duty are heartfelt, and his tactics for success are based on his physical prowess and courage in challenging the spiritual forces, such as Death.

Overall, this portrayal of Heracles parallels the mythic Heracles, but a compassionate and beneficent side of his character provides the impetus for his heroic actions. His portrayal represents a multi-faceted character. On the one hand, Heracles’ martial actions and brute strength add to his notoriety and are used to accomplish his tasks, such as defeating Death. At the same time, there is strong development of his character as an empathic person as well, whose virtue lies in his beneficence and suffering (as can be implied by his struggle and potential death). Heracles feels sorrow for the loss of his friend, and his actions are performed as a direct result of his will to alleviate his friend’s suffering.

The Philosphic Literary Portrayals of Heracles

**Tracing the Late Development of the Portrayals of Heracles**

From about the 4th century B.C.E. onward, the portrayals of Heracles began to be fashioned for symbolic use by philosophers. This new portrayal did not replace the mythic portrayal, but rather was a parallel development. During this period of

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140 *Alcestis* 1140.

141 *Alcestis* 1103. “Indeed, in my winning, you share in the victory” (νικῶντι μέντοι καὶ σὺ συνυκροτές ἐμοί).
development, most of the attention on the figure of Heracles focused on his exemplary value relating to the personal sacrifice and suffering which he endured, as well as the rewards for his endurance. An appropriate part of the legend to mention here is that Athena (goddess of wisdom and battle strategy) was said to have guided Heracles (her half-brother) through most of his life and into his post-mortem existence on Olympus.  

It would be the wisdom aspect of Heracles’ character that would be most emphasized in this period.

Höistad states that Herodorus of Heraclea (4th–3rd centuries) was the “creator of the philosophic Heracles allegories.” While the basic feats of the mythic legends were retained, certain alterations began to shift some of the focus of the legends. For instance, while the feats themselves were impressive, the focus began to be on the theme of endurance—and therefore began to be seen as applicable for any individual.

The sophist Prodicus (5th–4th centuries) related a tale of Heracles that is best preserved in Xenophon’s *Memorabilia* and conveys most fully a philosophic portion of the Heracles legend. Set in the time of his adolescence, the story tells of Heracles choice between a life of “virtue” (ἀρετή) and a life of “vice” (κακία). The characters of Virtue and Vice and the lives they each promise are described in this tale. Knowing that Heracles was to choose the path of Virtue and renounce the path of Vice, this addition to the legend of Heracles informs our understanding of how Heracles was viewed by

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142 Pausanias *Description of Greece* 3.18.11; 5.17.11. Also see Price & Kearns, “Heracles,” 252.

143 Höistad, *Cynic Hero*, 29.

144 Höistad refers to the “ἀγων-theme” here (see *Cynic Hero*, 30).

philosophers and how the refined version of Euripides’ Heracles was used to promote their beliefs.

The path Vice offers is the “most pleasant and easiest road” (τὴν ἡδίστην τε καὶ ῥᾴστην οἶδόν; 2.1.23). If chosen, this path promises a life where the body and soul would be free of war, worries and work (τὸ πονοῦντα; 2.1.24–25). Although Vice’s character describes herself as “Happiness” (Εὔδαιμονία), she is described as opulent, wanton, self-absorbed and hasty.146 Virtue refers to Vice’s speech as deceptive (ἐξαπατήσω; 2.1.26) and her true nature as unwelcome by gods or mortals.147

Virtue, on the other hand, is described as modest in dress and behavior, pure, and honest.148 The path that Virtue promises requires “toil and effort” (πόνου καὶ ἐπιμελείας), but will produce “goodness” and “worthiness” (καλῶν...ἀγαθῶν) for those that choose her.149 Vice describes the virtuous path to be “hard and long” (χαλεπῆ καὶ μακρὰν; 2.1.29). But virtue also states that “all things good and fair” (ἀγαθῶν καὶ καλῶν) are the result of toil and the doing of good works in his mind and body.150

The story was clearly intended as a pedagogical example for “youth” (οἱ νέοι; 2.1.21). The chief character in the story could have been played by any noble legendary “doer of good” (ἐργάτην ἀγαθῶν; 2.1.27). This versatile feature would have served the

146 Memorabilia 2.1.22–23.
147 Memorabilia 2.1.27, 31
148 Memorabilia 2.1.22–23.
149 Memorabilia 2.1.28
150 Memorabilia 2.1.28.
pedagogical intention best, since it could generally apply to the life of any who might choose to live a life of virtue. However, if certain assumptions about the philosopher’s perspective on Heracles are true, then the choosing of Heracles for this allegory would have special significance.

The very choosing of Heracles as the chief character in the story points to some strong possibilities of how Heracles was viewed by Prodicus (and Xenophon). The story assumes a likely distancing of Heracles from the strictly martial elements of his character; otherwise the story would not be as impressive. The story emphasizes the positive affect of *philanthropia*, for the practitioner as well as for humanity. Using Heracles as an exemplary figure would have provided encouragement, as students of this philosophy would have been aware of the beneficent influence of Heracles. For this reason, featuring Heracles in the story could provide an even greater impetus for selecting the life of virtue. Although life could be difficult when right choices are made, happiness could also be attained in this life, as well as in the life to come.

By the 4th century B.C.E., Cynics had adopted Heracles as a model for perfection through suffering. Diogenes of Sinope utilized Heracles in his treatment of the pursuit of “virtue” (αρετή). Diogenes promoted the idea of discipline for the “body” (σῶμα) and the “mind” (ψυχή), believing them both to be of value. Höistad states that Cynics

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151 No writings of Diogenes of Sinope have survived, but scholars have obtained information about his views from the 3rd Century C.E. writings of Diogenes Laërtius in *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*. See Höistad’s extensive analysis of Diogenes in Cynic Hero, 42–47.
emphasized the individual-ethical aspect of Heracles’ character, and utilized his legendary physique to reinforce the body-mind propaganda.\footnote{Höistad, Cynic Hero, 47.}

Other philosophers of the mid–4\textsuperscript{th} century B.C.E. made different use of the figure of Heracles. Isocrates used him as a model for rule in his correspondence to Philip of Macedon.\footnote{Isocrates, Philippus (Or.) 5.114.} Many philosophers—choosing to distance their philosophies from the mythic character—made only occasional reference to him, which at times was not favorable.\footnote{Höistad notes Plato and Aristotle as being passive in their use of Heracles. See Cynic Hero, 48.} This was likely due to the common use of Heracles in satirical plays which tended to emphasize his boorish nature, thus rendering him less fit for some serious philosophers.

There was a resurgence of philosophical interest in Heracles in the 1\textsuperscript{st} century C.E. Dio Chrysostom used Heracles as a touchstone example for his “Discourse on Virtue.”\footnote{Dio Chrysostom’s Virtue Or. 8.} Dio used Heracles as an example of one who received the ultimate benefit of suffering for the sake of one’s own “soul” (ψυχή). Dio said that the same people who thought of Heracles’ accomplishments as “troubles” (variations of πόνος), worshipped him because of what his suffering brought about—namely his deification and perpetual youth (as signified by his eternal marriage to Hebe).\footnote{Dio Chrysostom, Or. 8.28.} Dio disregarded aspects of the mythic version of Heracles, such as his supposed grandiose physique and involuntary

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servitude to Eurystheus.\textsuperscript{157} Instead, according to Dio, Heracles went about in appearance as an earnest Cynic, bringing judgment upon the lavish.\textsuperscript{158} Contrary to the mythic versions, Heracles was not the epic athlete, the tragic sufferer, or the comical glutton. Rather, he was the model of Cynic ideals.\textsuperscript{159}

In the midst of such parallel portrayals of Heracles, Seneca the Younger wrote his tragedy \textit{Hercules furens} in the mid–1\textsuperscript{st} century C.E. Although debatably attributed to Seneca, \textit{Hercules Oetaeus (Hercules on Oeta)} was likely written in the latter part of the 1\textsuperscript{st} century C.E. While there is no evidence of textual dependency between either tragedy and the epistle to the Hebrews, there is evidence that both sets of works make reference to the figure of Heracles in somewhat similar terms. As Attridge and Aune attest, Seneca relays the stories of Heracles (Hercules) in philosophic terms which deal with the concerns of both Stoics and Cynics.\textsuperscript{160}

I believe it is important to put Seneca’s writings concerning Heracles into perspective as well. I will analyze Seneca’s contribution to our understanding of Heracles as a hero in the next section, but it is necessary to make some comments on Seneca’s contribution to the evolution of the character here. Indeed, his tragedies reflect a more philosophically refined figure whose suffering is imposed upon him by forces out of his control. However, it must also be considered that Seneca’s tragedies would likely take for granted that the audience would be familiar with the common background for the

\textsuperscript{157} Dio Chrysostom \textit{Or.} 8.29.

\textsuperscript{158} Dio Chrysostom \textit{Or.} 8.30–33.

\textsuperscript{159} See Höistad’s summation, \textit{Cynic Hero}, 59–60.

\textsuperscript{160} Attridge, “Liberating”; and Aune, “Hercules.”
legendary figure of Heracles. The allegorical value of Heracles would not be as strong if some of the details of his life and actions were not known.

For example, in *Hercules furens*, Seneca indicates that Hera’s (Juno’s) animosity for Heracles sets the scene for most every feat that he accomplishes. These feats are not narrated in detail, only referred to for the most part. Still, the references assume that the audience knows the details. The text begins with Juno’s recounting of Hercules’ victorious accomplishment of all of the tasks that she orchestrated (through Eurystheus). Whereas she meant each of them to bring about his downfall, instead, she has to exclaim, “his unconquered valor is adored, and in all the world he is storied as a god.”161 In perhaps the greatest and last of his feats, Hercules travelled to the underworld (Tartarus) and brought back the three-headed hell-hound Cerberus.162 This action is treated as the capstone of the Labors, proving that sending afflictions from outside the hero would prove to be fruitless for Juno. When conflict from without was no longer considered a viable option, Juno considered turning Hercules’ conflict within himself—thus leading to the imposition of madness and Hercules’ subsequent murder of his family. Hercules struggles to endure the consequences of his actions, and eventually does so.

Achieving victory over internal forces and mastery of one’s own self is a hallmark of Cynic-Stoic beliefs. In the author’s telling of *Hercules Oetaeus*,163 Hercules’ struggle is again imposed to some degree from without. He achieves victory by ultimately

161 “indomita vertus colitur et toto deus narrator orbe” *Hercules furens* 39–40.

162 *Hercules furens* 60.

163 As noted elsewhere, most scholars agree that Seneca did not write *Hercules Oetaeus*, although it was attributed to him.
purging himself of all things material—even his own body. This element of the story conveys that victory is possible over all things, even one’s own self, if the will to overcome is steadfast.

Overall, the philosophic or refined portrayals of Heracles had transformed the figure from legend into a suitable example for philosophical propaganda. The tasks of Heracles were giving way to the character (or “soul”) of Heracles. The focus of attention began to shift to what Heracles’ life represented, and how others could choose to emulate his life.

The Philosophic Heracles/Hercules of Seneca

Hercules furens

Basing his play on Euripides’ Heracles, Seneca changes crucial aspects of Euripides’ portrayal, for example by stressing the goddesses Juno’s (Hera’s) hatred of the hero (and fear of him) as the impetus for her attack. Hercules furens confirms Hercules’ mythic qualities of strength and courage in facing numerous dangers, the epitome of which is his journey to Hades. Juno recounts in greater detail Hercules’ epic feat of conquering the underworld, as well as the repercussions of this victory for all. Rather than fearing death or the underworld, it is Hercules who brings fear to his divine enemy.

Seneca’s portrayal of Hercules is that he is a victor for the world. Hercules conquered death. The chorus extols how the hero “pacified the underworld, and returned. Now no fear remains: nothing lies beyond the underworld.”

164 While it is unlikely that most philosophers believed Hercules’ actions condoned suicide, the allegorical perspective on the self-immolation could still stand as valid.

165 “pacatis redit inferis. iam nullus superest timor: nil ultra iacet inferos” Hercules furens 890–92.
itself and thereby brought about liberation from the fear of death by his heroic journey to and from the underworld. Furthermore, Hercules thwarted the otherworldly forces set against him. Juno refers to herself as one “banished from the sky” (caelo pulsa) who “must dwell on earth” (tellus colenda est). She has sent every “monster” to destroy him, taking more effort to destroy him than he has had to exert to be victorious.

Seneca’s portrayal also shows Hercules to be master of himself by successfully navigating his own passions and emotions. Juno’s last resort is to send the greatest foe she can think of against Hercules. In this depiction, the enemy that Hercules must face is himself. Juno exasperatingly states that Hercules overcomes foes with increasing ease. It would seem that in order to experience real suffering, that suffering would have to involve his internal struggles.

Hercules is also portrayed as worthy of the worship and apotheosis that tradition says he will receive. Hercules’ wife Megara summarizes her husband’s heroic endeavors by stating that “the path from earth to the stars is not a smooth one.” Even his greatest enemy must acknowledge that his deeds have won him this right. In her opening monologue, Juno rails against the thought that her rival Alcmene’s son might “gain the stars that were promised him” (astra promissa occupet). She acknowledges that

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166 See Attridge, “Liberating”, 111.
167 *Hercules furens* 4–5.
168 *Hercules furens* 41–42.
169 bella iam secum gerat (“Now he must war with himself”) (*Hercules furens* 85).
170 “Non est ad astra mollis e terries via” (*Hercules furens* 437).
171 *Hercules furens* 23.
Hercules’ perfect record of victories have already achieved a divine status for the hero among the populace.\textsuperscript{172} Hercules’ actions beneficently provide aid from many foes, and perhaps the most notable foe he overcomes is the fear of death.\textsuperscript{173} In this way, Hercules is portrayed as a figure worthy of emulation.

Juno’s opening monologue gives the clear sense that the only enemy she believes Hercules cannot defeat is himself.\textsuperscript{174} Indeed, Hercules does fail to resist the madness within to some degree, and both he and his loved ones suffer the consequences of this failure. However, his ultimate victory and heavenly destiny occurs, thus making him a worthy example of endurance and virtuous suffering.

Hercules’ intelligence and skill are duly noted. For example, it is noted that (in reference to the Lion and the Hydra), those things which he once “feared and defeated” (quae timuit et quae fudit), he now “carries as weapons” (nempe pro telis gerit).\textsuperscript{175} Such comments would highlight the hero’s character as one who is more than a merely martial hero.

Most significantly, Seneca expounds on Heracles’ virtue to portray him as an exemplar for humanity. Of Hercules it is said, “his indomitable virtue is revered, and throughout the whole world he is storied as a god.” (indomita virtus colitur et toto deus narratur orbe)\textsuperscript{176} The Latin term \textit{virtus} (often translated as “virtue”) plays an important

\textsuperscript{172} Hercules \textit{furens} 39.


\textsuperscript{174} “bella iam secum great” (“Now he must war with himself”) Hercules \textit{furens} 85.

\textsuperscript{175} Hercules \textit{furens}, 44–45.

\textsuperscript{176} Hercules \textit{furens}, 39.
part in understanding Hercules’ heroic actions as worthy of replication by Stoics and other philosophies. *Virtus* (vir meaning “man”, thus related to “manhood”) is virtually synonymous with the Greek term ἀρετή. Thus, Seneca gives significant attention to shaping the reader’s understanding of virtue, and uses Hercules as an excellent example of that quality.

*Virtus* (or a derivation of it) appears 17 times in *Hercules furens*. Most of the references pertain directly to Hercules. Several times, one of the other characters in the play comments on Hercules and how his “virtue” or “valor” is either evident in his deeds, or is in jeopardy as a result of the murder of his wife and children. Sometimes, Hercules refers to his own “virtue” in similar ways. The most significant of these references is when Hercules (at the behest of his friend Theseus) chooses to make his final labor “living” in spite of his suffering. The suffering was not Hercules’ fault, but his choice to endure it becomes a central message in *Hercules furens*.

**Hercules Oetaeus**

As summarized above, *Hercules Oetaeus* tells the story of how Hercules sacrifices himself on a funeral pyre rather than face the agony of death from a cursed robe which his wife Deianira had given him, thinking it would inspire love in him. The basic

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177 Liddel-Scott, “ἀρετή”.

178 *Hercules Oetaeus* 115, 201, 325, 432–38, 476.


180 *Hercules Oetaeus* 1314–17.

181 See footnote 2 for notes on authorship and date of this work.
character of Hercules in *Hercules Oetaeus* is consistent with the portrayal in *Hercules furens*.

The portrayal supports that Hercules was an epic warrior seeking apotheosis on the basis of his deeds. As the play opens, Hercules retraces his great deeds. It is made clear that apotheosis is his goal. Hercules states that if his tasks are done (and his war with Juno over), then “restore the father to the son, the powerful to the stars” (redde nunc nato patrem, vel astra forti).

His deeds also benefit humankind. Hercules notes that freeing men from fear is a benefit of his work for humankind. Once he realizes the terminal nature of his condition, he confirms his task as be a victorious savior on behalf of the world. He states that the “ungrateful” (ingrate) world will suffer without him, as he has been the greatest “avenger” (ultor) of evil.

*Hercules Oetaeus*, more than any other work we have analyzed, deals with Hercules’ attitudes toward suffering and death. Once he knows his death is certain, he makes his own arrangements to depart the world in a manner fitting to him rather than to fate. Hercules is not portrayed as a victim of death, because he has conquered death in

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182 *Hercules Oetaeus* 1–98.

183 *Hercules Oetaeus* 31–32.

184 Heracles makes the point that he has freed humankind from fear by asking rhetorically, “what has been accomplished by freeing the race (of mortals) from fear?” (“sed quid inpavidum genus fecisse prodest?”), *Hercules Oetaeus* 63.

185 *Hercules Oetaeus* 1327–1332.
the past. Hyllus, in telling Deianeira of Hercules’ impending death, states that “Death
defies from him who once was victorious over him in his own realm.”\textsuperscript{186}

Hercules’ active anticipation of his apotheosis shapes his perspective on his
immolation. Philoctetes describes Heracles’ final act of building the pyre. In doing so,
he describes Hercules as suffering, but looking to heaven in hope. “His gaze was as one
seeking the stars, not fires” (voltus petentis astra, non ignes erat)\textsuperscript{187} Furthermore, just
before calling for the pyre to be lit, Philoctetes states that Heracles was facing death
expectantly: “Unconcerned with himself, gazing at the heavens, he sought with his eyes
whether from some height his father was looking at him” (Iacuit sui securus et caelum
intuens quaesivit oculis, parte an ex aliqua pater despiceret illum).\textsuperscript{188} Hercules departs
his mortal life as one conquering death (and perhaps Hades/hell by extension) as a final
victory.\textsuperscript{189}

\textit{Hercules Oetaeus} also gives us a rare portrayal of Hercules as a divine being.
After his death, the voice of Hercules states that he has reached his goal of apotheosis.\textsuperscript{190}
Alcmene recognizes that Hercules has departed, and she announces that she will return to

\textsuperscript{186} “Mors refugit illum victa quae in regno suo semel est.” See \textit{Hercules Oetaeus} 766–67.

\textsuperscript{187} \textit{Hercules Oetaeu}, 1645.

\textsuperscript{188} \textit{Hercules Oetaeus} 1693; see also 1983–88.

\textsuperscript{189} \textit{Hercules Oetaeus} 1976.

\textsuperscript{190} \textit{Hercules Oetaeus} 1940.
Thebes to “proclaim the new god added to their temples.”\textsuperscript{191} And in the final statements of the play, the chorus speaks words of supplication to the hero-god.\textsuperscript{192}

The author of \textit{Hercules Oetaeus} also addresses the virtue of Hercules. His virtue is contrasted with that of his wife Deianira who unknowingly serves as a tool for Juno to bring about Heracles’ death.\textsuperscript{193} Deianira hoped to ensnare Hercules with his own emotions, again similar to Juno’s goal in \textit{Hercules furens} (the former to love and the latter to self-hate).\textsuperscript{194} Instead, Hercules retains his honor and virtue by the fact that he does not fear death, nor does he face defeat at leaving his mortal life.

Overall, Seneca and the author of \textit{Hercules Oetaeus} portray Heracles to be the virtuous champion who has conquered the evils of this world. The evils ranged from the exterior forces beyond his control, to his internal struggles with shame and fear. Most significantly, Heracles is portrayed as one who is heroic in the face of his own death. These works contribute to our understanding of Heracles as a virtuous hero and a prime example for emulation.

\textbf{A Summary of Heracles as Hero}

Based on the descriptions of the hero, and how Heracles was both mythically and philosophically portrayed, Heracles is the prime example of a Greco-Roman hero who would have been known to a Greco-Roman audience, including the author of Hebrews. Heracles met one of the primary characteristics of a hero in that he was a mortal whose

\textsuperscript{191} \textit{Hercules Oetaeus} 1981.

\textsuperscript{192} \textit{Hercules Oetaeus} 1989.

\textsuperscript{193} \textit{Hercules Oetaeus} 438–39.

\textsuperscript{194} \textit{Hercules Oetaeus}, 473, 562.
earthly life would eventually come to an end. Although no “remains” of Heracles or his tomb was centrally located, archaeological findings show one of the earliest locales for a cult of Heracles to have been on Mt. Oeta where the hero departed from the mortal realm into the immortal one. Although a centralized tomb was unknown (and the legend of his complete immolation was widely known), there were numerous heroön (a special unroofed structure with four columns and a base), altars and temples dedicated to the hero and eventually to the god. This would also support the view that he was worshiped as a hero who, by definition, would have post-mortem influence in the mortal realm.

Regarding the exploits of his life, it would be difficult to find a hero who could match the life of Heracles. His deeds were said to have an effect in every plane of mortal and immortal existence (heaven, earth, and hell/Hades). The deeds of his life helped him to achieve apotheosis or deification. This would have been the greatest possible aspiration for any mortal. Heracles’ life was deemed worthy of worship by mortals who desired a special relationship with the venerated “hero-god.” In addition to worshipping Heracles as a hero, the worship of this particular hero gravitated toward divine worship and a cultic following as with the gods of Olympus. As early as the late 6th century B.C.E., Heracles was recognized in cults as a god. In particular, Herodotus and Pindar

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196 Some noted places for the worship of Heracles include: Athens (Pausanius, Description of Greece 1.8.4, 1.30.2); Attika and Kynosarges—near Athens (Paus. Desc. 1.19.3; Herodotus, Histories 5.63.4); near Corinth (Paus. Desc. 2.3.2; 2.4.5) as well as Sparta (Paus. Desc. 3.14.6; Nemean Odes 10.52).
approve and promote this conception.\textsuperscript{197} By the 5\textsuperscript{th} century B.C.E., the divine acknowledgement and worship of Heracles spread throughout the Mediterranean world.

The cults of Heracles often adopted (or “syncretized”) the legends of other local gods or heroes.\textsuperscript{198} Herodotus noted how religious traditions regarding Heracles were often interchangeable with the deities of other nations, such as Egypt and Phoenicia.\textsuperscript{199} Herodotus speculated that the “god” Heracles was an “ancient god” (παλαιός θεός) and an “immortal” (ἀθάνατος) who existed in some manifestation even before the birth of the man Heracles.\textsuperscript{200} In this way, Herodotus was attempting to explain how Heracles could be worshipped both as a “dead hero” and an Olympian “god”.\textsuperscript{201}

Heracles’ influence was certainly felt in the artistic expressions of the times as well. Iconographic representations of Heracles are evident throughout the early Greek world.\textsuperscript{202} Dixon-Kennedy states that, “Images of Heracles are to be found as far east as Persia, but he remains, without doubt, a character, whether mortal or god, of Greek derivation who later was absorbed almost unaltered into the Roman tradition, that tradition adding just minute detail to his already complex and complete life.”\textsuperscript{203}

\textsuperscript{197} Herodotus approved the practice of worshipping Heracles as a god (\textit{Histories} 2.44, 145), and Pindar actually refers to Heracles as “hero god” (\textit{Pythian Odes} 3.7). See Price and Kearns, “Heracles,” 252.

\textsuperscript{198} Price and Kearns, “Heracles,” 252.

\textsuperscript{199} Herodotus, \textit{Histories} 2.42–45.

\textsuperscript{200} \textit{Histories} 2.44.

\textsuperscript{201} \textit{Histories} 2.44. Could this be an example of the concept of a “pre-existent” Heracles?

\textsuperscript{202} Price and Kearns, “Heracles,” 252.

\textsuperscript{203} Dixon-Kennedy, “Heracles,” 159.
The nature of his life, being physically superior to average mortals, made him a special patron of athletes and arenas. Young men who studied martial arts and warfare chose Heracles as a personal patron.\footnote{The nature of Heracles’ patronage inclined a largely male following, and there is evidence that women were sometimes banned from participation. However, Heracles would sometimes be incorporated into existing hero-worshipping practices including those which were inclusive of female participation. See Price and Kearns, “Heracles,” 252.} Even though legend stated that Heracles founded the Olympic games in tribute to Zeus—the head of the Greek pantheon—some major athletic events (particularly those held in the region of Nemea, the scene of his first Labor) were dedicated to him and thus further indicate how he was revered.\footnote{Guerber, _Greece and Rome_, 207.}

His civic contributions were only the beginning of how the hero was considered beneficent. Whether as a god or a hero, many sought aid from him for deliverance from evil.\footnote{Herodotus, _Histories_ 2.113} Many also sought his council and guidance. Herodotus notes that Heracles belonged to a class of gods who could serve as “oracles” (\[\nu\nu\nu\tau\tau\tau\iota\varepsilon\sigma\nu\]).\footnote{Histories 2.83.} The legend of Heracles’ apotheosis greatly increased his level of influence—yet his heroic qualities placed him in an unusual category of gods who could commiserate with humanity since a portion of their existence was as a mortal.

Finally, there was also the element of political prestige in linking oneself with the hero-god. Certain powerful persons claimed a special relationship with Heracles as their
benefactor. Some actually claimed to be genealogical descendants of Heracles himself and used their supposed legendary lineage as evidence of their claims to power.

Overall, Heracles was viewed as the ideal hero and god, by the Greco-Roman world. His particular characteristics would have made him an excellent reference for Christian philosophies, either as an example or a counter-example. We shall explore in subsequent chapters how parallels between Heracles and Christ of Hebrews could be viewed as likely.

**Archegos As a Term for “Hero”**

One of the key factors which has led scholars to look for heroic imagery in Christian literature has been the term ἀρχηγός. Ἀρχηγός occurs throughout Hellenistic literature, including the Septuagint and the New Testament. It is applied to significant Hellenistic heroes such as Heracles (see below). This term appears four times in the NT, and twice in Hebrews (Acts 3.15; 5:31; Heb 2.10; 12:2). Since each of the New Testament occurrences refers to Christ, scholars have studied the use of the term for the purpose of understanding its background. Such studies have shed light on the understanding of the early Christian community’s Christology. I will now explore the possibility that ἀρχηγός, with its variety of meanings, could also be understood to be synonymous with “hero”—particularly in the context of the Hebrews. A lexical

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209 Both the Argeads of Macedonia and the Dorians of the Peloponnese claimed to be descendants of the Heraclidae. See Price and Kearns, “Heracles,” 253.
connection such as this justifies an exploration of further parallels between Heracles and Christ.\textsuperscript{210}

Primary Descriptions of \textit{Archegos}

'Αρχηγός is a combination of the Greek terms for "beginning" [ἀρχή] and "to lead out" [ἀγω]. The standard Greek lexicons and dictionaries provide three basic definitions for ἀρχηγός: (1) "leader"; (2) "instigator (in a series)"; and (3) "founder."\textsuperscript{211}

As will be shown, the definitions may overlap when significant individuals are concerned.

The first definition is "one who has a preeminent position, 'leader, ruler, prince'."\textsuperscript{212} One of the \textit{Oxyrhynchus Papyri} dating from the early 4\textsuperscript{th} to late 3\textsuperscript{rd} century B.C.E. records a report of a public meeting wherein the term is used twice to acclaim the presiding prytanis\textsuperscript{213} [ἀρχηγαὶ τῶν ἁγαθῶν...ἀρχηγὲ τῶν ἁγαθῶν].\textsuperscript{214} Circa 5\textsuperscript{th}–4\textsuperscript{th}

\textsuperscript{210} Hatch and Redpath indicate that the LXX writers translate nine different Hebrew terms into the Greek term ἀρχηγός. See HRCS 165.


\textsuperscript{212} See \textit{BDAG}.

\textsuperscript{213} The prytanis was an executive member of the Athenian council.

\textsuperscript{214} From POxy 41: 5–7. Bernard P. Grenfell and Arthur S. Hunt. \textit{The Oxyrhynchus Papyri}. (London: Egypt Exploration Fund, 1898–1926), 1: 84–87. \textit{BDAG} places this text solely under the first definition. Given the translation and meaning provided by Grenfell and Hunt, it is appropriate for this reference to also apply under the third meaning of "founder" or "source." Grenfell and Hunt translate the phrase [ἀρχηγαὶ τῶν ἁγαθῶν...ἀρχηγὲ τῶν ἁγαθῶν, κτίσα τῆς πὶ ὀλέως] as "source of our blessings...Source of our blessings, founder of the city!" (\textit{The Oxyrhynchus Papyri}, 85–86).
centuries B.C.E. Aeschylus (tragedian) and Thucydides (historian) each use ἀρχηγός in a way consistent with “prince” and “captain.”

The *BDAG* notes that this first definition for ἀρχηγός encompasses most of the occurrences in the Septuagint. According to Hatch and Redpath, the Septuagint uses ἀρχηγός 35 times to translate nine Semitic terms. Initially, this study will concentrate on the definitions and usage of the most prevalent appearances in the LXX and how these principal meanings parallel the definitions provided by *BDAG*. Under the primary definition of ἀρχηγός, the following Hebrew terms and texts apply:

(1) **Chief** (Jer 3:4); ἄρχων “one lifted up, chief prince” (Num 13:3(2); 16:2); ἀρχή “ruler, dictator” (Judg 11:6, 11; Isa 3:6–7); פֶּה “head, beginning” (Exod 6:14; Num 13:4(3); 14:4; 25:4; Deut 33:21; Judg 9:44; 1 Chr 5:24; 8:28; 12:20; Neh 7:70–71; 11:16–17; Lam 2:10; 1 Macc 9:61; 10.47); מְגָן “beginning, chief thing” (Mic 1:13); מָכַּֽשׁ “[leader](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leader)“ (Gen 1:1) as ἀρχηγός. This would mark the term’s connection with the creative act of God. See the primary definition of “Anfang” (“beginning”) under “Anfang” in *HALOT* 2: 1086–1092.

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216 *BDAG*.

217 Of the nine Semitic synonyms, the five most prevalent appear in the main text of this paper. The nine terms (and their derivative phrases) listed alphabetically in Hatch and Redpath are as follows: סֵפֶן; פֶּה; נְפָק; פִּקּוּל; פֶּלֶס; פֶּלֶס; פֶּלֶס; פֹּנֵק; פֶּלֶס [also יַסְעָר]. See HRCS 1:165.


219 The English definitions provided by *BDAG* are synonymous with those found in HAL (Leiden: Brill, 2004).

220 Note that in Gen 1:1 the LXX translates פֶּה as ἀρχηγός. This would mark the term’s connection with the creative act of God. See the primary definition of "Anfang" (“beginning”) under "Anfang" in *HALOT* 2: 1086–1092.
of many (people)” (Num 10:4); and ἱππος “commander” (Judg 5:15; 1 Chr 26:26; Neh 2:9; Isa 30:4). Philo uses ἀρχηγός in his quotations of Numbers (14:4; 25:1, 4) and likewise mirrors the meanings of the LXX passages. BDAG places both instances of the term in Acts (3:15; 5:31) under this primary definition, with the caveat that Acts 3:15 might also carry the meaning of the third definition “founder.”

The second definition is “one who begins something that is first in a series” or “instigator” (with negative connotation). Polybius of the 2nd century B.C.E. used the term positively to apply to the “first to raise a kingdom to power,” and negatively to refer to “mutineers.” BDAG places the following LXX texts under this second definition. In 1 Macc 9:61 the term means “leader” (in context here “instigator”) who is an “example in an action, who stirs others to follow.” In 1 Macc 10:47 it refers to Alexander (the Great of Macedon) who acted as the “first” of many kings to offer “true peace” (εἰρηνικὸν) with Israel. Micah 1:13 uses ἀρχηγός to translate ἀρχή “beginning” (a negative reference to an “instigator” of sin).

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221 Num 14:4 in Allegorical Interpretation 3:175; and Num 25: 1, 4 in On Dreams 1: 89.
222 BDAG.
223 BDAG.
224 Polybius Histories 5:10:1; and 1:66:10 respectively.
225 BDAG.
226 TDNT 1:487.
227 TDNT 1:487.
Plutarch of the 1st–2nd centuries C.E. used ἀρχηγός in reference to gods of Olympus reputed to be the primary founders of music and art. This particular reference could also be placed in the third category of definition for ἀρχηγός as well. Philo makes reference to fire as the ἀρχηγικός or “primary...source” for all labor. In this context the term could be used as “instigator” (the second definition category), but only because it is used to discuss Moses’ ban on bearing fire as a preventative measure to prevent violation of the Sabbath. In one passage, Josephus uses the term with a negative connotation as “author of all sorts of mischief.”

The third definition is “one who begins or originates” or “originator, founder.” This may be distinguished from the second definition above since it applies to a more creative role, rather than merely the first in a sequence. Delling’s article in TDNT defines ἀρχηγός as “the ‘hero’ of a city, who founded it, often gave it his name and became its guardian.” For example, Plato makes reference to Athene as ἀρχηγός [ἀρχηγετής] for founding Athens. This would indicate that "founders" were seen intrinsically to be leaders as in the Oxyrhynchus Papyrus noted under the first definition above. The papyrus acclaims the prytanis “source of our blessings [2x], founder of the city” [κτίστα

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228 Plutarch, Moralia 958D; 1135B.
230 Josephus, Antiquities 7:207.
231 BDAG.
232 TDNT 1:487.
233 Plato, Timaeus 21E.
Josephus uses the term to refer to the character of Noah as “the founder of our race.” BDAG states that Acts 3:15 and its reference to Christ as the “author of life” would also be applicable under this definition. It would seem that this third definition could easily be seen as a synonym for “hero.”

Heracles as Archegos

Now that the basic categories of the definitions have been established, I will discuss how ἄρχηγός is used in reference to Heracles and the Christ of Hebrews. McCruden notes that secular literature utilizes ἄρχηγός to portray Heracles as “founder, leader or champion.” In other words, there is at least one reference to Heracles in ancient Greco-Roman literature for each of the three definitions given for ἄρχηγός. Aelius Aristides refers to Heracles as “the common leader of all men.” Also, Aristides utilizes the “impetus” aspect of ἄρχηγός by calling Heracles “the best champion of human nature [who] guided all men toward the best.” Finally, Dio Chrysostom uses ἄρχηγός to refer to the “founder of the city.”

In essence, Heracles embodied the term by means of his leadership and his perceived role as a bringer of civilization. As shown above, Heracles embodied the description of “hero.”

234 POxy 41: 5–6.
235 Josephus, Against Apion 1: 130. Note that BDAG places this reference under definition two, incorrectly I believe.
237 Aristides, Oration 3.37. See also Aune, “Heracles,” 15; McCruden, Solidarity Perfected, 51.
238 Aristides, Oration 40.14. See also Aune, “Heracles,” 15–16; McCruden, Solidarity Perfected, 51.
239 Dio Chrysostom, Oration 33.1, 47. See also Aune, “Heracles,” 16.
Christ as *Archēgos*

Delling finds aspects of all three major definitions given for ἀρχηγός (“leader/author,” “instigator,” and “founder”) can be applied to Christ in the New Testament occurrences. Every time the term is used in the Greek New Testament, it refers to Christ. In two speeches of Peter in Acts (3:15; 5:31), the term reflects the high Christology of the early church. Both references to Christ in Acts as ἀρχηγός apply the first “author/principal” definition. Acts 3:15 very likely employs the third “source” meaning as well.

J. J. Scott’s article notes that scholars typically understand the biblical use of ἀρχηγός as relating to the Greek concept of “source/founder” and the Semitic concept of “leader/ruler” (אָרָךְ הַרְשָׁעִי הָאֵל). Regarding ἀρχηγός in Hebrews, Scott views the passages as “salvation history” and therefore applies the term as one “standing at the central point of salvation history” in an intersection of the past, present and future. He states that the best understanding of ἀρχηγός employs all its subtleties of meaning—because there are no “mutually exclusive functions” which can adequately describe the author of Hebrews’ reference.

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240 *TDNT* 1: 487.


243 Scott, "Archēgos,” 54.
In Heb 2:10, Lane uses the context and synonymous Greek terminology to justify his translation of ἀρχηγός as “champion.”


Attridge and McCruden agree that the context of Heb 2:10 suggests a translation of “leader” or “pioneer.”

Hebrews 12:2 can likewise be translated in a variety of ways which reflect all the aspects of ἀρχηγός. If the heroic element is applied to both verses, this would be indicative of a link between the passages which is supported by Guthrie’s structural outline of the epistle.

the New Testament which may shed more light on the degree of connection implied by use of the term in Hebrews.

Conclusion

One of the contexts in which Christianity emerged in the course of the 1st century C.E. was a widespread use of Heracles, both in mythical and philosophic ways. It is therefore reasonable to assume that the author of Hebrews would have known both the refined version of Heracles, as well as some of the mythic material which formed its base. In the fourth chapter of my dissertation, I will build upon the parallels between the philosophical portrayals and Christ, as highlighted by Attridge and Aune.²⁴⁷

CHAPTER THREE

HEBREWS 2 AND 11–12

Introduction

The author of Hebrews portrays Christ in a variety of ways. In discussing a potential Hellenistic-heroic background to the portrait of Christ in Hebrews, it will be necessary to examine Heb 2 and 11–12 and how they contribute to the overall message of Hebrews. In this chapter, I will do a detailed exegesis of Heb 2 and 11–12, and in particular the passages that will be used in chapter four in my discussion of a heroic pattern within Hebrews. In this chapter, I will also point out appearances of heroic language and imagery in Heb 2 and 11–12, but will more explicitly discuss them in chapter four. The particular contribution of these two passages in Hebrews will support my thesis of a heroic portrayal of Jesus in the epistle.

Before the messages of Heb 2 and 11–12 can be accurately interpreted, the passages must be understood in the context of the overall work. As a first step in this pursuit, the structure of Hebrews needs to be discussed. In addition to the discussion of structure, it will be necessary to understand the temporal-spatial framework of Hebrews. Understanding the author’s language and perspective regarding time (past, present, future, eschatology) and space (heaven, earth) is essential to grasping the message of Hebrews.
The next section of this chapter will examine the message of Heb 2: 5–18. After re-introducing the high Christology present in Heb 1, the author’s discussion of the “Son” turns to the subject of the incarnation. The author quotes from the Psalmist, and subsequently presents an interpretation to develop his perspective on the Son’s humanity. The Son is identified to be “Jesus” who became mortal, suffered (death), and received exaltation in order to provide salvation for humanity. The theme and language of Heb 2 set the stage for the understanding of Christ’s ministry of mediation.

Hebrews 2 provides an ontological perspective on Christ. However, the language and themes of Heb 2 recur later in the epistle in Heb 12:1–3 and its surrounding context. Therefore, the next section of this dissertation will examine the message of Heb 11–12 to determine the particular contribution of 12:1–3. Since 12:1–3 serves as the capstone to Heb 11 (a form of hero-list from Jewish history), an examination of the extended context is necessary.

Overview of the Structure and Temporal-Spatial Framework of Hebrews

The Structure of Hebrews

One of the most important steps in understanding the message of Hebrews is to trace the argument in the book as indicated by its structure. As early as the 16th century, proposals for the structure of Hebrews have been offered which attempt to trace the message (or messages) of the book by grouping the text into sections and subsections based on similarities of content. Since that time there has been agreement on the

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presence of both expository and hortatory material, as well as relative agreement on paragraph divisions, and recognition of major divisions at or near 1:5, 4:14, and 10:19.\(^2\)

The debate has involved interpretation of how the expository and hortatory sections relate to one another, and what the central argument(s) or climax(es) of the epistle are. For example, Craig Koester states that 2:5–9 functions as the proposition for the argument of the epistle.\(^3\) Meanwhile, F. F. Bruce maintains that 10:19–25 serves as the summary of the epistle’s argument.\(^4\)

The difficulty of agreement is due to the complexity of the epistle’s form and content.\(^5\) In the last two centuries, scholars have offered approaches which can be generally categorized into one of four types: thematic, rhetorical, Vanhoye’s literary approach, or discourse analysis. I offer a brief summary of the approaches here. In this dissertation, I will be adopting the structure of George H. Guthrie’s Discourse Analysis which I believe best accounts for the multifaceted complexity of the epistle’s form and content.

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The Thematic Approach

The thematic approach focuses on an expository arrangement of large blocks of the text which highlight one or more themes. For example, the theme of Christ’s superiority served as the basis for Thomas Aquinas’ 13th century structure for Hebrews. The thematic approach offers the benefits of indicating major concepts and divisions in the epistle. However, there has been no uniformity on the agreement of divisions or concepts. The major critique of the thematic approach is that it does not recognize or explain the intricate components of form present in the epistle, and thus does not adequately convey the author’s message. For example, repetitions which occur throughout the epistle do not conform to strict thematic section divisions (such as Jesus as High Priest; 2:17; 3:1; 4:14–5:10; 6:20). The thematic approach as such is no longer used.

The Rhetorical Approach

The rhetorical approach attempts to classify the function of a text to its recipients by identifying certain rhetorical-literary features. For example, this would mean identifying and explaining the author’s use of Hellenistic rhetorical features. Scholars who have taken a rhetorical approach to Hebrews have generally concluded that the epistle should fall into one of two forms of argument: deliberative or epideictic. Those who subscribe to the epistle’s deliberative form hold that the author of Hebrews uses

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8 Guthrie, *Structure*, 27.
exposition and exhortation in an attempt to contrast the beneficial future reward of faithfulness versus the harmful future effects of faithlessness.\(^9\) Those who subscribe to the position that the epistle is epideictic hold that the author is more focused on the present than the future (although the future certainly plays a role). The epideictic form seeks to condemn shameful behavior and commend honorable behavior by offering comparisons with the recipients’ current environment (e.g. Christ’s present superiority to OT models).\(^10\) Meanwhile, some scholars have suggested multiple purposes for the epistle, such as a combination of deliberative and epideictic.\(^11\)

The rhetorical approach notes the variety of Greek rhetorical devices which are used in Hebrews. According to this approach, Hebrews’ structure follows the simple four-part outline common in Greek rhetoric: *exordium* (1:1–4); *narratio* (1:5–2:18); *argumentatio* (3:1–12:29); *epilogus* (13:1–25).\(^12\) The rhetorical approach correctly senses the oral and pastoral natures of the epistle. However, this approach can be problematic when a single purpose (deliberative or epideictic) is assigned to the entire epistle. Koester states that the purpose of the passage would be determined by the recipients, who would hear either a deliberative or epideictic message depending on the status of their relationship with the covenant community.\(^13\) In fact, it would be too

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\(^12\) Guthrie, *Structure*, 32.

\(^13\) Koester, *Hebrews*, 82.
simplistic to categorize the epistle only in terms of Greek rhetoric. O’Brien states that while the rhetorical approach does account for many of the Hellenistic literary features, it does not adequately identify styles of discourse that are not easily categorized as Hellenistic-rhetorical.\textsuperscript{14}

**The Vanhoye-Literary Approach**

Building on the development of rhetorical analysis, Albert Vanhoye presented an approach that was concerned primarily with the final form of the epistle, and thus sees all portions as part of a unified whole.\textsuperscript{15} This approach recognizes literary features such as *inclusio* and chiasmus, as well as the types of genre utilized in the epistle that do not originate strictly in Hellenistic rhetoric. Vanhoye’s contribution set the standard for approaches to the study of the structure of Hebrews.

Vanhoye outlines the epistle according to five major concentric portions plus an introduction (1:1–4) and conclusion (13:20–21). He structures the entire discourse as a chiasm around the “central exposition” concerning sacrifice in 5:11–10:39. Vanhoye sees 9:11 as the central verse within this section, and thusly argues that the entire epistle is constructed in relation to the focus of this verse, which concerns the high priestly status of Christ. He also sees the innermost layers of the epistle as having to do with ecclesiology (3:1–5:10 Christ’s faithfulness and compassion; 11:1–12:13 faith and endurance). The outermost layers of the epistle, according to his outline, have to deal


with eschatology (1:5–2:18 Christ’s name superior to angels; 12:14–13:19 the peaceful fruit of justice).

There are several benefits of the literary approach and to Vanhoye’s contribution in particular. First, this approach appropriately recognizes the use of literary indicators (“hook words”, inclusios, etc.) which were used in ancient literature. Second, the indicators are used to mark the major divisions and themes of the epistle. This would also be consistent with how ancient documents were structured. Likewise, shifts in genre are given special attention in this approach, and in particular how the passages oscillate between expository and hortatory genres. Overall, the approach also contributes to the idea that the discourse is unified—at least in its final form. Even though there are various sections and transitions, the literary method contributes by showing how different parts of the discourse are related to one another.

The major criticism of the literary approach has to do with reducing the entire work to a single theme or idea. While certain scholars utilize this approach, there is disagreement as to what the climax or central focus of the epistle should be. For example, Vanhoye states that the priesthood is central. Some scholars recognize the importance of the priesthood element in the epistle, but do not see it as the central theme

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16 Guthrie, *Structure*, 34.

17 Guthrie, *Structure*, 34.


Another critique is that the rigidity of the structure does not adequately account for parallel sections, such as 4:14–16 and 10:19–23.²¹

**The Discourse Analysis Approach**

The discourse analysis approach (which is sometimes referred to as “textual linguistics”) seeks to discover how large units of the text are determinable and interrelated to form a unified discourse. Smaller units, even words, can be utilized in tracing the discourse while always keeping in mind the language in its original historical and literary contexts. This approach shows how a text such as Hebrews is a combination of style and theme.

George H. Guthrie’s *The Structure of Hebrews: A Text-Linguistic Analysis* diverges from a linear perspective on the structure of the discourse of Hebrews. Guthrie’s approach sees two large lines of discourse (one expository and one hortatory) moving together—and sometimes overlapping—throughout the discourse. This view of Hebrews as an interwoven tapestry recognizes “cohesion shifts” which mark transitions between units and types of discourse.²² Guthrie analyzes changes in genre, topic, space, time, actor, subject, verb, tense, mood, person, number, reference and lexical form or meaning. His point is that although the work is a unified whole (a macro-discourse), the

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transitions signal how the larger discourse can be divided into subsections (micro-discourses) which help to better follow the message of the epistle.\(^{23}\)

At the same time, Guthrie’s approach highlights the cohesiveness between distinct parts of the discourse. He recognizes linked passages whose literary characteristics (“hook words”, inclusios, etc.) show the passages to be joined. For example, when examining the major turning points in the discourse which occur at 4:14–16 and 10:19–25, Guthrie shows the passages to be practically parallel to one another—thus forming an inclusio between the passages while simultaneously they each serve as cohesion shifts within their immediate contexts.\(^ {24}\) These two passages are shown to serve as overlapping passages which are simultaneously exposition and exhortation. In other words, these passages serve multiple purposes.

Guthrie’s approach acknowledges the multilayered nature of the epistle. Hebrews weaves elements of key motifs (such as Jesus’ Sonship, the Tabernacle(s), positive and negative examples, etc.) into expository and/or hortatory sections of the discourse to present a rich tapestry designed to encourage and motivate the readers to respond favorably to the word of God.\(^ {25}\) While other scholars have offered variations or critiques

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\(^ {23}\) See Guthrie’s outline below. I have blended the forms of presentation which Guthrie offers in his commentary as well as his text on the structure of Hebrews.

\(^ {24}\) Guthrie expands the parallels first noted by Nauck in “Zum Aufbau des Hebräerbriefes,” 200–03. See Guthrie, Structure, 68, 71–72, 79–82.

\(^ {25}\) See O’Brien, Hebrews, 30.
of his outline. Guthrie’s approach remains the most significant representative of this approach.

**The Approach for This Dissertation**

For the purpose of my dissertation, I will adopt G. H. Guthrie’s approach for the basis of my outline because it seems to reflect most accurately the multilayered characteristics of the epistle. The layering of exposition and exhortation correctly recognizes that the epistle is more complex than a linear outline form can account for. In his structure, the two key transitions in the epistle are noted and their dual roles of serving as exposition and exhortation simultaneously. Guthrie’s outline also goes further to recognize some degree of correspondence between other passages, which supports my claim that there is a connection between chapters 2 and 11–12. In the next chapter, I will show in detail the relationship between the units of Heb 2 and 11–12 and how their combined message indicates Jesus to be a hero.

**George H. Guthrie’s Outline of Hebrews**

The following outline has been adapted from Guthrie’s account of the epistle’s structure. While there are interrelationships and transitional points throughout the epistle, this general overview of the structure groups material as either expository (regular type) or exhortatory (italicized type). The expository material follows a structured outline (with Roman and Alpha-numeric designations). Guthrie has also attempted to show the

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interrelationship between sections by using Greek and Greek-prime signifiers (for example, $\varepsilon$ is related to $\dot{\varepsilon}$).

[α] Introduction: God Has Spoken to Us in a Son (1:1–4)

I. The Position of the Son in Relation to the Angels (1:5–2:18)

[β] A. The Son Superior to the Angels (1:5–14)

[γ] -WARNING: Do Not Reject the Word Spoken through God’s Son (2:1–4)

ab. The Son, Superior for a Time, Became Positionally Lower than the Angels (2:5–9)

[δ] B. The Son Lower than the Angels (i.e., among Humans) to Suffer for the ‘Sons’ (i.e., Heirs) (2:10–18)

[ε] -Jesus, the Supreme Example of a Faithful Son (3:1–6)

[ζ] -The Negative Example of Those Who Fell through Faithlessness (3:7–19)

-Transition (4:1–2)

[η] -The Promise of Rest for Those Who Are Faithful (4:3–11)

[θ] -WARNING: Consider the Power of God’s Word (4:12–13)

II. The Position of the Son, Our High Priest, in Relation to the Earthly Sacrificial System (4:14–10:25)

[i] Overlap: We Have a Sinless High Priest Who Has Gone into Heaven (4:14–16)

A. The Appointment of the Son as a Superior High Priest (5:1–10; 7:1–28)

1. Introduction: The Son Taken from among Humans and Appointed according to the Order of Melchizedek (5:1–10)

[k] -The Present Problem with the Hearers (5:11–6:3)
-WARNING: The Danger of Falling Away from the Christian Faith (6:4–8)

-Mitigation: The Author’s Confidence in and Desire for the Hearers (6:9–12)

-God’s Promise Our Basis of Hope (6:13–20)

2. The Superiority of Melchizedek (7:1–10)

3. The Superiority of Our Eternal, Melchizedekan High Priest (7:11–28)
   ab. We Have Such a High Priest Who is Minister in Heaven (8:1–2)

B. The Superior Offering of the Appointed High Priest (8:3–10:18)

   1. Introduction: The More Excellent Ministry of the Heavenly High Priest (8:3–6)

   2. The Superiority of the New Covenant (8:7–13)

   3. The Superior New Covenant Offering (9:1–10:18)

      Introduction: The Pattern of Old Covenant Worship: Place, With Blood, Effect (9:1–10)

      a. Christ’s Superior Blood (9:13–22)

      b. A Sacrifice in Heaven (9:23–28)

      c. An Eternal Sacrifice (10:1–18)

-Overlap: We Have a Great Priest Who Takes Us into Heaven (10:19–25)

-WARNING: The Danger of Rejecting God’s Truth and God’s Son (10:26–31)

-The Positive Example of the Hearers’ Past and an Admonition to Endure to Receive the Promise (10:32–39)
The Temporal-Spatial Framework in Hebrews

Understanding the temporal-spatial framework within which the author discusses the Son is crucial to understanding the discourse. The author refers to distinct realms of time and space and places Christ and the recipients within that context. The author then uses the framework as a basis in the discourse for explaining the reality of Christ and covenant life versus the recipients’ perceived reality.

The author refers to the past, the present and the future in the discourse. Hebrews 13:8 says, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday (ἐχθές), today (σήμερον), and forever (εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας).” Beyond this simple triptych of time, the author distinguishes sub-periods within the past and present times to help answer some perceived contradictions between what the recipients was told about Christ’s reign, and their own experience of
suffering. Furthermore, the temporal references also refer to spatial ideas, such as the realms of earth and heaven (1:2; 2:5).

Concerning ages past, the author refers to a time before or at the point of creation, or before (beyond) humanity. It would have been understood that God existed before all, but the author’s focus is on the times of the Son. This would include the time of the pre-existent Son, “through whom [God] made the world (lit. ages)” (δι’ οὗ καὶ ἐποίεν τοὺς αἰῶνας; 1:2).

The other past age was within the timeframe of human history “long ago” (πάλαι; 1:1), which would encompass the times of the patriarchs and prophets as well as the first covenant and its associated religious systems. The author uses this timeframe for numerous references to the history of God and His people (e.g. chapters 3–4 and 11). Rather than simply making the point that the new covenant is better than the old one, the author also uses linear points in history to show how the new covenant in Christ has more ancient foundations than the covenant under Moses. The most notable example of this occurs with the author’s argument concerning the priesthood. Respect for the ancient order is apparent when the author appeals to the predating of Melchizedek’s priesthood to that of the Levitical priesthood (7:1–10). Furthermore, the author joins the covenant community with a heritage of faithfulness that extends back to the beginning of creation.

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28 The author makes reference to “forefathers” or “ancestors” using πατήρ in this way (1:1; 3:9; 7:10; 8:9; 11:23; 12:7, 9; as well as πρεσβύτερος (11:2).

29 This term likely used to not only encompass the prophets (προφήτης) themselves, but the entire canonical corpus of the Prophets.
(Heb 11:2). Such appeals would serve to strengthen the author’s position by indicating cohesion with the rich and respected history of the covenant communities over time.

Turning to the present periods as referred to in Hebrews, the author presents the common Christian understanding of the eschatological present. There are two distinct periods within “these last days” (1:2), the first of which was initiated by the incarnation of the Son. This initial “present” period concerns the days of the life of Christ, or in other words, the days of the Son’s subjection (humanity). The author commemorates the messianic incarnation by his quotation of Ps 2:7, “You are my son, today (σήμερον) I have begotten you” (1:5; 5:5). From the perspective of the incarnate Christ, the days of his earthly life were his “present” days (his “today” period). The author makes use of the term “today” to mark the period of mortal testing before judgment (3:13). Within his “today”, Jesus was made subject to the mortal condition, which included having to face the judgment of God (2:7). From the recipients’ point of view, the life of Christ was history about which testimony had been given (2:3–4). But the significance of Christ’s life was such that it would remain relevant for humanity for all time.

As Christ’s incarnation ushered in the “last days”, his death and exaltation inaugurated another new period which would encompass all of remaining human time. Within this present age is the audience’s “today”—the audience’s “present”. As with the Son, the audience’s “today” is the time period in which they are faced with the challenges of life, and the opportunity to respond favorably or negatively to the word of God (3:7, 13, 15; 4:7 (2x)). During this period, the exalted Christ reigns, seated at the right hand of

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30 This psalm also appears in Acts 13:33 in the speech Paul gave to the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch on his first missionary journey.
God (1:3, 13; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2). However, this fact is not readily apparent to the audience or the world and is the reason the author must exhort the audience to live faithfully.

The author also discusses the eschatological future. This will be the time when the Son’s reign is consummated on earth and made evident to all by his return (2:5; 9:28; 10:25, 37). The author repeatedly encourages and exhorts the audience with this time period in mind. Judgment will be brought upon those who resist God, or who are his enemies (6:2; 10:13). Eternal reward will finally be inherited by all of his children. Hence, the author refers to this future reality as an impetus for the proper response from the audience.

The Message of Hebrews 2

Introduction

In keeping with the rich tapestry of the epistle, Heb 2 contains an intricate exposition of Christology wherein the Son’s identity, actions and relevance for the audience are discussed. The Son’s divine identity is clearly established in both the introduction (1:1–4) and the first section of the epistle (1:5–14). The author’s use of the kingly-messianic Ps 2 conveys the high Christology which emphasizes the divine kingship of the Son.31 Given the identity and status of the Son, Heb 2:1–4 exhorts the audience not to reject the Son’s message. The author then resumes his articulation of the identity of the Son in light of his incarnation (2:5–9) and suffering (2:10–18), to set the stage for his discussion of Jesus’ fitness for being the perpetual High Priest (4:14–10:25).

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31 The level of Christology expressed in Heb 1 has its greatest parallel in Johannine literature. For more on how John 1, 1 John 1 and Ps 2 are interrelated, see Urban C. von Wahlde, The Gospel and Letters of John (3 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Critical Commentary, 2010) 1: 42–43, 65.
The exposition of Heb 2 is essentially a continuation of the christological exposition of Heb 1. The structure and content of Heb 2 convey multiple layers of concurrent statuses of the Son (mainly exalted and/or subjected) which the author explains manifest themselves differently according to the time in which they occur. These elements combine to further the author’s exhortation to the audience to focus on the person of Christ and to adhere to his saving message of faithfulness (3:1ff).

Hebrews chapter one contains some of the highest Christology in the New Testament. The texts the author uses to promote his Christology in Heb 1 are used likewise throughout the New Testament in what Lane calls, “the same confessional pattern.”32 In 1:5, the author of Hebrews quotes Ps 2:7, “You are my son, today I have begotten you” (Ὑίος μου ἐί σύ, ἐγὼ σήμερον γεγέννηκά σε). The Synoptic writers used this coronation psalm33 to convey the messianic sonship of Christ concerning three events: (1) his baptism (Mark 1:11; cf. Matt 3:17; Luke 3:22); (2) his transfiguration (Mark 9:11; cf. Matt 17:15; Luke 9:35)34; and (3) his resurrection (Acts 13:33). Furthermore, in 1:5 the author of Hebrews joins Ps 2:7 to Nathan’s oracle of 2 Samuel 7:14 (1 Chron 17:13)—another verse often used by Christian writers in relation to Christ’s messianic sonship.35 “I will be a father to him, and he will be a son to me”

32 Lane, Hebrews, 1:25.


34 See also 2 Pet 1:17 which contains a reference to the synoptic transfiguration episode and the associated quotation of Ps 2:7.

35 Lane, Hebrews, 1:25.
Another instance of the high-christological-confessional-pattern in Hebrews occurs in 1:13 (as well as 2:8\textsuperscript{36}; 8:1; 10:12, 13; and 12:2) where the author of Hebrews links himself to an existing christological confession by quoting Ps 110:1 “Sit at my right hand and I will make your enemies a footstool for your feet” (Κάθου ἐκ δεξιῶν μου ἔως ἄν θῶ τοὺς ἔχθρους σου ὑποπόδιον τῶν ποδῶν σου). This verse is the most commonly cited Old Testament text by New Testament authors.\textsuperscript{37} It is likely that the New Testament authors constructed their narratives with Ps 110 in mind. In the Synoptics, Ps 110:1 is quoted by Jesus to make the point that the messiah was more than a human descendant of David, but was also referred to by David (the Psalmist) as “Lord” (κύριος) (Mark 12:36; cf. Matt 22:44; Luke 20:42; and Peter’s speech in Acts 2:34–35).

A reference to Ps 110 is also implied in Christ’s references to his eschatological return (Mark 14:62; cf. Matt 26:64). In Pauline literature, Ps 110:1 gives special attention to Christ’s exalted post-resurrection status of being at the “right hand” (δεξιῶς) of God (Eph 1:20; Col 3:1). In 1 Cor 15:26, a partial quote of Ps 110:1 connects the subjection (ὑποτάσσω) of all things to Christ, with Christ’s victory over the “final enemy” (ἐσχάτος ἐχθρός) which is a personified “death” (ὁ θάνατος). In particular, this train of thought will be evident in the exposition of Heb 2 (see below).

\textsuperscript{36} The term “under his feet” (ὑποκάτω), though a quotation of Ps 8:4–6, also forms a connection with Ps 110:1 to the degree that I include the reference here.

Psalm 110:1 also occurs in 1 Pet 3:22 which mentions the resurrected Christ, “who has proceeded to God’s right hand in heaven with angels, authorities and powers made subject to him” (ὁς ἐστιν ἐν δεξιᾷ [τοῦ] θεοῦ, πορευθεὶς εἰς οὐρανόν, ὑποταγέντων αὐτῷ ἀγγέλων καὶ ἐξουσίων καὶ δυνάμεων). In particular, this verse in 1 Pet echoes the tradition present in Heb 1 which combines Christ’s exalted status (δεξιός) with the topic of all things “made subject” (ὑποτάσσομαι) to him, even “angels”. The author of Hebrews develops the topic by detailing Christ’s “superior” (κρείττων) status in relation to angels in order to support his subsequent argument in 2:1–4.

Hebrews 1 and 2 are not primarily a polemic against angel worship, but are a way of explaining the exalted status of Christ in a way which the audience would understand.38

Following the pattern of exposition-exhortation-exposition, Heb 2:1–4 points to the importance of the message in light of the identity of the messenger. This is the first warning passage of Hebrews reflecting the form of “a word of exhortation” (τοῦ λόγου τῆς παρακλήσεως; 13:22) found throughout the epistle. The author has already pointed out that Christ’s exalted status is the highest of all with the only exception being God himself (1:2–14). Based on the exposition of Christ’s divine identity (hence the use of “therefore” (Διὰ τοῦτο) in 2:1), the “message” (λόγος ;2:2) has special authority.

The message originated with Christ (“was declared first through the Lord” (ἀρχὴν...λαλεῖσθαι διὰ τοῦ κυρίου; 2.3b). The author of Hebrews claims to be a second-generation recipient of the message for whom first-generation believers had “confirmed” (βεβαίωσε) the message (2:3c). The message also received the supreme

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38 O’Brien, Hebrews, 92.
confirmation of God in a fashion familiar to the biblical tradition in 2:4a. Similar to God’s affirmations in both Testaments, the message was confirmed by (“signs and wonders” (σημείοις τε καὶ τέρασιν) and “miracles” (δυνάμεις).\(^{39}\) In a manner fitting the New Testament, the message received God’s confirmation as stated in 2:4b “by the Holy Spirit” (πνεῦματος ἁγίου; or “by gifts of the Holy Spirit” (NRSV)).\(^{40}\) With such testimony to support it, the author exhorts the audience to “adhere” or “listen” (προσέχω) to the message with due diligence (2:1).

In Heb 2:5, the author resumes the expository style and theme of 1:5–14, and begins to discuss the status of the Son in terms of his incarnation. The opening verse of this section continues the argument by two means: (1) the use of “for” (γὰρ) connects the argument grammatically; and (2) the inclusio of “angels” (ἀγγέλου) in 2:5 and 2:16 connects the argument thematically and structurally. The exposition itself addresses the topic of the Son’s statuses, and explains the appropriateness of Christ’s subjection (incarnation and suffering) for the purpose of his preparation as the perfected High Priest.

Hebrews 2:5–9: The Christological Interpretation

Hebrews 2:5–8a: Introduction and Quotation of Psalm 8:4–6

In this subsection, the author quotes Ps 8:4–6 (8:5–7 LXX)\(^ {41}\) to use for his explanation of Christ’s incarnation. The temporal-spatial element (discussed above)

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\(^{39}\) The particular combination of “signs and wonders” appears in the OT (Deut 4:34; 6:22; 26:8; 29:3; 34:11; Ps 135:9; Isa 8:18) and in the NT (Acts 4:30; 5:12; Rom 15:19; 2 Cor 12:12).


\(^{41}\) For the sake of clarity (unless specified otherwise), I will use the MT numbering system since most English versions do.
plays an important role in setting the scene for the quotation and subsequent interpretation, and in particular the tension between the eschatological present and the eschatological future. This tension involves helping the audience to understand why they are suffering in a world that supposedly is being ruled by their benefactor—something which they have difficulty resolving with their current suffering. The author uses the Psalmist’s words to address the tension by expanding Christ’s concurrent identities (or multiple statuses) as exalted messiah and subjected mortal. In 2:5, the author begins by reasserting the fact that Christ is superior to angels. God has “subjected” (ὑποτάσσω) the “coming world/age” (τὴν οἰκουμένην τὴν μέλλουσαν) to Christ—not to angels. It is significant to note that the “coming world” was likely understood to contain a spatial, as well as a temporal element, to include both the inhabited world of mortals and the heavenly realm of angels.42 Several texts of Second Temple Judaism indicate that many believed the world was under the management of angels, as recorded in Deut 32:8 (LXX)43: “When the Most High distributed the nations, as He dispersed the sons of Adam, He established the boundaries of the nations according to the numbers of the angels of God” (ὅτε διεμέριζεν ὁ ὕψιστος ἔθνη, ὁς διέσπειρεν ύιοὺς Άδαμ, ἔστησεν ὁρια ἐθνῶν κατὰ ἀριθμόν ἀγγέλων θεοῦ). Given this traditional understanding, it seems as though the author of Hebrews wants to establish strongly the scope and timing of Christ’s reign as universal before entering the discussion of his incarnation.


43 Dan 10:20–21; 12:21; Sir 17:17; 1 En. 60:15–21; 89:70–76; Jubilees 35:17. See Lane, Hebrews, 1:45–46; and O’Brien, Hebrews, 93.
In 2:6–8a, the author introduces and reproduces Ps 8:4–6. The quote itself is introduced by a reference to an indefinite “someone” (τίς). This does not necessarily mean that the author was unaware of the source of the citation, but rather this was a common method of giving credit to God as the author and speaker of the Scripture. In Ps 8, the psalmist is addressing God.

Psalm 8 has been classified as a hymn of praise. The psalmist recognizes the insignificance of humans when compared to God’s creation of the “heavens” (ὁυμνῆς; Ps 8:4). Yet the psalmist recognizes that in spite of seeming insignificance, the Lord has paid special interest to humankind. He has “caused humans to be a little less than God/gods” (ὁμοιὸς ὑμῖν ὁ θεὸς ἡμῶν), and set them above the rest of creation (Ps 8:5–8).

This quotation appears in the LXX as follows:

What is man that you remember him,  
the son of man that you care for him?  
You made him lower for a little while than angels,  
and in glory and honor you crowned him.  
You set him in charge over the works of your hands,  
you put all things in subjection under his feet. (Ps 8:5–7 LXX)

tί ἐστις ἄνθρωπος, ὅτι μιμνήσκῃ αὐτοῦ,  
η υἱὸς ἄνθρωπος, ὅτι ἐπισκέπτῃ αὐτόν;  
ηλαττώσας αὐτοῦ βραχύ τι παρ ἀγγέλους,  
δόξῃ καὶ τιμῇ ἐστεφάνωσας αὐτόν,  
καὶ κατατέθησας αὐτὸν ἐπὶ τὰ ἐργα τῶν χειρῶν σου,  
pάντα ὑπέταξας ὑποκάτω τῶν ποδῶν αὐτοῦ,

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44 Thompson, Hebrews, 61; Attridge, Hebrews, 70–71; Alan C. Mitchell, Hebrews (Sacra Pagina 13; Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2007), 64.

45 Craigie, Psalms 1–50, 106.
As the author of Hebrews was most likely quoting the LXX (though not in its entirety), it is important to note several differences between the MT and LXX. First, the LXX uses ἄνθρωπος to translate the Hebrew forms for both “man” and “humankind” (שֵׁם and מָankind in the order they appear in Ps 8:5 MT). But even more significantly, the LXX interprets מֵיתוֹלָא to be ἄγγελος. The term מֵיתוֹלָא is used to define any powerful entity ranging from God himself (Gen 1:1; 2:2; etc.) to angels or other divine beings (Gen 6:2; Ps 97:7 etc.).

The author of Hebrews discusses the incarnation in terms of Christ’s relationship to divine beings and humanity. By becoming human, Christ became “less than” divine-heavenly beings (i.e. God or angels). The incarnation was more than sharing the less-than-divine status of humanity—for Christ who was the Son (1:1–4) was previously greater than the angels. Christ’s shift in status—though temporary (1:4; 2:8)—was significant. He was the divine Son and representation of God who for a time became less than מֵיתוֹלָא and less than an ἄγγελος. The author of Hebrews uses Ps 8 to set the entire framework for understanding the incarnation of Christ as both a demotion from heavenly status and a sharing of status with humanity.

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46 See below for discussion on the author of Hebrews’ omission of “You set him in charge over the works of your hands” (καὶ κατέστησας αὐτὸν ἐπὶ τὰ ἑργα τῶν χειρῶν σου).


48 Except for the exclusion of the clause “You have set him over the works of your hands”, the author of Hebrews follows the LXX. Some manuscripts of the epistle include the phrase to conform to the LXX, but the presence or absence of the phrase does not alter the interpretation. See Attridge, Hebrews, 71 n. 22; Bruce, The Epistle to the Hebrews, 70; Koester, Hebrews, 214; O’Brien, Hebrews, 94 n. 68.
Psalm 8:4–6 is a perfect text for the author of Hebrews to use at this point in the epistle. The psalm seems to introduce the topic of the incarnation while simultaneously providing a basis for the solidarity of Christ and the audience. The quotation lends itself to a multilayered interpretation and would be of particular interest to the author of Hebrews for three reasons.

First, the parallelism of “humankind” (ἄνθρωπος) and “the son of man” (ιὸς ἄνθρωπος) fits the author’s christological argument and supports the topic of Christ’s solidarity with the audience as well. Given the original context and parallelism in Ps 8, this phrase could be interpreted as a generic reference to humanity (plural) or a human (singular). The author of Hebrews, however, builds upon this generic anthropological interpretation to include a simultaneous christological/messianic reference.49

The author’s use of the phrase “son of man” would be an obvious and well-known referent to Christ that the audience would recognize.50 Both canonical and deuterocanonical literature of the Jewish Scriptures used the title to refer to humanity in general.51 In a few cases the phrase was intended (or was subsequently used) to refer to a messianic or eschatological figure.52 “Son of Man” was the most common title of self-

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49 Further support for my view of a simultaneously anthropological and christological interpretation for Ps 8 in Heb 2 can be found in George H. Guthrie and Russell D. Quinn’s article, “A Discourse Analysis of the Use of Ps 8:4–6 in Heb 2:5–9,” JETS (June 2006): 235–46. Their article offers five reasons for the christological interpretation of Ps 8:4–6 as used by the author of Hebrews, but also notes the anthropological grounding of the verses as well.

50 Mitchell states that the author of Hebrews and his audience would have been familiar with Paul’s letter to the Romans, and the Gospel of Mark, “Mature reflection on the death of Jesus and the consequences of that death for all humans is clear in Hebrews.” For more details on comparisons between Mark and Hebrews, see Mitchell, Hebrews, 70–71.

51 For example: Num 23:19; Job 25:6; 35:8; Isa 56:2; 2 Esdras 6:1; et al.

52 Dan 7:13; Ps 8:4 (cf. 144:3), 1 Enoch 46–48; 62–71.
designation Jesus uses in the Synoptics. In some of the Synoptic passages, the term is used to refer to the exalted Christ returning to earth from heaven. It is clear that the author of Hebrews understands this term to be highly christological.

However, it must be restated that the anthropological aspect of “son of man” should be retained as a component of the author of Hebrews’ interpretation. “Human beings” or “mortals” and “mortality” are common themes throughout the epistle. The anthropological parallelism of the Psalm quotation would reiterate the concept of Christ’s incarnation by equating him with humanity. Not only does the original context of Ps 8:4–6 support this idea, but the author also places in the immediate context filial references to promote Christ’s humanity (such as the filial use of ἄνθρωπος in such close proximity to ἀδελφός (2:12) and πατέρα (2:13–14)). The tenor of the verse also indicates that the incarnate Christ would likewise be dependent upon God for the change in status (i.e. exaltation). These components in turn reinforce the idea of Christ’s solidarity with humans.

Second, the Ps 8 passage is of particular use to the author of Hebrews because it concerns the subjected status of humans, and of Christ in particular (his incarnation). In these phrases, the first translational issue concerns whether the pronoun αὐτός should be translated as individual (“him”) or collective (“them”). Again, the artistry of the author is that both possibilities are simultaneously valid and would each play a role in the author’s

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53 Mark 2:10, 28, 8:31; 9:9, 31; et al. and parallels.
54 Mark 13:26; 14:62 and parallels.
56 Guthrie and Quinn, 243.
interpretation of the passage. The author is painting a portrait of an individual, subjected, and mortal Jesus—which is his focus in Heb 2. Surrounding this focus, however, is the idea that just as Jesus became like the audience (subjected state of humanity), so may members of collective humankind become like Jesus if they remain true to the confession (exalted state of sonship).

Another issue concerns the translation and meaning of Βρακχυ τι (Βρακχυς + τις). I believe this is another example of a double-meaning term. This term carries the dual purpose of indicating both spatial and temporal meanings. Spatially, the Son of Man was made “a little lower than the angels”, that is, was made human. Simultaneously, the term refers to the temporary duration of the status change for “a little while”. This is confirmed by the author’s own commentary which emphasizes Jesus’ “lower” or “lesser” (ελαττώω) spatial status for a temporary period—both of which are contrasted with his “now” (νῦν) glorified status (2:8).

Finally, the Ps 8 passage is used by the author of Hebrews because it concerns the exalted status of both Jesus and humans as well, and in particular Christ’s fulfillment of Ps 110:1 (109:1 LXX): “The LORD said to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet’” (Εἶπεν ὁ κύριος τῷ κυρίῳ μου Κάθου ἐκ δεξιῶν μου, ἐως ἅν θῶ τοὺς ἐχθροὺς σου ὑποπόδιον τῶν ποδῶν σου). Psalm 110 was a coronation psalm that spoke of the king (David) being exalted over everything and everyone. The author of Hebrews develops throughout the epistle that Jesus is the

57 Although I argue that both the temporal and spatial aspects of Βρακχυ τι are equally important. Guthrie and Quinn states that the temporal aspect of this term is of more concern to the author of Hebrews than the Son’s status (see Guthrie and Quinn, 245–46).
“speaker” of this psalm in that all things are made subject to him (Ps 110:1) and that he is a priest in the order of Melchizedek (Ps 110:4 in Heb 5:6; 7:17, 21). In the context of Heb 2, the subject of the quotation (Jesus) receives an exalted status above humanity, creation and even the heavenly angels as well.

The τῶν ποιητῶν connection of Ps 8:6 and 110:1 was common enough in the Christian tradition to be used here, as well as twice in Pauline literature (1 Cor 15:25–27; Eph 1:2–22). In Hebrews, the connection is reinforced by the introduction of Ps 110:1 in Heb 1:13—which almost directly precedes the Ps 8 quotation in Heb 2:6–8a. The connection is relatively seamless when one considers that the passages are so Christologically related, and in this case are separated by only a brief exhortatory interruption.  

The quotation of Ps 8 ends addressing the exalted status of Christ over “all things” (πάντα; 8a). The quotation contains a notable textual issue which is an omission of a phrase in Heb 2:7 which appears in the Psalm: “and you have set him over the works of your hands” (καὶ κατέστησας αὐτὸν ἐπὶ τὰ ἐργα τῶν χειρῶν σου). While there are significant witnesses which include the phrase in Heb 2:7, the oldest manuscript supports a reading which omits the phrase. Whether the author of Hebrews omitted the phrase or possibly quoted a variant reading of the LXX Ps 8 is unclear. Omission of the phrase would more clearly support the author of Hebrews’ point that his interpretation of

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59 Sinaiticus (4th century C.E.), Alexandrinus (5th century), and Ephraemi Rescriptus (5th century).

60 P46 (2nd-3rd century C.E.), as well as the Vaticanus (4th century).
the exalted status mentioned in the psalm was that of the exalted (resurrected/enthroned) Christ over all things (earthly and heavenly), and not simply humanity’s elevated status over the rest of creation. However, once again, this would open a door for a transitional interpretation where those familiar with the original psalm could more easily see themselves as relating to Christ in his exaltation in much the same way as he related to them in his subjection.

The choice of this particular Psalm is a masterful stroke by the author of Hebrews. Psalm 8 is used by the author as the interpretive key between the highest of christological quotations in Heb 1, and the filial quotations in Heb 2. The author chose a traditional psalm which includes a phrase that a Christian audience would have immediately identified with Jesus the Messiah. In that sense, the author intended the phrase to be identifiably messianic. Also, there is a multiple layering of meanings, because the phrase is also meant as a term for humanity. It is fitting that the author would use such a psalm which is wrought with both christological and anthropological ideas to communicate both the incarnation and exaltation of Jesus in the context of his discussion on solidarity. The author of Hebrews reinforces Jesus’ unique status as God’s son, while at the same time opening the door for interpretation of all those who identify with him to be God’s children as well.

As I will explain in more detail in chapter four, the author of Hebrews’ portrayal of Christ—while distinct in some respects—shares elements of heroic imagery here. Specifically, the author portrays Christ to be a mortal of divine origins who experiences an alteration of status. The divine origins of the hero Christ are apparent in Heb 1–2. In
the context of his portrayal as the “son of God” (divine) the author emphasizes his status as a “son of man” (humanity)—each being an essential quality for a hero. As I will show in the next section, the author’s particular interpretation of Ps 8 as concerning the incarnation of Christ reinforces the point that the hero lived as a mortal who experienced an alteration of status from a mortal being to the one who was exalted over all creation.

**Hebrews 2:8b–9:** Interpretation of Psalm 8:4–6 and Allusion to Psalm 110:1

In Heb 2:8b–9, the author presents an interpretation on Ps 8 and an allusion to Ps 110:1. The author assumes that Ps 8:4–6 speaks to the current realities of Jesus’ statuses, namely that he was once subject (incarnated) and is now exalted. The author then addresses the audience’s perception of these realities, especially the audience’s perception of Jesus’ exalted status in light of his former suffering and their own current suffering.

The author interprets Ps 8 Christologically, particularly regarding the multiple statuses of Christ in different ages. Having already established that the preexistent Son was divine (Heb 1:5–14), the author utilizes the quote to discuss how and when the divine Son of Man (Messianic term) became also a son of man (anthropological term) for a time—after which he became the exalted Son of Man to whom all things are made subject.

The author’s use of the title when referring to Jesus may be interesting to note here, as it signals a transition in the author’s discussion on status. For instance, In 2:9a, the author makes his first mention of “Jesus” (Ἰησοῦ). Up to this point, reference has
only been made to the “Son” (Yīóς). The use of “Jesus” in 2:9 is a reference to his humanity, as it is associated with his time of incarnation. The author most often refers to him as “Jesus” alone or in combination with “Christ” or “Lord.” The author intentionally returns to the subject of the mortal (or once-mortal) “Jesus” to emphasize his role and relevancy to the audience. Even though the “Son of Man” quotation in 2:6 is implicitly messianic, the term “Christ” (Χριστός) does not appear until 3:6. In Heb 3, “Jesus” (3:1, 3) and “Christ” appear in the author’s point that the “Son” (3:6) is worthy of more honor than Moses to the degree that a “son” does over a “servant” (3:5). The term “Jesus Christ” is used sparingly (10:10; 13:8, 21). The use of the term “Christ” alone is also significant when one considers that “Christ” is the term of choice used to refer to him in chapter 9, which contains the bulk of the author’s message on Christ’s ritual sacrifice.

The author’s method of referring to Christ deserves more exploration than I am able to include here. For the purposes of discussing Heb 2, what seems to occur is a progression in his use of major titles (from Son, to Jesus, to Christ and variations). This does not mean that the author believed the same person became all three persons in

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61 “Son” appears previous to “Jesus” in 1:2, 3, 5 (2x), 8; 2:6; and elsewhere in Hebrews as a referential term to Jesus (2:10 (sons); 3:6; 4:14 (“Son of God”); 5:5, 8; 6:6 (“Son of God”); 7:3 (“Son of God”), 28; 10:29 (“Son of God”).

62 The entire Christian tradition recognizes that “Jesus” was the Son of God’s earthly name. In the gospel traditions of Matthew and Luke, Jesus’ name is proclaimed when his birth is announced (Matt 1:21; Luke 1:31).

63 The author uses “Jesus” (2:9, 11; 3:1, 3; 4:14; 5:7; 6:20; 7:22; 8:6; 10:19; 12:2, 24; 13:12; (note: the name appears in 4:8 also but should be correctly translated “Joshua” as it refers mainly to Moses’ designate to lead the people into the Promised Land); also “Jesus Christ” (10:10; 13:8, 21); and once uses “Lord Jesus” (13:20) to refer to the resurrected Jesus.

64 “Christ” alone appears in the following texts (3:6, 14; 5:5; 6:1; 9:11, 15, 24, 26, 28; 10:5; 11:26).
chronological order. Throughout the epistle, the author’s use and combinations of these terms convey his understanding that the same person was simultaneously all of these. For the purposes of discussing Heb 2, the author begins discussing the human Jesus in the context of “human beings” (ἄνθρωπος; 2:6) to promote his solidarity with them, even in the context of his exalted status.

The author addresses the issue of Christ’s exaltation. There is an inherent tension between Ps 8:4–6 and the presently situated exalted Christ (where it appears “all things” are under his feet already), and Ps 110:1 which has a future orientation (“until” God makes his enemies a footstool). The author of Hebrews addresses this tension by making the point that both orientations are simultaneously valid. In other words, Christ is already exalted and yet there remain aspects of his rule yet to be realized—namely the manifest subjection of all (including evil) to Christ.65 To the audience, however, it may appear at the “present” time that the world is not subject to Christ and thus, those who follow him are subjected to the suffering in this world.

The author points to Jesus’ life as a template for the believers, who likewise suffered for a time (his “present”), but who is now exalted and can inspire hope for the audience in their “present” sufferings. The author’s interpretation of these verses from the psalmist indicates that suffering is a necessary part of the glorification process.66 The conjunction “so that” (ὅτι) used with the aorist subjunctive of γεύσομαι, creates a purpose clause—indicating that Jesus’ “tasting” is tied directly to his “crowning”

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65 Guthrie and Quinn refer to this as “inaugurated eschatology.” See “A Discourse Analysis,” 242.

66 Thompson, Hebrews, 66.
So the conjunctions used in 2:9 convey that Jesus’ enthronement was a result of his “suffering of death” (τὸ πάθημα τοῦ θανάτου; 2:9b) and his act of “tasting death” to benefit all (“he tasted death” γεύσηται θανάτου; 2:9c). It is at this point that the author introduces the concept that he is to develop in 2:10–18, namely that Christ’s subjection and suffering were a necessary part of his becoming the beneficent mediator and glorified high priest.

In keeping with heroic references, the author addresses the themes of the hero’s altered status, solidarity with humanity, beneficent suffering, and even an encounter with death on behalf of another. The author’s interpretation of Ps 8, as well as the allusion to Ps 110:1, contains the common heroic theme of exaltation of the hero. Simultaneously, the author’s interpretation refers to the hero’s mortality and suffering—both of which would humanize the character of Jesus in a way similar to that of ancient heroes. The hero’s solidarity with humanity would endear the figure to the audience, as opposed to distancing the figure from humanity as would be the case if the character were only divine and distant. The author’s use of filial and human references would also reinforce heroic solidarity. To an even greater extent, the author reinforces the hero’s solidarity with humanity by introducing the conjoined themes of suffering and death (2:9). In the next section, the author fully develops these heroic themes.

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67 BDAG “οὐσίωσιν”.

68 The author uses “because” (διὰ) and “so that” (οὕτως) to emphasize the purpose of Christ’s experience of suffering and death. The audience has similarly “tasted” or “experienced” the “heavenly gift” (i.e. the Holy Spirit; 6:4).

69 Thompson, Hebrews, 67, 71.
Hebrews 2:10–18: The Significance of the Incarnation

Now that the author has set the foundation for the discussion on Jesus’ incarnation in 2:5–9, he develops the theme of Christ’s solidarity with humanity through his sufferings. Hebrews 2:10 serves as the key summary verse for the author’s presentation on the necessity of Christ’s heroic incarnation and suffering. Jesus’ solidarity with humanity (2:11–13) and the consequences of his incarnation (2:14–16) both contribute to the author’s portrait of Jesus as the most appropriate High Priest (2:17–18).70

Hebrews 2:10: Jesus the Perfect Hero

Hebrews 2:10 summarizes Jesus’ role as the “hero” (ἀρχηγός) in the story of the audience’s salvation. The author explains that Jesus’ suffering is a necessary and appropriate part of his own perfection, which in turn benefits humanity by bringing salvation to them. Such themes were common in Hellenistic myths, such as Heracles.71

In this verse, the first of two rhetorical axioms (here and 2:11) are presented by the author to explain the “fitting” or “appropriate” (πρέπει) nature of God’s choice to make Jesus suffer. The term πρέπει was often used by Greek authors to comment on the behavior of deities.72 In this instance, it is God’s choice that the author comments upon, making the point that the reasons behind Jesus’ sufferings were justified as necessary.

70 Guthrie notes four points in which 2:10 can be related to 2:17–18, and thus may be considered an inclusio: (1) The use of πρέπει (ἐπρέπειν; 2:10) and ὁφείλει refers to the appropriateness of the incarnation; (2) the son develops (is “perfected” (τελειώσα) in v. 10; “becomes like” (ὁμοιόω) his siblings in v. 17); (3) the recipients of salvation are mentioned (“sons” v. 10; “brothers” v. 17); (4) and Jesus’ perfection and his becoming High Priest involved “suffering” (πάθημα v. 10; πάσχον v. 18). See Structure.


72 Thompson, Hebrews, 72.
The author inserts a key title to refer to Jesus here, namely “hero” (ἀρχηγός). This term was discussed in detail in my previous chapter, as well as my rationale for its translation as “hero.” Additionally, throughout the epistle there appear suitable parallels to ἀρχηγός such as “source” (αἰτιός; 5:9) and “forerunner” (πρόδρομος; 6:20). Similar to “hero” in 2:10, “source” appears in the context of an exposition on Jesus’ divine sonship, earthly life, suffering and perfection in which he becomes “the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him” (πᾶσιν τοῖς ὑποκούουσιν αὐτῷ αἰτίος σωτηρίας σῶν; 5:9b) and is designated as High Priest by God (4:14–5:10). Likewise, “forerunner” appears in the context of discussing Jesus’ role as High Priest, who “has entered within the veiled area” (i.e. Holy of Holies) (εἰσερχομένην εἰς τὸ ἐσωτερικὸν τοῦ καταπετάσματος; 6:19). Such a merging of images reappears in the exhortation of Heb 10:19–20, where the author explains the “curtain” is Jesus’ “flesh” (σάρξ).73 These images set the stage for the author also to address the sufferings of the audience, which in turn transition to the exposition of heroes in Heb 11 of whom Jesus in 12:1–2 is the pinnacle. Of particular importance to the author is how this “hero”, “source” and “forerunner” has benefited humankind by providing the way of salvation at high personal cost. The thread of the heroic thought pattern emerges several times in Hebrews and comes to its climax in 12:1–2, where ἀρχηγός appears again, as well as the issues of perfection, divine sonship, suffering and contest imagery. More connections between Heb 2 and 11–12 will be explored in next chapter of this dissertation.

73 Thompson, Hebrews, 73.
In 2:10, the author addresses the hero’s “perfection” (τελειώ). Scholars have debated over the author’s meaning and whether “perfection” refers to a form of moral perfection or simply a completed task or state. The author of Hebrews deals with the subject of perfection in more detail than any other New Testament writer. Throughout the epistle, the author refers to Jesus’ perfection (2:10; 5:9; 7:28; 9:11; 12:2) the perfection of believers (10:1; 11:40; 12:23) and the inadequacies of former systems to perfect believers (7:11, 19).

Concerning Jesus’ perfection, David Peterson argues that the author’s use of “perfection” was meant to convey a sense of qualification based on Christ’s experiences. In his study, Peterson reviews two of the most common scholarly opinions about perfection in Hebrews: (1) that Christ’s “perfection” carried the cultic sense of “inauguration” into the heavenly-priestly system; or (2) Christ received “perfection” in a metaphysical sense in that he transcended this world. Peterson develops what he calls, “the vocational understanding of the perfecting of Christ.”

I would agree with David Peterson that, what he calls “the vocational understanding of the perfecting of Christ,” is the most accurate understanding of

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74 David Peterson, Hebrews and Perfection: An Examination of the Concept of Perfection in the ‘Epistle to the Hebrews’ (Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 47; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 73, 175.

75 Peterson, Hebrews and Perfection, 49, 73.

76 Peterson, Hebrews and Perfection, 186.
perfection in Heb 2. In this passage, the idea of Jesus’ “perfection” is connected to his suffering, death, and exaltation, which would seem to refer to a completed journey or task that qualified him for service as High Priest to sanctify believers. Given the context of 2:10, the suffering encompasses everything relating to the incarnation, including his subjection to weaknesses and his confrontation with death. When seen as part of the overall exposition of Heb 1 and 2, the entire sequence should be seen as originating with his pre-existence. According to the author of Hebrews, Jesus’ actions result in his completion of the course that begins with the exalted state of divine sonship, continues through his subjected incarnate state of humanity (including his death), and ends ultimately with his enthronement as the exalted Jesus. Thus, Jesus’ life is but a portion of the overall course set for him.

Once the perfected Jesus (2:10; 12:2) participated in the incarnation, he was qualified to participate in the perfect priesthood (7:11, 18) and became the perfected tabernacle and sacrifice (7:28; 9:11). Given the high Christology of the author of Hebrews, it would seem strange that the author would entertain the idea that any portion of Jesus’ existence (or pre-existence) was “imperfect” regarding his virtue. In fact, his “perfection” in all states would be a necessary part of his being considered the “perfect” sacrifice (9:11). So the author does not seem as concerned with advocating his virtuous state as much as showing how his already virtuous state contributes to his perfection. In other words, the author designates Jesus’ course as complete, something which includes

77 Peterson, Hebrews and Perfection, 73.
78 Peterson, Hebrews and Perfection, 32, 73, 166; Thompson, Hebrews, 65–66.
Jesus’ undeniable virtue as a key element. Furthermore, just as the hero has completed his own course, so has he inaugurated a perfective state for believers.\(^79\)

As part of this new system, believers benefit from Jesus’ perfection. Through his sacrifice, perfection is similarly attained for the audience (10:1, 14; 12:23) as well as the faithful heroes of the past (11:40). During the earthly lifespan of the believer, this perfection is internal (9:9). However, as Jesus is the hero, author, pioneer, and forerunner of the course, so must the audience run the same course faithfully. The author’s point is that Jesus’ performance remains central for the audience and should invoke their allegiance.

The author’s use of “hero” (\(\alpha\rho\chi\eta\gamma\omicron\omicron\)\(\alpha\)) in this section, as well as in 12:2, incorporates themes familiar to the Hellenistic heroes’ secular and religious fame, such as solidarity and beneficence to humanity, as well as the defeat of death. My fourth chapter will outline these themes in more detail, but suffice it to state here that the author of Hebrews intentionally uses this term to evoke the imagery of heroes while discussing Jesus’ ordeals and beneficent actions on the behalf of humanity. Furthermore, in keeping with heroic themes, the author links suffering with the perfecting of the hero (2:10).

**Hebrews 2:11–13: Jesus’ Solidarity with Humanity**

The author develops the idea of solidarity between Jesus and humanity by building upon familial expressions and relating them to God. He begins by explaining their common patronage (2:11a). Jesus then becomes the subject/speaker who describes his relationship with humanity (2:11b–13). Jesus “speaks” (\(\lambda\epsilon\gamma\omicron\omega\)) citations from the

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\(^{79}\) Contra the Law and Levitical Priesthood or sacrificial system (7:11, 19, 28) which does not offer perfection through its system (9:9; 10:1).
Psalmist and First Isaiah to solidify their familial relationship and solidarity in a faithful relationship under God (2:12–13). The author establishes the solidarity of this relationship before expressing the nature of the incarnation in the following subsection (2:14–16).

In Heb 2:11, the author uses another rhetorical axiom (the first appearing in 2:10) explaining the perfecting of Jesus through suffering. There has been some debate among scholars in identifying the subject (ὁ ἅγιος ἡμῶν “the one who sanctifies”) as either God or Jesus. On the basis of 2:10, God the one who “makes” Jesus perfect and “sanctifies” all—including Jesus. At the same time, the author repeatedly equates Jesus’ sacrificial work with the sanctification process (2:11; 9:13; 10:10, 29; 13:12). In determining the subject, it is essentially asking the question, “Who sanctifies, God or the high priest?” The answer is both. God ordains the ritual and sacrifice, and the high priest (Jesus) performs it (both as priest and sacrifice) and the result is sanctification of the congregation. Since both subject (“the one who sanctifies” (ὁ ἅγιος ἡμῶν)) and object (“those being sanctified” (οἱ ἅγιοι ὑμῶν)) have a singular originator (“are from one [father]” (ἐξ ἑνὸς πάντων)), it makes sense to interpret Jesus as the subject of 2:11.

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80 Thompson, Hebrews, 74.
81 Attridge, Hebrews, 89.
82 Thompson, Hebrews, 74.
83 Some have suggested “out of one” to refer to Adam or Abraham (Attridge, Hebrews, 88–89; Mitchell, Hebrews, 74).
this context, the issue is the solidarity between Jesus and the believers, so the point is that they have the same originator who is God.\textsuperscript{84}

On the basis of this familial relationship (“for this reason” (διὰ...ἀιτίαν; 2:11b) the subject Jesus [implied] “is not ashamed to call them siblings” (οὐκ ἐπαίσχυνεται ἀδελφοὺς αὐτοῦς καλεῖν 2:11c). The author uses honor/shame language to address the nature of the relationship. As stated above, such language has led some scholars to designate the rhetoric of this argument as epideictic. While this is a valid argument for seeing the phrase as indicative of epideictic rhetoric, such a categorization does not adequately summarize the entire passage. In this passage, the author repeatedly makes reference to the familial relationship between Jesus and his “siblings” (ἀδελφοί; 2:12; 3:1, 12; 10:19; 13:22), and places this relationship in the context of their relationship as “children” of God (παιδία; 2:10,12–14; 12:5, 7–8).\textsuperscript{85} The author may have included an undertone of exhortation by use of honor/shame language, but within the context of a familial relationship with God as indicative through a relationship with Jesus.\textsuperscript{86}

The author designates Jesus as the speaker “saying” (λέγων) several citations from Scripture, the first being from Ps 22:22 (21:23 LXX), “I will proclaim your name to my brothers [and sisters], in the midst of the congregation I will praise you”

\textsuperscript{84} Most translations appropriately include “all have one Father” even though “father” (πατέρα) does not explicitly appear in the verse. The reference to “father” is appropriate because of the remainder of filial references (“Son,” “sons,” or “children”).

\textsuperscript{85} I will discuss below the significance of “congregation” (2:12b).

\textsuperscript{86} O’Brien, Hebrews, 109–10.
Psalm 22 is a psalm of personal lament, attributed to David, wherein the speaker mostly addresses God directly in the first person (22:1–22) and concludes with a direction to praise for the assembly (22:23–31). The author obviously makes use of Ps 22:22 because it is a first person utterance which fits his point about the relationship between the speaker (Jesus) and his “brothers and sisters” (Heb 2:12). Additionally, the author’s choice of psalm is significant for a number of reasons.

First, the author has chosen a psalm that would have evoked the Christian memory of the gospel crucifixion narratives. Jesus’ utterance on the cross in Mark 15:34 (Matt 27.46) is taken from Ps 22:1a, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Ὁ θεός μου ὁ θεός μου, εἰς τί ἐγκατέλιπεν ἡμέραν). Much of the psalm itself would evoke portions of the gospel crucifixion narratives such as the scorn of the crowds (22:6–8 with Mark 16:32 and parallels), the rigors of the crucifixion (22:11–16), the “piercing” of “hands...feet” (22:17), and the casting of lots for his garments (22:18 and Matt 27:35; John 19:23–24). Given the parallels between Ps 22 and the crucifixion narratives, the author of Hebrews’ choice would not only reinforce the nature of the speaker’s relationship with humanity, but would also pinpoint the identity of the speaker as Jesus—the one who experienced the crucifixion.

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87 There author of Hebrews (or the version of the LXX he cites) uses a different verb “proclaim” (ἀπαγγέλλω) rather than the LXX “tell” (διηγάμαι)—otherwise the citations are identical. Mitchell, Hebrews, 74.

88 It is possible the gospel writers constructed the crucifixion narratives around the elements of the Psalm.
Second, the author’s choice of the psalm fits into the context of his argument concerning Jesus’ incarnation, suffering, and deliverance from death. In Ps 22:9–10, the speaker makes reference to his human birth as the point at which his relationship with God began. “Yet You are the One who drew me out of the womb; gave me hope from my mother’s breasts. Upon You I was cast from birth; You have been my God since my mother’s womb” (ὅτι σὺ ἐὰν ἐκσπάσας με ἐκ γαστρός, ή ἐλπίς μου ἀπὸ μαστῶν τῆς μητρὸς μου, ἐπὶ σὲ ἐπερρίφην ἐκ μήτρας, ἐκ κοιλίας μητρὸς μου θεός μου ἐὰν σὺ.) Thus, Ps 22 is an appropriate choice considering the author of Hebrews’ discussion on the incarnation (Heb 2:7, 14–18). The theme of suffering would be addressed by the psalm’s association with Jesus’ crucifixion (see above). The theme of deliverance addressed in the praise portion of Ps 22:19–31 would also help set the scene for the upcoming portion of Heb 2 where Jesus’ victory over death is interpreted (2:14–16).

Third, the author’s choice of Ps 22 also prepares the audience for the upcoming citation from Isa 8:17–18, “...‘I will place my trust in him.’ And again, ‘Here am I and the children whom the Lord has given me.’” (καὶ πάλιν, Ἐγὼ ἔσομαι πεποιθώς ἐπὶ αὐτῶ, καὶ πάλιν, Ἰδοὺ ἐγώ καὶ τὰ παιδία ἀμοὶ ἔδωκεν ὁ θεός; Heb2:13). In Isa 8, the prophet receives word from the Lord in the midst of fearful times. As Judah was to face, and to experience in some measure, Assyria’s invasion of Israel, the Lord’s message to the prophet was that the Lord was to be feared more than the invading nation (Isa 8:12–13). Even though it would have seemed as though God were abandoning his people to a foreign nation, the prophet was being exhorted to trust in the Lord even though the people around him were giving up hope (Isa 8:11–12). Just as Isa 7 contained reference
to the sign of Immanuel as a sign of hope for Judah’s future (Isa 7:14), Isa 8 includes another reference to Immanuel (8:8). Furthermore, as Immanuel was a sign of hope, so were the prophet and his children to be “signs and wonders” (σημεῖα καὶ τέρατα) (8:18). Isaiah 8 concludes with a warning against consulting mediums, as such measures would be trusting in alternate sources than in the Lord’s word (8:19).

The author of Hebrews uses the quote from Isaiah in similar fashion as Ps 22, where Jesus is the speaker of the quotation, and there is an expression of familial relationship where all three members of the family are included (God, Jesus, and the “children” (τὰ παιδία). Passages from Isaiah and Ps 22 were associated early in Christian writings. The general theme of suffering in Ps 22 would resonate with the most cited portion of the Hebrew Scriptures by New Testament authors, namely the Fourth Servant Song of Isaiah (52:13–53:12). In Heb 2, the author divides what would have been a continuous passage from Isaiah (by use of “and again” (καὶ πάλιν; Heb 2:13b). Perhaps the simplest explanation would be that the author of Hebrews does this to recognize a break in the quotation where Isa 8:17 LXX ends. However, the author intentionally includes the phrase “I will put my trust in him” (Ἐγὼ ἐσομαι πεποιθῶς ἐπὶ σὺντον) which would seem to emphasize a central theme of trust (faith) in Isa 8 as well as Heb 2. Other New Testament authors similarly make use of Isa 8 to exhort hope in God when His methods lead many to doubt Him.89 If the context of the citation from Isaiah was familiar to the audience, then the underlying theme of trust would also be apparent to them. The author of Hebrews not only seeks to emphasize the familial

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relationship between the Lord, Jesus, and the audience, but he also seeks to place this relationship in the context of trust in God.

By examining the contexts and themes of Ps 22 and Isa 8 as employed by the author of Hebrews, we can see how the author saw them as supportive of the communal relationship between Christ and the covenant community. For instance, “people/assembly” in Ps 22 and Heb 2 are further identified as “descendants” (σπέρμα) of a patriarch (Jacob in Ps 22:23 and Abraham in Heb 2:16). In the citations included in Heb 2:11–13, the “children” become associated with the speaker (Jesus) and participate by proxy in “proclaiming (ἀγγέλλω), “praising” (μνεώ), and “trusting” (πιστεύω) in God. Concerning these actions directed to God, humanity participates with Jesus—and are thus validated to do so by association. It could be implied that through Jesus performing his priestly duties, all who worship are considered part of “the congregation”/or “the assembly” or corporate group participating in the actions being performed on their behalf by the priest. The next subsection (2:14–16) explores how Jesus’ participated in humanity—and is validated to represent humanity as High Priest.

The author continues using heroic themes in 2:14–16, particularly regarding the hero’s perfection. The hero figure maintains solidarity as a member of the family of humanity, as well as the responsibility he has for leading others in an exemplary journey to perfection. In this context, heroic suffering takes on the characteristic of having instructional benefits first for the hero, then for the hero’s followers. In this passage, the author recalls for the audience the uttermost experience of the hero’s suffering, and the virtue by which the hero endures and overcomes the experience.
Hebrews 2:14–16: The Extent of Jesus’ Incarnation, Full Humanity

In the preceding subsection (2:11–13), the theme of solidarity between Jesus and the “brothers [and sisters]” (ὑίός/ἀδελφός/παίδιον) emphasizes how Jesus is associated with humanity, and vice versa. Hebrews 2:14–16 provides further details on how Jesus is associated with humanity. Specifically, the author elaborates on what Jesus “shared” (κοινόω) (his physical being and experiences), as well as the purpose and outcome of this sharing (the defeat of death). The mythic-heroic tone for the passage was set in 2:10 with the introduction of ἀποθηγόμενος and the concept of perfection through suffering. In 2:14–16, the author of Hebrews integrates even more of the mythic hero-imagery into his portrait of Jesus, while still maintaining a consistently Christian image.

The necessity of the incarnation is described in 2:14 and is introduced with two conjunctions showing cause and effect (“Since, therefore” (ἐπει ὄν)). The condition of humanity (or “children”) is such that they are mortal (“flesh and blood” (αἷμα καὶ σάρκις)). For Christ to become one of them, he would have to become human. It would not be enough that Jesus would take the form of a human, but it was necessary that he be a human in every respect, including the physical body and mortal weaknesses. The physical elements of Jesus’ flesh, body and blood all play an integral part in Hebrews. These elements describe his humanity and related suffering (5:7; 13:12) but are used mostly in Hebrews to communicate the physicality of Jesus’ sacrifice and the corresponding spiritual effects (9:12, 14, 18–22; 10:5, 10, 19–20). In Heb 2, the author emphasizes that Jesus had to become “like [his] brothers [and sisters]” (ἀδελφοί), meaning that—in addition to the physical body—he had to likewise be susceptible to the
fear of death (2:14) and temptation (4:15), and otherwise be susceptible to suffering. Hence, in 2:14–15, the primary focus of Jesus’ actions relates to his heroic defeat of the devil and the devil’s weapon of choice, namely death.

By stating that Jesus had defeated the devil’s most powerful weapon, death, the author declares Jesus to have achieved the highest form of victory by a mortal. Moreover, this victory was not achieved by deception or dark arts. Ironically, Jesus defeats death by experiencing it. In order to understand more fully how the audience would have perceived this particular form of victory, it is important to understand what their perspective would have been based on the traditions that were most likely familiar to them.

The biblical tradition concerning death in the Jewish Scriptures is diverse. On the one hand, death could be regarded as a natural part of life and even a welcome respite from mortal cares (e.g. Abraham in Gen 25:8 and Moses in Deut 34:7). On the other hand, death is most often portrayed as an unwanted experience associated with separation from God.

The Jewish Scriptures conveyed a mood that would have been consistent with many ancient near eastern world views of a personified death. 90 Death is described as insatiable and open-mouthed. 91 “Sheol and Abaddon 92 are never satisfied” (Prov 27:20a; 27:20).

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90 Some scholars correctly perceive a connection between chaos and the personification of death (chaos as “anti-creator”). For further development of this perspective, see F. J. Mabie, “Chaos and Death,” in The Dictionary of the Old Testament Wisdom, Poetry & Writings (Tremper Longman III and Peter Enns, eds.; Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008), 52.

91 Mabie, “Chaos and Death,” 52.

92 “Abaddon” or “place of downfall” is occasionally used in parallel with “Sheol” as a reference to the realm of the dead (Job 26:6; Prov 15:11; 27:20). See L. Wächter, “TAW” TDOT (2004), 14: 244.
cf. 30:16). In Isaiah’s Parable of the Vineyard, God speaks of his judgment upon His people: “Therefore Sheol has enlarged its throat and opened its mouth without measure; and Jerusalem’s splendor, her multitude, her din of revelry and the jubilant within her, descent into it” (Isa 5:14). Similarly, Jeremiah speaks of judgment coming in the form of death, which enters windows, palaces, and the thoroughfares of the city (Jer 9:21). Such language emits a perceivable motif where death acts like a formidable predator.

Mortality was a promised judgment of sin (Gen 2:17; 3:19; 6:7, 11–13, etc.) and Sheol (“abyss”; ὅθεν Ps 89:48; ὅθεν 88:49 LXX) was the destination of the dead. Death could easily be regarded as something to fear (Ps 12:23–24; Eccl 12:1–8). The first human to die was not killed by God, but by a fellow mortal (Gen 4:8). Yet, for many characters in the biblical narrative, the occasion and manner of their deaths were most markedly a judgment from God. For example, the final plague of the Exodus tradition brought death to the firstborn of every house not under God’s protection (Ex 12:29–30). Yet, even those who may have initially received God’s favor were not exempt from such judgment. In Heb 3, the author focuses on the failure which led to the fatal judgment of the Exodus-Wilderness generation (3:7–11 quoting Ps 95 and referring to events recorded in Exodus and Numbers). Even the “messiah” King Saul received such judgment for his faithlessness (1 Chron 10:13). According to biblical tradition, only the antediluvian Enoch and the prophet of Israel Elijah did not experience death (Gen 5:24; 2 Kings 2 respectively).

93 Mitchell, Hebrews, 75.
In the Hellenistic world, death was often personified as a deity. Thanatos (θάνατος) was the son of Nyx (“night”; Νύξ) and the brother of Hypnos (“sleep”; Ὑπνος). It was believed that in cases of the more violent or tragic deaths that Thanatos’ sisters, the Keres, were employed to carry the unfortunate dead souls to the underworld Hades. As has already been mentioned in the previous chapter’s discussion on Alcestis, Death was sometimes portrayed as a shrewd and eager being who derived some satisfaction from his power over mortals. Thus, to defeat this archenemy of life (personified or not) would be—by its very definition—a feat beyond the reach of most mortals.

Hellenistic philosophers recognized that physical death was inevitable for mortals (with the exception of some legendary heroes). Even though the event was inevitable, it did not mean that life had to be lived fearing this fate. Many philosophers pointed out that a life lived in fear of death was a form of slavery, from which the pursuit of “virtue” could free them (albeit whatever form of virtue a particular philosopher might hold). The point was that mortals could achieve a victory over the fear of death, and that the inevitable need not detract from the value of life.

The theme of death appears throughout Hebrews in a variety of ways. The author discusses death as a reality of life which limits the efficacy of mortal priestly

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94 Homer, Iliad, 16.453–55; Hesiod, Theogony, 211–212; et al.


ministry (7:23). Death is also mentioned as the judgment for the faithless generation in the wilderness (3:17) and the prescribed judgment for violating the sacred boundary of Sinai during the wilderness episode (12:20). The author also stylistically uses the term “dead works” (νεκρών ἔργων) to refer to ineffectual rituals (6:1) as well as a condition of the “conscience” (or “soul”; συνείδησις) that hinders effective service to God (9:14).

In Hebrews, death is portrayed as part of suffering in mortal life—perhaps the most powerful element (2:9; 13:12). In the case of Jesus’ incarnation and purpose in coming to the mortal world, death was a necessary part of his experience. The first mention of death in the epistle refers to Jesus’ experience of it (2:9). In the context of the current section under discussion, Jesus’ experience of death testifies to his true existence as a mortal being and the consequent benefit of his successful endurance of the trial (2:14–15). Even though Jesus saw the necessity of his own death, he still desired that God might save him from it—which indicated his sharing of both the fear and experience of death (5:7). In Heb 11, death is portrayed as a potential obstacle to faithfulness—one which is successfully endured or circumvented (e.g. Enoch) by the faithful (11:4, 5, 8, 13, 19, 35, 37). Even if the faithful experienced death, it did not mean that death was victorious over them. Jesus’ experience of death was a necessary element of his suffering and subsequent victory over death. His victory resulted in the liberation of the believers from living in the fear of death.

In addition to showing Jesus’ death as signifying his humanity, the author of Hebrews explains Jesus’ death as a necessary part of his role in the covenant process. “For in the case of a covenant, the death of the one who made the covenant is necessary.
Indeed, a covenant (or will) is affirmed at death, because it is never enforceable as long as the one who made the covenant is still living” (οπού γὰρ διαθήκη, θάνατον ὀνάγκη φέρεσθαι τοῦ διαθεμένου. διαθήκη γὰρ ἐπὶ νεκροῖς βεβαιά, ἐπεὶ μὴ τότε ἱσχύει, ὦτε ζην ὁ διάθεμενος; 9:16–17). Hebrews 9 goes into greater detail to explain the superiority of Christ’s covenant based on his role as priest and sacrifice. The references to Jesus’ blood throughout the epistle correlate to his suffering and death.97

Hebrews 2 also introduces the concept of Jesus’ victory over death. The author refers to resurrection as an elementary part of the Jewish-Christian tradition (6:2; 11:19, 35). Of course, of greatest import to the Christian tradition would be Jesus’ resurrection (13:20). However, the author of Hebrews does not explain Jesus’ victory over death only in terms of his resurrection and subsequent exaltation. In Heb 2:14–15, it is Jesus’ experience of death that is shown as key to his victory that benefits all mortals.

The author of Hebrews speaks of Jesus’ victory over death in a fashion characteristic of Pauline literature—whereby Jesus’ resurrection becomes the greatest proof of Jesus’ power, fidelity and lordship.98 Attridge notes that the NT and early Christian writers pointed to Jesus’ exaltation as an apocalyptic victory over death.99 As noted earlier in my chapter, Jesus’ victory over death (or stated differently, the subjection of death to Jesus) can best be categorized as being of the eschatological-present. Jesus

98 1 Cor 15:26, 54–55; Phil 2:9–11; 2 Tim :10.
99 Attridge, Hebrews, 92.
has won the victory over death, but the victory has yet to be fully realized for the audience.

Assuming the audience had a more than basic understanding of the Torah, seeing death as a result of the devil’s work would not need to be explicitly stated (Gen 3). Still, the author indicates that death, and the fear of death, can be a motivator for infidelity to the confession—as evidenced by his numerous exhortations to endure in spite of their “bloodless” suffering (12:4). Jesus’ example, however, is that death need not mean defeat. Rather, death is shown to be the test and means by which Jesus qualifies to save others from death.

The way in which the author of Hebrews portrays Jesus’ interaction with death is one of the most obvious points of similarity between his portrayal and the imagery of Hellenistic heroes. While I will say more in the final chapter of my dissertation, it is important to state here that Jesus’ actions are portrayed by the author as having the effect of destroying death. By destroying death, Jesus destroys the work of the enemy of humankind, the devil. Thus, the characters and conditions which traditionally have separated mortals from immortality are rendered null and void by Jesus’ actions. The author wants the audience to understand that Jesus’ victory has implications for all. Jesus’ work (suffering, death, resurrection, intercession) successfully reverses the power of death for the faithful. Thus, those who were “slaves/in bondage” (δουλεία) are released from such fear to live a life of faithfulness to God.
The author concludes this section by describing the scope of Jesus’ rescue of humanity. The author states that Jesus “takes hold” or “gives help” (ἐπιλαμβάνω) to the faithful (characterized as “Abraham’s “descendants” (σπέρμα)) and not to “angels.” Such familial phrasing is consistent with the familial terminology of Heb 2, as well as the concept that Christian’s are children of Abraham through their faith (cf. Heb 11). The author of Hebrews uses the figure of Abraham as a touchstone for describing Christ’s legitimate priestly role (ch. 7), as well as for defining the faithful community (ch. 11).

Hebrews 2:17–18: The Result of Jesus’ Incarnation, A Fitting High Priest

In the conclusion of Heb 2, the author creates a bridge between concepts he has introduced thus far (those things which Jesus has experienced) and his upcoming section on the relevant ministry of Jesus for the audience. The author has discussed Jesus’ pre-existence, incarnation, solidarity with humanity, suffering, death, victory over death, and exaltation. At this point, the author explains the reasoning behind Jesus’ incarnate experiences. Hebrews 2:17–18 serves the dual purposes of summarizing the expository section of Heb 2, as well as introducing Jesus’ role as high priest for the covenant community.

The message of Heb 2 is summarized in verses 17–18. As we have discussed, Heb 2:5–16 emphasizes Christ’s identity as a heroic human being, and the ideal human

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100 This verb often occurs in the Gospels relating how Jesus “takes hold” of those he has healed or blessed (Mark 8:23; Matt 14:31; Luke 9:47).

101 The reference to “angels” (ἄγγελος) is both a structural and thematic move by the author. The term and concept appears multiple times in Heb 1 and 2, and does not reappear until chapters 12 and 13.

102 Thompson suggests the reference “Abraham’s descendants” is an allusion to Isa 41:8.
who achieves perfection through suffering. Jesus journey to glory was to pass through suffering and death, a theme that recurs in Hebrews (2:9–10; 5:8; 9:26; 13:12). Furthermore, the result of his journey is salvation for the community (2:9, 10, 15). Yet, the community must expect to endure suffering as they are on the same journey to glory as the hero of their faith. In order to summarize these major points in the discourse, the author explains the purpose of the incarnation.

Jesus’ incarnation was not accidental or circumstantial. Rather, Jesus’ incarnation was an “obligation” (οφειλω), which is more obligatory than the rhetorical use of “fitting” (πρέποι) in 2:10. Jesus’ incarnation was a necessary part of his role as high priest. In particular, his experiences of suffering (πάσχω) and temptation (πειράζω) make him qualified to represent humanity in the presence of God. Moreover, not only do Jesus’ experiences qualify him for service as high priest, but such a high priest as would be sympathetic (“merciful and faithful”; ἐλεήμων...πιστός) to the mortal condition. This summarizes the point the author has been making in Hebrews that Jesus’ humanity was both a reality and a necessary precursor to his relevant role as intercessor for the audience.

Concerning Jesus’ role as intercessor, Heb 2:17–18 sets the stage for understanding Christ’s role as high priest, which is the central role of Jesus according to the author of Hebrews (8:1–10:18). Hebrews 2 establishes Jesus’ high priesthood to be superior for a number of reasons. Jesus’ priesthood is superior because he is faithful,

103 Thompson, Hebrews, 67.
104 Note the use of “therefore” (ὅτεν) to introduce the purpose clause in 2:17.
merciful, and exalted (eternal). All of these elements are essential for Jesus to be the ultimate mediator between God and humanity.

Jesus’ faithfulness is the topic for the author’s comparison between Christ and Moses in Heb 3:1–6. Such a comparison between Jesus and the greatest hero of the first covenant with Israel reinforces the author’s high Christology. Jesus’ divine sonship (Heb 1; 2:5–9) puts Moses’ ministry into perspective as inferior to Christ’s ministry. Without fidelity to God, Jesus’ life and ministry would be ineffective. Jesus, as the ἀρχηγός of faith (12:2), makes the faithfulness of the covenant community valid.

Jesus’ merciful nature is also addressed by the author of Hebrews. The topic of Jesus’ merciful nature as high priest is taken up again in Heb 4:14–5:10. Again, there is a comparison to the Exodus era of Israel’s history: the priesthood. Jesus’ existence as a human being qualified him to serve as a priest, while at the same time giving him the perspective to serve mercifully and with compassion. The author returns to the topic of Jesus’ role as a “mediator” (ἐντυγχάνω) a number of times throughout the epistle. Each time the superiority of Jesus’ priesthood and the superiority of the new covenant he represents are addressed (7:25; 8:6; 9:15; 12:24). In this respect, the author is also making a further comparison between the Mosaic (and Aaronic) mediation, and Jesus’ mediation.

The mediations are similar in that both the Mosaic and Jesus’ mediations “make propitiation for the sins of the people” (τὸ ἱλασκέσθαι τὰς ἁμαρτίας τοῦ λαοῦ) and mediate in “matters pertaining to God” (τὰ πρὸς τὸν θεόν). The latter phrase appears
three times in the LXX. ¹⁰⁵ In two of the occurrences, Moses represents God—once to Aaron (Ex 4:16) and once to Israel (Ex 18:19). The phrase also occurs in Deuteronomy in one of Moses’ concluding speeches where he accuses Israel of having fallen short on the subject (Deut 31:27).

The mediations differ in that Jesus is a Son, and not only a servant of God as were Moses (Heb 3) and Aaron (5:4). Furthermore, Jesus’ mediation is declared superior to the Aaronic/Levitical priesthood because of the eternal nature of his mediation (7:25), and the superiority of the covenant being mediated (8:6; 9:15; 12:24). Perhaps the most significant difference is that Jesus himself brings about the covenant by his own personal sacrifice (Heb 9–10). The ultimate proof for the success of his life and death are further established by the reality of his exaltation. The exalted nature of Jesus as high priest is taken up again in Heb 7:1–10:18. ¹⁰⁶ Both Moses (Aaron) and Jesus share experience as human beings, but only Jesus has experienced the exaltation of sonship as described by the author of Hebrews—and therefore only Jesus’ eternal intercession is shown to be active by the author (7:25). Thusly, Jesus’ role as high priest is introduced in direct conjunction with his incarnation.

Heroes were petitioned because it was believed they would be sympathetic to the plight of their petitioners. Heroes were considered to have the ability to influence events in the mortal realm. To a certain extent, they played an intercessory role between the supplicants and the powers (divine and earthly) that the supplicants wanted secured for

¹⁰⁵ Mitchell, Hebrews, 76.
¹⁰⁶ Thompson, Hebrews, 67.
themselves. The author of Hebrews portrays a hero whose most important postmortem role was to intercede for humanity.

The Message of Hebrews 2 Summarized

As has been shown, the expository portion of Heb 2 is part of a progression of expository units designed to identify and describe Jesus as the Son. The author’s description goes into detail in chapter 2 about the incarnation and its significance. Furthermore the author builds upon the themes surrounding the incarnation to link Jesus to the audience. Ultimately, Heb 2 indicates the relevance of Jesus’ incarnation (his mortality) and his exaltation (his divinity) in an effort to encourage the audience to be faithful to the confession.

Hebrews 2 introduces Jesus as the Son who was human and experienced the suffering associated with that experience (2:9–10, 18). The experience linked Christ and humanity (including the audience) because Jesus shared their status for a time. Their shared status and solidarity also provided the benefit of making Jesus qualified to serve as a high priest on humanity’s behalf. Thus, Heb 2 concludes by setting the tone for the entire epistle regarding the relevancy of Jesus’ ministry for the audience.

It is important to see Heb 2 in the larger context as well. George H. Guthrie’s mapping of the expositional units in Hebrews shows chapter 2 to be a link in a systematic progression of units designed to identify the person and role of Jesus the Son. By seeing the expositions without the hortatory segments, the connectedness of the expositions becomes more apparent. The Son’s superiority to angels (in essence all

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107 Guthrie, Structure, 127.
created beings) is established in both the introduction (1:1–4) and the first exposition of the epistle (1:5–14). The expositional section of Heb 2 (verses 10–18) develops the incarnation of the Son and identifies the Son to be both divine and human. The author discusses Jesus humanity as a fulfillment of the ideal human described in Ps 8. On the basis of this identification, the author shows the Son to be qualified to serve as the High Priest on behalf of humanity (5:1–7:28) and therefore able to offer the best offerings in heaven (8:3–10:18).

It is possible to derive from the author’s argument that the audience needed assurance that Jesus was indeed an exalted being who had once become human, and that his journey from heaven to earth and back again would benefit them. In spite of the potential evidence which suggests that nothing is subject to Jesus (2:8), the author reassures the audience that Jesus has received a glorification that benefits them all (2:9). In Heb 2 alone, the stated or implied benefits are as follows: Jesus’ beneficial death (proxy for everyone (2:9)); being brought to glory (2:10); salvation (2:10); sanctification (2:11); solidarity and honor with Christ (2:11–12, 17); being children of God (2:13–14); freedom from the fear of death (i.e. the power of the devil) (2:14–15); help (2:16); an authentic Abrahamic heritage (2:16); a merciful and faithful high priest (2:17); and rescue (2:18). The author begins to formulate a portrait of Christ that is an amalgam of Jewish and Hellenistic hero paradigms that influences his portrayal as high priest for the

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108 David Allen, *Hebrews*, 227. Allen notes that the contribution of Heb 2 to the discussion of the incarnation of Jesus is one of the most significant contributions in the New Testament. Allen also notes that the 4th–5th century C.E. christological controversies would rely heavily on the understanding of Heb 1–2.
covenant community. In the next section, we will address how the portrait is further accentuated in the parallel section of Heb 11–12.

The Message of Hebrews 11–12

Introduction

In Heb 11–12 (specifically Heb 11:1–12:17) the author continues his pattern of exhortation-exposition-exhortation to convey a message of encouragement to the audience. In order to support his call to endure, the author utilizes a list of significant heroes from Jewish history who fit the prescribed pattern of faithfulness (Heb 11:1–40). We will explore the literary context of this list and draw insight from the use of the particular heroes listed. Next, we will analyze Pamela Michelle Eisenbaum’s contribution to the understanding of the form and function of Heb 11. By mixing Jewish and Hellenistic forms of hero-lists, the author of Hebrews fashions a list of characters who exemplify faith as well as the elements which he believes surround this central virtue. At this point we will move to Heb 12 where the author declares Jesus to be the pinnacle of these examples (12:1–2), and sets the tone for placing the audiences’ situation in the context of salvation history (12:3–17). We will examine these texts—Heb 12:1–2 especially closely—and indicate how this section of Hebrews contributes to the overall portrait of Jesus.

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Hebrews 11

In Heb 11, the author returns to the theme of “faith” (πίστις) that has been developed throughout the epistle.\textsuperscript{110} Here, however, the author defines and characterizes faith both as a concept (11:1), and as a means to achieve God’s “testimony” or “commendation” (from μαρτυρία).\textsuperscript{111} He parallels “substance” (ὑπόστασις) with “proof” (ἐλεγχός) as well as “things hoped for” (ἐλπίζω) with “things not seen” (οὐ + βλέπω).

By doing this, the author connects two seemingly juxtaposed ideas of certainty and uncertainty through the concept of faith. The term “faith” appears 24 times in Heb 11, and 18 times the term appears as an anaphora (“by faith”).\textsuperscript{112} His point is that certitude is achievable by those whose perspective is governed by faith.\textsuperscript{113} By showing how their “approved ancestors” (i.e. their spiritual predecessors) lived lives of faith (strived for perfection without tangible certainty of God’s promises), the author makes examples of them while simultaneously defining elements of the faithful life, in particular endurance (11:2).\textsuperscript{114}

The companion to the theme of faith in Heb 11 is endurance. In this way, the author expands his definition of faith beyond a reference to abstract belief, to include real

\textsuperscript{110} Previous to Heb 11, the concept of faith has occurred in 2:17; 3:2, 5–6; 4:2; 6:1, 12; 10:22–23, 38–39.

\textsuperscript{111} Note the theme and inclusio of forms of μαρτυρία (11:2, 4 (2x), 5, 39).

\textsuperscript{112} An anaphora is a literary device which employs repetition of words or phrases for emphasis and is commonly used in rhetoric. See Fred B. Craddock, “Hebrews,” \textit{NIB} 12: 130.

\textsuperscript{113} The language of perception (or “sight”) occurs several times (11:1, 3, 7, 10, 13, 23, 26, 27).

\textsuperscript{114} S. M. Baugh believes that Heb 11 also contains an eschatological element because the heroes of faith are given glimpses of an eschatological future. See Baugh, “The Cloud of Witnesses in Hebrews 11” \textit{WTJ} 68 (2006): 113–32.
actions. In the preceding exhortatory section (10:32–39), the author draws upon the recent memory of the audience to recall their own exhibitions of endurance. In essence, the author uses the audiences’ own previous acts of faith as a means to introduce the subject of faith in the expository section beginning at Heb 11:1.

The exhortation to endure is taken up again at 12:1. The exhortatory sections are linked by repeated use of “endurance” (ὑπομονή)—which occurs as a noun (10:36; 12:1) and a verb (10:32; 12:2–3, 7). But as we have seen in our discussion of Heb 2, the author retains thematic connections throughout the discourse, even though the forms change from exposition to exhortation. Even though “faith” is defined by terms such as “substance” and “hope”, it is through “endurance” (not “shrinking back” (ὑποστέλλω; 10:38–39) that faith is externally exemplified. In Heb 11, the author provides an exposition of Jewish history to provide examples of these qualities in a way that would speak to an audience familiar with Jewish history and Hellenistic rhetoric.

The Literary Context of Hebrews 11

The literary classification of Heb 11 has been a matter of debate. There is no evidence this list existed apart from the epistle. Furthermore, the list fits seamlessly into the epistle. The theme (or themes) of the list fits the immediate context of the epistle, and the epistle’s author consistently uses Scripture and examples from scripture for hortatory purposes (3:7–4:11; 10:30–31, 37–39). The list contains an inclusio (μαρτυρέω in 11:2, 39 (also used in vv. 4–5)), which surrounds the section rich in rhetorical devices such as anaphora, repetition, listing and the use of examples.

Some scholars have categorized the list in Heb 11 as being essentially a list of examples of faith recalled from biblical history. Attridge more specifically categorizes the list as an “encomium” on faith. An “encomium” (ἐγκώμιον) is a “celebration” of something, which most obviously in this text would be the virtue of faith. Eisenbaum points out that the shared characteristics of the figures in Heb 11 go beyond the single element of faith. The method of presenting the shared characteristics of the heroes of Heb 11 indicates a mixing of Greco-Roman and Jewish forms of exposition.

Eisenbaum concludes that Heb 11 is an amalgam of Jewish history and Greco-Roman rhetoric that is designed to provide a spiritual ancestry of sorts for the audience by providing a history for this particular community. There are numerous examples of Jewish history lists where perfect heroes were commemorated for their significant roles. There are also numerous examples of Greco-Roman listings of “paradigms” (παράδειγματα). Such examples or lists of models that centered around one point of similarity (such as a virtue or quality) were common in the Greco-Roman world. Heb

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117 Merland Ray Miller classifies the literary form of Heb 11 to be an encomium, but on Jesus rather than faith or heroes of faith. See “What Is the Literary Form of Hebrews 11?” JETS 29 no. 4 (December 1986): 411–17.
118 Eisenbaum, Jewish Heroes, 87.
121 Eisenbaum, Jewish Heroes, 81–82.
11 is an example list where the lauded characteristic of faith is spelled out, and its many dimensions explored, through the retelling of a particular heroic history. By analyzing the heroes of Heb 11, a more complete portrait of the Christ as the hero of Hebrews can be revealed.

**The Heroes of Hebrews 11**

Immediately following the definition of faith in 11:1, the author mentions what the heroes of Heb 11 achieved, namely God’s “commendation” (11:2, 39). In order to reinforce his definition of faith, the author lists heroes and events from Israel’s history (11:3–38). At first glance, some of the heroes on the list may seem questionable as to their fitness for being moral examples for the community. Yet, following Eisenbaum’s examination of the shared characteristics of the heroes, it is possible to see characteristics of faith which validate the author’s choices.

From a chronological perspective, the historical summary begins with a reference to Creation (11:3). In the first subsection of Heb 11, three heroes of the Primordial period of biblical history (Abel, Enoch, Noah) are followed by four heroes of the Ancestral period (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Sarah (in the order they are mentioned)). The author then includes a brief analysis of the heroes up to this point (11:13–16). The author then mentions what he views to be the chief example of faithfulness in the Ancestral period—Abraham’s offering of Isaac (11:19–20)—followed by a reference to Patriarchs and concluding the summary of Genesis with a reference to Joseph (11:22).

The second subsection of the historical summary mentions the greatest hero of the Jewish Scriptures—Moses (11:23–28). The author then refers to the Israelites during the
Exodus, Wilderness and Conquest periods—including Rahab as one incorporated into Israel (11:29–31). The final subsection of the summary mentions heroes of the Pre-monarchic and Monarchic periods with general references which could readily be applied to heroes of every age leading up to the coming of Christ. The ultimate figure mentioned by name in this fashion is Christ himself (12:1–3). The author essentially begins with Creation and ends with Christ (which would include the eschatological present as far as the audience is concerned).

Some of the characters in the list are obvious choices of persons who acted “by faith”, but others are not so obvious. Hebrews 11 deviates from the perfect example model common to Jewish lists, and conforms more to Greco-Roman forms that idealized aspects of persons who may have been less than ideal moral examples of humanity.

For instance, Samson is named in the list of heroes (11:32), yet the majority of his choices were in conflict with the teachings of the Torah. Still, the author includes this cast of characters under the overarching theme of faith. Perhaps the characters are even chosen because they are imperfect by comparison to Christ. Faith is not only the

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122 Given the lack of direct references to names in this final subsection, it can only be assumed that the author was seeking to conclude the summary by bringing the history up to the point of Christ (12:1) and the audience (11:40).

123 Eisenbaum, *Jewish Heroes*, 81–82.

124 The epic of Samson in Judges 13–16 portrays his many licentious choices such as his marriage to a Philistine (Jud 14 contra Ex 34:16; Deut 7:3), and his disregard of the Nazarite vow which he was to uphold (Jud 14:9; 16:17 contra Num 6:1–21). Furthermore, he had an infamous temper (14:19). Even though the Lord was using Samson’s choices to accomplish His will against the Philistines (Jud 14:4), the choices themselves were contrary to the Torah and examples of the kinds of behavior responsible for Israel’s judgment under Philistine rule in the first place (Jud 13:1).

125 Eisenbaum, *Jewish Heroes*, 181.
shared characteristic, but it is the means by which the heroes accomplish their goal—the reception of God’s reward and promises (i.e. perfection).

Hebrews 11 contains heroes who share several common characteristics. These characteristics specify the author’s definition of faith. Michelle Eisenbaum has identified a “profile of the Hebrews hero” based on these shared characteristics.126 In discussing these heroes’ qualities, it is possible to see the virtues to be cherished and/or emulated. The first quality Eisenbaum points out is that all the characters experience death or a near-death event.127 The heroes face death as an integral part of their story. In addition to the many direct and indirect threats of death referred to in chapter 11, the author mentions the death (or death-like condition) of the heroes throughout the chapter.128 As Eisenbaum points out, the deaths (or near-deaths) of the heroes mark an important transitional point for the heroes.129 In each of the cases, when death is occurring around them (or is about to happen to them) the heroes make choices the author of Hebrews wants the audience to notice. When the heroes are faced with suffering and death (which I believe the author equates, though Eisenbaum does not)130, they are given a choice to believe and act on God’s promises (seeking/pleasing God), or to turn to their own devices for solutions—ignoring God’s call and promises. These are critical moments where the


127 Eisenbaum, Jewish Heroes, 178–79.

128 Abel (v. 4); the world (v. 7); Abraham and Sarah’s bodies which were unable to naturally conceive are portrayed as “dead” (v. 12); deaths of patriarchs are summarized (v. 13); Isaac’s facing of death (v. 17–19); Jacob (v. 21); Joseph (v. 22); and latter martyrs (v. 37).

129 Eisenbaum, Jewish Heroes, 179.

130 Eisenbaum, Jewish Heroes, 179–80.
heroes choose to act on faith and are consequently: (1) spared from death for the time being (Noah); and/or (2) resurrected from death (literally or figuratively) (Abraham, Sarah, Isaac); and/or (3) granted blessings in spite of their impending death (Abel, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah); or (4) escape death altogether (Enoch). With the exception of Enoch (v. 5) (and possibly a reference that could easily include Elijah vv. 32–35)\(^{131}\), all of the characters mentioned by name experience a mortal death.\(^{132}\) The author’s point is that death (and suffering) does not deter the faithful from acting appropriately in response to God’s promises.

Eisenbaum recognises a second shared quality and states that heroes are given knowledge (sight) of the future. She explains that this characteristic is the one most closely linked to the author’s definition of faith (“evidence of things not seen”).\(^{133}\) Although she admits that this characteristic is not obvious for all from the text (e.g. Abel and Enoch), she states that their post-mortem credentials indicate their having pleased God with future rewards in mind (11:6).\(^{134}\) In the context of this characteristic, Eisenbaum discusses her view on the heroes’ suffering in Heb 11. She states that it was necessary to show that suffering was a part of the heroes’ lives, but that to focus too

\(^{131}\) Enoch and Elijah are traditionally the only biblical characters who did not experience death (Gen 5:24 and 2 Ki 2:11, respectively).

\(^{132}\) Enoch’s brief, but significant appearance in Gen 5:18–24, is the foundation for a list of apocryphal works attributed to him. While some of these works, especially I Enoch, may have been known to the author and audience, it is unclear if these have any impact on the author of Hebrews’ choice of him here. Besides Heb 11, New Testament references to Enoch occur in the Lucan record of Jesus’ lineage (Luke 3:37), and the potential quotation in Jude 1:14–16 (debated among scholars).

\(^{133}\) Eisenbaum, Jewish Heroes, 179.

\(^{134}\) Eisenbaum, Jewish Heroes, 179.
much on their suffering would be unduly allowing the concluding verses of the chapter to influence the author’s message (vv. 33–38).\textsuperscript{135} Her point on the suffering of the heroes is valid. The heroes were not heroes because they suffered, but because they endured any occurrence in their lives that came about as a result of their faithfulness to God.

On this second quality, I would like to offer an extension of Eisenbaum’s thesis. I would agree that all of the heroes are given a glimpse of the future. I would further note that the visions of the future are in the form of promises given by God—which are part of God’s will for the visionary. These glimpses are what govern their decisions and, as those decisions please God, the heroes are lauded as commendable and are included in the list. It is not merely that they are told about the future, but they are given insight into what is pleasing to God (11:5). Commonly, the heroes lived (or suffered) to “see” God pleased, but not to see the future fulfilled (11:39–40).

The third characteristic of the heroes that Eisenbaum notes is their alteration of status. She posits that the author of Hebrews lowers the status of biblical heroes in the same fashion that all models of the previous covenant are diminished (levitical priesthood, temple, etc.).\textsuperscript{136} Unlike other Jewish hero lists which show their characters to be the best faithful examples, the author of Hebrews patterns Heb 11 in a matter more familiar to Greco-Roman rhetoric where the examples are incomplete models on their own.\textsuperscript{137} The author is selective in his presentation of the heroes. Figures such as Moses

\textsuperscript{135} Eisenbaum, \textit{Jewish Heroes}, 180.

\textsuperscript{136} Eisenbaum, \textit{Jewish Heroes}, 180–84.

\textsuperscript{137} Eisenbaum notes 1 Macc 2, 4 Macc 18 and Sirach as containing such lists. See Eisenbaum, \textit{Jewish Heroes}, 181, n. 175.
are not portrayed as favorably or as comprehensively as one might expect from someone acquainted with the biblical tradition.  

Eisenbaum states that the author has a dual-purpose behind altering the heroes’ statuses. First, the heroes are intentionally separated from their national leadership identities—they are viewed for their individual accomplishments in Heb 11, not their roles in Israel’s identity. The author’s choice to portray the heroes in this way makes their example universal (i.e. it is not necessary for the audience to be part of any previous covenant to benefit from the covenant under Christ). Second, the heroes are shown to be incomplete or imperfect when compared to the perfect priest Jesus. The author in unequivocal when relating the superiority of Christ and his covenant to the audience.

Eisenbaum’s view on the subject of the diminished status is certainly valid when the overall approach of the epistle to models of the previous covenant are considered. All of the models or systems are incomplete and imperfect. The law is only a “shadow” (σκόπος ;10:1). As Eisenbaum notes, many characters of Heb 11 are imperfect examples of faithfulness. For example, Abraham did not show faith when he lied about Sarah’s identity (Gen 12:10–20; 20:1–18). The author’s selection of heroes and their choices indicates that the author was concerned with making the heroes apply beyond traditional-national Israelite history. The author was only interested in showing their faith in a way

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138 For instance, Moses’ role in the crossing of the Red Sea is not explicitly mentioned (11:29).

139 Eisenbaum, Jewish Heroes, 184.

140 Eisenbaum, Jewish Heroes, 180–81.

141 Eisenbaum states that “the heroes are not very good examples of faith.” See Eisenbaum, Jewish Heroes, 180.
that could be applied to the coming Christian covenant. I would like to again alter her point to focus on the heroes’ reaction to God’s promises as an element of their faith.

There are numerous other characters and events from the Jewish Scriptures from which to draw examples, but the author chose these (at least in part) because they were significant and well-known examples of people responding favorably to God’s promises. As the author places their actions in the context of the theme of Heb 11, he shows that these heroes responded to God’s promises without the many benefits that Christ’s coming has provided for the covenant community.

The final characteristic that Eisenbaum notices in the author’s portrayal of the heroes of Heb 11 is what she calls “marginalization.” She argues that this point is “the most fundamental characteristic of the heroes of Hebrews.” Eisenbaum states that the author avoids mentioning the traditional biblical covenants because this would have promoted a national identity that the author was seeking to avoid. For example, the author portrays Moses’ contribution as a personal choice between suffering or pleasure, and mentions nothing of the covenant. The author was seeking to appeal to the sensibilities of all the Christians in his audience, only some of whom could have identified with Israel (genealogically).

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146 Eisenbaum, *Jewish Heroes*, 185.
As we examine Heb 11 more closely, we can see specifically how the author marginalizes the heroes as “aliens and strangers in this world” (Ἑῷ νοὶ καὶ παρεπίδημοι ἐἰσιν ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς; 11:13). When the author inserts rhetorical summaries into the text, he highlights the characteristics of particular interest to his point. Eisenbaum chooses to distance the content of the lists from the rhetorical portions (such as 11:33–38). However, concerning the marginalization of the heroes, the rhetorical portions (which I call “summaries”) give tremendous insight into the list as a whole. The heroes of the antediluvian period in 11:4–7 are characterized as having “pleased” (εὐαρέστεω) or having received “approval” (μεμιστήρεται from μεμιστέω) by God. This distinguishes them from the majority of humankind whose destiny was to be destruction (cf. Gen 6:5–8; 7:21–23). The summary in Heb 11:6 qualifies faith as “pleasing” God, involving the elements of “believing” (πιστεύω) and “seeking” (ἐκζητέω) God. With Noah, his faith is portrayed in the context of his response to God’s “warning” (χρηματίζω) which led to the salvation (σωτηρία) of himself and his family (v. 7).

The summary in verses 13–16 form the center of the section discussing Abraham (11:8–22). The language of “foreigners” (ἔθνος) and “exiles” (παρεπίδημος) who are seeking “a homeland (their country)” (πατρίς), having left behind the country of their origins, is particularly applicable to Abraham and the ancestors of the latter portion of the book of Genesis (cf. Deut 26:5). The verbs of the summary section describe their

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147 Eisenbaum, Jewish Heroes, 180.

148 The aorist participles denoting “having seen” (ὁρᾷ); “having welcomed” (ασπαζόμαι); “having confessed” (ὀμολογεῖ), while at the same time “not having received the promises” (μὴ + λαμβάνω).
sojourns to be an active pursuit of God’s “promises” (ἐπαγγέλια). The author metaphorically equates the promises with a geographic description: “homeland”, “a better [country]” (κρείττων) and a “city” (πόλις) which God “has prepared for them” (ἐτοιμάζω; see also 11:10). Such geographic imagery builds on the land-based theology of the previous testament, except that the author of Hebrews reiterates that no earthly location representing the perfective state had ever been reached by the heroes (11:39; cf. 4:8–11).

In the section on Moses and the Exodus-Settlement periods, there is no summary. However, for the figure of Moses, there is a mention of his suffering “for the Christ” (v. 26). This direct reference to Christ is unique in the hero-list of Heb 11. The author seems to acknowledge Moses’ special knowledge of Christ as an impetus for his choice of virtuous suffering over the vices of Egypt (v. 26). Furthermore, both he and his parents are given credit for “not fearing” (οὐκ + φοβέομαι) Pharoah’s anger (vv. 23, 27). The implication is that human authorities which threaten faithful actions need not be sufficient deterrent for the faithful to act. Similarly, the Israelites and Rahab are credited for siding with God in the midst of danger, and as a result are spared (vv. 29–31).

In his conclusion of the hero-list, the author of Hebrews summarizes over twenty characteristics of heroes spanning the Judges, early Monarchy and subsequent periods of Jewish history (11:32–38). This final section of Heb 11 most generally, and most vividly, portrays the lives of God’s faithful. The author first mentions the heroic acts that were performed, including resurrection (vv. 33–35). Then, the author mentions the heroic sufferings that were endured, including exile and painful death (vv. 36–38). Given
the expanse of Jewish and early-Christian history available to the author, he certainly could have given names for every act and suffering he mentions. Instead, the summary remains general and easy to apply to almost any period in history—including his own present context.

The author of Hebrews chose these heroes, at least in part, because they were usually part of such lists.\(^{149}\) Regarding the characters and events mentioned, this hero-list paralleled other Jewish hero-lists. However, the qualities (virtues) emphasized in Hebrews were trans-national, and the context of the history is not dependent on national identity or the sometimes moral ambiguity of the biblical traditions surrounding them. Instead, it was the individual choices of the heroes in response to God’s promises that were noted. Perhaps the key to connecting the characters (finding the common denominators) is to look in another place—other than moral or ethical realms—and into the realm of their actions based on God’s promises alone.

According to the tone set in 10:36–39, “righteousness” (δικαιοσύνη) is the effect of living in faith.\(^{150}\) The heroes endured (externalized faith) and received approval as a result. For the most part, their actions were portrayed in the context of danger, and they suffered because of their choices. They were different than the worlds in which they lived. For those familiar with the traditions from which they came, they would have known that their non-faithful, non-pleasing, non-enduring counterparts received God’s


\(^{150}\) God’s recognition of Noah’s faith as righteousness appears in Gen 6:9. Meanwhile, Paul also attributes Abraham’s faithfulness as being “credited as righteousness” (λογίζεται...εἰς δικαιοσύνην) by God (Rom 4:5, 9).
The heroes were portrayed as outsiders who acted according to God’s promises—as counter-intuitive as those choices may have been. They defied reason, and in most cases suffered and died for their faith. What is more, they lived “by” their faith\footnote{Note the use of the instrumental dative “by faith” (10:38; 11:3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 11, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31).}—looking to the seemingly impossible—seeking to please God and thereby be set apart from the rest of the world. Yet, the conclusion/transition of 11:39–40 clearly states that they did not receive perfection—the fulfillment of God’s promises—until Christ came. Even the achievement of God’s “commendation” (11:2, 39) was not equivalent to “perfection” (12:2). The author explains that only through Christ is the goal of perfection achievable (11:40, 12:2), and then only by imitating Christ’s endurance (12:3–13). In this way, the chronology of the list includes the audience of the epistle. Especially in light of the general concluding summary, the author brings the history of the list into his own eschatological present and makes the audience potentially part of the heritage of faithful examples—as long as they endure as Christ did.

Furthermore, the author indicates the audience’s involvement as participants in the history of the faithful community. The author lauds characteristics in the Christian community (i.e. the audience) as essential elements of the Christian heritage. The history is not confined to heroes of the past, rather the passage begins and ends with a collective reference to the epistle’s author and audience. In 11:3, it is the audience’s “understanding” (νοεῖν) of the creation of the universe which is the first action
mentioned in the chapter. This the author’s way of mentioning how the audience has already participated in a faithful act similar to the other heroes of Heb 11. At the conclusion of the chapter, the author also points out that the heroes’ “perfection” was to be completed only upon the inclusion of the author and audience (11:40). As we will discuss in the next section, Christ became the first to achieve perfection, thus making it possible for all to achieve perfection (12:1–3).

In summary, the author draws upon the persons and events listed in Heb 11 to support his argument that faith involves living according to God’s promises—even if they are not completely fulfilled in the lifetimes of the heroes. The author’s point is that, since the audience is living in the period after Christ’s coming, they have crucial advantages than their spiritual ancestors did. While they may be living in a period when God’s promises do not appear to be fulfilled, the author assures them that God is continuing to fulfill His promises among them. The audience’s greatest advantage is that, unlike their spiritual forebears, they have the living example of Christ to emulate as well as one who ministers on their behalf.

Heroic references exist in Heb 11 to the extent that the author lists a number of heroic figures who share the common virtue of faith. All of the heroes are essentially portrayed as being in continuity with the audience’s journey to achieve that virtue. In this respect, the heroes are exemplary characters. In Heb 12, the climax of the heroic references in Hebrews comes in the discussion of the figure who is the greatest example of the central virtue—and is portrayed as the greatest of the heroes.
Hebrews 12

In the exhortation of Heb 12:1–3, the author portrays Jesus as the greatest example of faithfulness—a theme which he has developed significantly in the preceding exhortation of Heb 11. The author characteristically communicates encouragement for the audience in the midst of his portrayals of Christ, and Heb 12 is no exception. Building on the background of the hero-list of Heb 11, Jesus is held as the highest example or standard that the audience should emulate. Consistent with the faith theme of Heb 11, the primary heroic characteristic to be exemplified is faithfulness as shown through endurance.

Hebrews 12 effectively brings the epistle to its conclusion by continuing the series of exhortations that began in 10:26 and continue through 13:21. Hebrews 12:1–3 is discussed below as being a transitional section bridging chapters 11 and 12 with a portrayal of Jesus as the enduring example of faithfulness. Building on this example, the author then exhorts the audience to view the sufferings they must endure as discipline (12:4–13). This discipline is designed to develop “holiness” (ἁγίασμος) in them and thereby align them to receive blessing from God (12:14–17). The author concludes the chapter by setting up a comparative metaphor between Mount Sinai and the covenant associated with that location, to Mount Zion (the heavenly mountain) and the superior covenant established through Christ’s sacrifice (12:14–29). Taken as a whole, chapter 12 encourages the audience to rejoice in their position as children of God, and to accept any hardship as preferable to the fate of forsaking that fellowship.
Hebrews 12:1–3 is one of the most critical passages in the book of Hebrews. Although the epistle contains many exhortations, these verses contain the culmination of every segment which encourages the audience to remain true to the confession. The author accomplishes this by encouraging the audience to emulate the Son, whose own fidelity to God was responsible for his own experiences of suffering and also the reason for his exaltation. The author uses athletic language and imagery to portray Jesus as the hero-champion, and the audience as fellow participants in the stadium of life. In the context of Heb 11, such language would have easily been associated with the theme of endurance in the face of martyrdom. Hebrews 12:1–3 serves as the continuation of the “exhortation to endure” (10:32–39) and as the capstone to the author’s exposition on faithfulness (11:1–40). The author provides an exhortation to contend (v. 1), a prime example to behold (v. 2) and the encouragement to be derived from the example of Jesus (v. 3).

Based on the terminology and themes present in Heb 11–12, and in particular 12:1–3, scholars have noticed similarities with 4 Macc (1st century C.E.). The Fourth book of Maccabees contains narratives of the martyrdoms of Eleazar (ch. 6) and of his seven brothers and mother (chs. 8–17) in graphic detail, and portrays their lives in ways consistent with the athletic imagery present in Hebrews. In every instance, the brothers are given the choice between profaning their adherence to God’s law—and a tortuous death. Scholars have noted the similarities in particular between Heb 12:1–3 and 4 Macc 10:10 and 17:10–16. For instance, the martyrs “fix their eyes on God” (ἀφοράω

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17:10; see Heb 11:2c); “contend” (ἀγωνίζομαι 17:13; see Heb 12:1c) as “athletes” (σθλητής 17:15, 16); with Eleazar being the “first contestant” (προαγωνίζομαι 17:13; see Heb 12:2 ἀρχήγος); all of humanity being “spectators” (θεωρέω 17:14; Heb 1:1); and all the victorious being “crowned” in victory (στέφανον 17:15). The parallels between the passages, both in word and sentiment, convey parallel messages that living lives of faithfulness to God transcend mortal existence. “For indeed, the contest in which they were involved was divine (godly), for on that day virtue gave the awards and tested them for their endurance. The prize was immortality (incorruptibility) in endless life.”

Hebrews 12:1: The Exhortation to Contend

By his use of “therefore” (τοιγαροῦν) the author connects his upcoming exhortation to the exposition of Heb 11. The summary statement of 11:39–40 is that “those having been commended” (μαρτυρηθέντες from μαρτυρέω) had not received the fulfilled promises (or perfection). Still, these were the faithful who had endured. In 12:1, the author uses the imagery of the Greco-Roman stadium as his setting to address the recipients. He portrays the heroes of the past as the spectators, and exhorts the
recipients of the epistle as the athletes in the scene to act in such a way as to succeed in the contest at hand (enduring for the sake of faithfulness).

As a basis for the exhortation, the author refers to the “cloud of witnesses” (νεφός μαρτύρων) which “encircle” (περίκειμαι) the recipients of the epistle. The “cloud” (νεφός) was a term commonly used to refer to the “numberless throng.”153 In the immediate context, however, additional meaning for the reference can be drawn from the author’s use of the noun μάρτυς. The verb μαρτυρέω occurs four times in Heb 11 in connection with the commendation of God based on the heroes’ faithfulness (11:2, 4, 5, 39). The “witnesses” were those who had received commendation from God, and were, therefore, fitting spectators of the current “athletes” (recipients). Furthermore, they themselves could “testify” to the promises of God, and the endurance necessary to remain faithful. It is uncertain whether the association between μάρτυς and “martyrdom” (in the sense of killed/persecuted Christians) was intentionally meant by the author of Hebrews, but the concept is present in relatively contemporary writings (such as 4 Maccabees). However, such dual use of the term as both meaning “commended” and “martyr” would be appropriate, given the context of its use here.154

The author continues to draw upon athletic imagery to encourage the recipients as athletes. The recipients are exhorted to “put off all weights/encumbrances and sin that

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153 BDAG “νεφός”, 670. See also Lane, Hebrews, 2:408.

154 By the end of the 1st century C.E., Christians had achieved martyrdom before stadium audiences. Perhaps this fact influenced the author’s choice to combine stadium imagery with martyrs.
skillfully surrounds” (ἐὐπερῆστατας). The imagery is clear that all encumbrances would be detrimental to performance in any athletic endeavor. Additionally, the author attributes action to the concept of sin which can “beset” itself against a person or “surround” them in hostility.” In this case, the imagery speaks for itself as no specific sin or encumbrance is noted—leaving the recipients to apply the metaphor freely. Whatever could hinder the recipients from completing the race successfully was to be discarded.

“Run” (τρέχω) is both the main verb for verse 1 and the anchor for the athletic imagery of the section. The author of Hebrews commonly uses forms of the hortatory subjunctive when exhorting the recipients to act (here and 4:14–16; 10:19–25; 13:12–13). The action is intentional, requires training, and has an ultimate goal. In this case, the race is to be run “with endurance” (δι’ ὑπομονῆς), which is the theme of the section and the underlying theme of Heb 11.

The “race” or “contest” (ἀγών) itself is one having been “appointed”—or “marked off” (προκέματα). The recipients were being told that the race was at hand. The “race” or “contest” is typical of athletic imagery, but was also used to refer to

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155 There may be some rhetorical parallel occurring where the witnesses are “encompassing”, while at the same time the runner is to avoid sin which “surrounds” (only occurrence of this form in Scripture).

156 Attridge, Hebrews, 355.


158 David Allen, Hebrews, 571.

159 Thompson, Hebrews, 247.
martyrdom. The “trials” of Greco-Roman heroes were similarly referred to—as were the Olympic “games.” As we will see in chapter four, the athletic and metaphorical uses of άγων were prevalent in heroic imagery. The author of Hebrews intentionally joins the athletic and heroic imagery in the context of his exhortation to the recipients to emulate the heroic lives he has been discussing in Heb 11—the climax of which appears in the following verse.

**Hebrews 12:2: The Example to Behold**

The author turns to the method by which the recipients can be victorious in their quest—to “look intently” (άφοράω) upon Jesus. As we have already seen in Heb 11, the heroes of the past “looked” and “saw” the “invisible.” The fulfillment of all promises was to occur in Jesus, who was “unseen” to the heroes of the past. The author of Hebrews is writing to those who have “seen” Jesus in the sense that they are living in the time after the incarnation—and thus have the advantage of being able to see and draw from his example. The author has already referred to Jesus’ endurance in life a number of times throughout the epistle (2:9–18; 4:15; 5:7–9). Jesus’ mortal life can be a point of focus for the recipients.

Jesus, the example himself, is given the title “hero and perfecter of the faith” (τῆς πίστεως ἀρχηγὸν καὶ τελειωτὴν). The broad sense and meanings of ἀρχηγός has been discussed earlier in my dissertation. Given the athletic context of its appearance

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162 “Perfecter” (τελειωτήν) in noun form occurs only here in Scripture, and only in Christian texts afterward. See Attridge, *Hebrews*, 356–57, n.53.
here, “leader” or “founder” aspects of the hero definition would be particularly important. At this point, suffice it to say that the “hero, author, source” of the faith also “fulfilled” that faith. As previously discussed, viewing the author’s use of “perfection” as “fulfillment” is appropriate, even though Jesus’ perfection in the sense of his sinlessness would also fit the context (7:26). In this way, not only is the author conveying what Jesus did (he “perfected”/ “fulfilled” / “completed” the faith), but what he has become for the recipients (a model of endurance).¹⁶³

The author then refers to the “endurance” of Jesus. Specifically, he describes Jesus as the one “who, for the sake of the joy set before him, endured the cross, despising its shame, and has been seated at the right hand of the throne of God” (Ὁ ἀντὶ τῆς προκειμένης αὐτῶν χαρᾶς, ὑπέμεινεν σταυρὸν, αἰσχύνης καταφρονήσας, ἐν δεξιᾷ τοῦ θρόνου τοῦ θεοῦ, κέκαθικεν). Scholars debate the translation of ἀντὶ in this phrase, and the subsequent meaning of the verse. Those who would favor “in place of the joy set before him,” believe that the author may be following a common christological pattern which describes Jesus as one “who” (Ὁ) is present in heaven, on earth, and then in heaven again.¹⁶⁴ The pattern would therefore presume that Jesus chose to endure “in place of” or “instead of” the pre-existent life he had in heaven (Heb 1–2). The pattern would appear as follows:

¹⁶³ Attridge, Hebrews, 356; Koester, Hebrews, 523.

A The joy set before him (heaven)
   B he endured the cross (earth)
   B1 despising the shame (earth)
A1 is seated at the right hand of God

Other scholars, however, would contend that ἀντί should be translated such that the phrase means “for the sake of the joy set before him,” so that the “joy” comes after or even as a result of Jesus’ endurance.\textsuperscript{166}

Both approaches are simultaneously valid. The latter approach (“for the sake of the joy”) would be consistent with the athletic imagery of pursuing a goal with a prize in mind. At the same time, a case can be made for the former as Jesus’ choice of an earthly life of suffering over his pre-existent life is consistently present in the epistle (2:9–18; 5:7–9). Furthermore, Jesus’ choice could be seen as another heroic act like that of Moses, whose own vision of Christ led him to choose virtue over ease (11:26). This would not exclude the fact that Jesus could have looked at the prize of his exaltation as motivation for his endurance. In fact, Jesus’ “joy set before him” (τῆς προκειμένης αὐτοῦ χαρᾶς) parallels the “contest set before” (τοῦ προκείμενου ἡμῖν ἀγώνα) the recipients—who would only have the prize of joy to “look forward to” (11:26) as they did not have a pre-existence.

What Jesus’ endured is epitomized in his endurance of the “cross” (σταυρός). Although this term appears only here in Hebrews, the associated suffering, “shame” (αἰσχύνη) and sacrifice of Jesus’ crucifixion appears throughout the epistle (2:9–10, 14–18; 5:7–9; 7:27; 8:11–28; 13:12). As the climax of the heroes list, the author also

\textsuperscript{165} Thompson, Hebrews, 248.

\textsuperscript{166} Attridge, Hebrews, 357; O’Brien, Hebrews, 455; Thompson, Hebrews, 248.
intimates that Jesus’ suffering rivals the sufferings of all martyrs throughout time. Jesus had to exhibit the greatest of faithfulness to endure the greatest of sacrifices.

The author reiterates Jesus’ position as being at the “right hand of the throne of God” (ἐν δεξιᾷ τοῦ θρόνου τοῦ θεοῦ). Once again, the author makes an allusion to Ps 110:1. By consistently portraying Jesus’ exalted position in this way, the author simultaneously motivates the recipients by indicating that Jesus was rewarded for his endurance, and that the mediator of their covenant holds a position of authority and security for them. So, again, the author portrays Jesus in such a way as to convey both encouragement and exhortation.

So we see again the author’s intentional use of heroic language (such as ἀρχηγός), as well as the heroic themes of perfection through suffering, athletic imagery, and striving for virtue. The hero was portrayed to be the epitome of virtue. The recipients would subsequently be exhorted to strive to achieve the heroic virtue in like manner as the hero himself.

Hebrews 12:3: The Encouragement to be Derived

The author’s encouragement is to “consider” (ἀναλογιζόμαι) Jesus, their example. As the author will state in 12:4, the recipients’ experiences do not yet include physical violence or death as Jesus experienced (or the martyrs of Heb 11). Instead, the author is more concerned that the recipients endure in life in the same fashion that Jesus “endured” suffering and death “at the hands of sinners” (ἀμαρτωλός) whose “contention” (the rhetorical term for “dispute” (ἀντιλογία)) could deter the recipients’

167 Attridge, Hebrews, 358.
resolve. The danger facing the recipients was that they would despair (“be sick and faint” (καθαρέω + ἐκλύω)) and subsequently fail in the race. The author rhetorically uses athletic terminology to describe the physicality of the menace and its negative effect. Although the recipients had endured sufferings and had been mistreated for their faith (10:32–34), their suffering had been “bloodless” (12:4). But as Jesus successfully endured all forms of hostility, the hope would be that all who “look” and “consider” the “hero” of faithfulness will likewise succeed.

At this point, the author transitions from the example, to the concept of viewing suffering as discipline (12:4–7). An interpretation of Prov 3:11–12 provides the basis for the author’s approach.168 Again, in another parallel with 4 Maccabees, the author’s point is that the suffering is not God’s punishment, but an educational experience (4 Macc 10:10).169 Similarly, prophetic and wisdom literature address the topic of wisdom (the way in which God is pleased) as the result of “training” (παιδεία; Isa 35:3; Sir 2:12; 25:23; Job 4:3; Prov 4:26).170 The author consistently encourages the recipients to emulate the internal (belief) and external (endurance) characteristics of Jesus, the prime example of heroic faithfulness.

The Message of Hebrews 11–12 Summarized

In Heb 11–12, the author continues a general exhortation to endurance that he begins in chapter 10. In Heb 10, the author concludes the central message of Hebrews

168 Lane, Hebrews, 2:406.
169 Thompson, Hebrews, 251–52.
170 Thompson, Hebrews, 256. Guthrie, Structure, 132.
concerning the new sacrificial system under the covenant of Christ. The author exhorts the recipients not to reject the new covenant, but instead to remain constant and to endure any suffering or loss that may come as a result of their adherence. The promises of salvation and reward are derived from the author’s quotations from Isa 26:20 and Hab 2:3–4. Of particular interest to the author of Hebrews is the concept of living “by faith” (ἐκ τίστεως; 10:38; Hab 2:4). In Heb 11–12, the author interprets a list of heroes of faithfulness who exemplified what it meant to live according to the promises of God without actually having received them during their lifetimes. The author then points to the ultimate example of faithfulness—Jesus—who fulfilled the promises of all the heroes who came before. The author simultaneously highlights that Jesus himself was a “hero” who endured suffering, yet remained faithful to God.

Embedded within the exposition and exhortation of Heb 11–12 is a message of hope for the recipients. The, as of yet, “unseen” promises of God are just as certain for the recipients as the coming of Christ was certain for the heroes of Heb 11. In the same way, such promises concerning their endurance and discipline will bear certain reward for the community which remains faithful. And in the meantime, the one who serves and mediates on their behalf is again shown to be in solidarity with them. Just as Jesus endured, so they must endure. Just as Jesus was rewarded, so will they be.

Conclusion

Hebrews 2 provides a portrait of Christ in the context of his incarnation. Given the high Christology of the author—thematically developed at the outset of the epistle in Heb 1—Heb 2 puts the incarnation into perspective. Jesus is shown to be the model
human whose mortal life, suffering and death, benefited all humanity. The author wants
the recipients to understand that Jesus’ role as high priest was made possible by his
experience as a human, and that such an experience qualified him to be the ultimate
mediator between God and humanity. This move helps to set the stage for the center
portion of Hebrews which goes into detail regarding Jesus’ mediation. Throughout the
epistle the author promotes the recipients’ participation in and reception of this ministry.
The recipients must not abandon the faith they first received in order to benefit from this
ministry. In other words, the recipients must endure in faithfulness to succeed.

In the concluding chapters of Hebrews, after having described Jesus’ ministry in
detail, the author describes the only appropriate response that the recipients must have to
the message—endurance. Hebrews 11–12 provides a portrait of Christ in the context of
his endurance. Jesus’ portrait is steeped in the history of faithful heroes—whose
characteristics transcended their national affiliations and could be applied universally to
any Christians.

In the next chapter of the dissertation, it will be shown how Heb 2 and 11–12
cohere and take their cues from the Hellenistic-hero model. The characteristics of the
Hellenistic-hero model (see chapter two) will be applied to the portrayal of Christ in
Hebrews. As will be shown, each passage informs the heroic perspective on the portrait
of Christ in Hebrews.
CHAPTER FOUR

CHRIST AND HERACLES WITHIN THE HEROIC PARADIGM

Introduction

One of the contexts in which Christianity emerged in the course of the 1st century C.E. was a widespread use of Heracles, in both mythical and philosophic ways. It is therefore reasonable to think that the author of Hebrews would have known both the refined version of Heracles, as well as some of the more popular mythic material which formed its base. In chapter two, I established the parameters of the heroic paradigm. In chapter three, I briefly indicated where heroic imagery may have been used in my discussion of the text of Hebrews. In this chapter, I will indicate more fully how the author of Hebrews integrated Christian elements seen elsewhere in the NT and heroic language and imagery in his portrayal of Christ.

The parameters of the heroic paradigm build upon the parallels between the philosophical portrayals of Heracles and Christ, as highlighted by scholars such as Attridge and Aune.¹ Attridge analyzes points of comparison between the 1st century C.E. tragedies Hercules furens and Hercules Oetaeus, and the descensus tradition evident in

Hebrews. Attridge states that the “two key foci” for the consideration of parallel traditions between Heracles and Christ in Hebrews involve the theme of perfection through suffering (2:10), and the theme of liberation of captives from a fear of death (2:15).

Using the analyses of Attridge and Aune as a starting point, I have drawn together a number of parallels between classic heroic portraits, Heracles and the portrait of Christ in the letter to the Hebrews. Heroes meet most if not all of the following characteristics: (1) they are deceased; (2) they have divine-royal parentage; (3) they live life as mortals (have solidarity with humanity); (4) they perform supernatural deeds; (5) they endure suffering and experience a notable death (and some achieve perfection); (6) they become objects of worship; (7) they are revered as beneficent forces; and (8) they become exemplars of virtue and courage for mortals to face their fear of death. All of the elements are related and some characteristics overlap in their significance. For example, they must experience a notable death and thus are deceased. For most heroes, their beneficence in the afterlife is in the same manner as that of their mortal beneficence.

I will use a four-step approach to show how the author of Hebrews integrated Christian concepts about Christ with heroic language and imagery. I will topically address the characteristics within the heroic paradigm in the order listed in the previous paragraph. To begin, I will discuss how the heroic characteristic appears in classic hero stories. Next, I will show how the characteristic is present in the legends of Heracles. I will then point out certain NT texts (excepting Hebrews) which contain elements of

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Christology relevant to my discussion of the heroic expression in Hebrews. Finally, I will propose how the author of Hebrews has integrated the Christian concepts into his viewpoint of Christ as hero.

**Christ and Heracles Within the Heroic Paradigm**

*Heroes Are Deceased*

**Classic Heroes: Deceased**

In order to be worshipped as a hero in the classic sense, it was necessary for the hero to be deceased. Even though the hero’s distinctive nature and abilities set them apart from ordinary humanity while they were alive, they were not worshipped until they had made the journey from physical life to the afterlife. It was only there, in this disembodied state (the divine state of apotheosis) that the hero would be venerated to the greatest degree.

As will be developed in the following sections, the hero’s death is of particular importance in the establishment of his heroic status. For this reason, the hero-cult centered geographically near the tomb (or tombs) of the heroes. Pausanias contains accounts of locales where the founder’s grave location is debated—and by extension the city’s true founder is debatable. In some cases, multiple locations claimed to be the

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3 It is not my purpose to indicate the use of heroic language in the NT outside of Hebrews, or to assume any dependency between Hebrews and other NT texts. The NT texts are mentioned as evidence of Christian concepts that are present in Hebrews. Although some of the NT texts may reflect heroic language and imagery, at this time I will confine my argument concerning heroic language and imagery within Hebrews.

4 In some cases (Enoch, Elijah) a formal death may not occur, but instead a form of departure from the mortal realm.

5 Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 5.5.5–6.
home of the hero’s tomb (e.g. locations claiming to be Agamemnon’s tombs are located
in Mycenae (Greece) and Tarentum (Italy)).6 In every case, however, the hero was
deceased.

**Heracles: Deceased**

The story of Heracles’ death on Mount Oeta contributes significantly to the hero’s
legend. As related in chapter two, he initiated his self-immolation to avoid dying a
cursed death. Heracles faced death (both as a concept and as a personified being Death)
numerous times without fear.

In many ways his death was befitting his life. It was performed on his own terms
without fear. Being mortal, it was inevitable that he would die. What more fitting way
for the hero to die than as a self-sacrifice? In this way, Heracles remained master of his
own fate, and did not relinquish the mastery of his life’s ending to anyone else—
including Death himself. The legendary end of his life was only to be a transition to his
eternal destiny.

**Christ of the New Testament: Deceased**

The NT writers, and in particular the Evangelists, portrayed Jesus to be
extraordinary in terms of the life he led. Jesus was portrayed as a powerful person who
performed miracles greater than any other biblical figure. Still, he was subject to mortal
death the same as all humanity. In fact, his death receives much emphasis in the NT.

All four Gospels contain a narrative of Jesus’ death. Although the emphases and
particulars of the accounts differ, Jesus’ moment of physical death is communicated

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6 Fritz Graf, “Hero cult,” in *Brill’s New Pauly Encyclopaedia of the Ancient World* (Hubert
through semantically related terms as either the rendering up of his “spirit” (πνεῦμα; Matt 27:50; John 19:30) or “expiration” (ἐκνεύω; Mark 15:37; Luke 23:46). John’s account further states that soldiers presiding over his crucifixion confirmed his death before he was removed from the cross (John 19:33).

Paul explains that Christ’s death is an essential part of the entire Christian enterprise. Romans 5–6 reinforces that Jesus’ once-and-for-all death occurred as a means to his defeating of death to the benefit of all humankind. Likewise in 1 Cor 15, Paul makes the point that Christ experienced physical resurrection as surely as he experienced a physical death. The physical death of Jesus serves as the foundation for a physical resurrection. These texts affirm that if Jesus did not in actuality die, then the Christian hope of a physical resurrection would be in vain.

**Christ of Hebrews: Deceased**

The author of Hebrews makes it very clear that Jesus experienced a physical death (2:9–10, 14; 5:7; 6:2; 9:28). Besides the gospel traditions concerning the death of Jesus, it would have been inconceivable for a 1st century audience to imagine a crucifixion that did not ultimately bring about death. When the author mentions Jesus’ crucifixion, Jesus’ death is implied (6:6; 12:2; 13:12).

Likewise, when the author spoke of Jesus’ offerings of his body or blood, his death would have been implied. Those familiar with either Hellenistic or Jewish traditions would have understood the ritual offering to involve the death of any breathing creature⁷ (animal or person). Therefore, when the author of Hebrews refers to Jesus’

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⁷ This would be as opposed to grain or mineral offerings.
offering or sacrifice of himself, his blood or body—his death is implied as well (7:27; 9:12, 14–22, 26; 10:10–14; 13:20, 24).

Jesus’ death was heroic. It was his final greatest act which served to bring salvation to humankind. It was self-elected, but not easy to endure or even to contemplate. Jesus endured his death victoriously. Finally, it marked his transition to a heavenly form in which he would continue to serve humankind as savior.

Heroes Have Divine-Royal Parentage

Classic Heroes: Divine-Royal Parentage

From the very beginning of their lives, heroes were set apart from the rest of humanity. In many cases they were born to royalty as semi-divine beings with a god and a mortal as parents. Their lives interact with both the divine and mortal realms.

Heroes often were direct offspring of Zeus himself (Heracles of mortal queen Alcmene and Perseus of mortal princess Danaë). Achilles was the son of king Peleus (a hero in his own right) and Thesis a sea nymph. Orpheus was the son of the god Apollo and a muse.⁸

The influence of divine lineage carried over to the next generation as well. The descendants of heroes were sometimes distinguishable from the rest of humanity as partially-divine progeny. In later antiquity, there is evidence of people claiming to be descendants of heroes in an attempt to further legitimize their own power (e.g. the kings of Lydia were reputed to be descendants of Heracles).⁹

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⁹ Herodotus, *Histories* 1.7.
Heracles: Divine-Royal Parentage

As shown in chapter two of this dissertation, Heracles was born the son of the Greek god Zeus, and mortal princess Alcmene. Zeus disguised himself as Alcmene’s husband in order to have relations with her. Alcmene was wed to Amphitryon who was prince of Tiryns, and was serving as a general of Thebes when Heracles and his half-brother Iphicles were born. Heracles was born of the greatest Greek god and had links to royal lineages on this mother’s and step-father’s sides as well.

Christ of the New Testament: Divine-Royal Parentage

The divine origin of Jesus is a subject of many NT passages. Though Jesus’ divine parentage appears most clearly in Matt, Luke and John, the subject received a remarkable level of attention in Mark. Mark’s gospel does not contain an infancy narrative nor a description of the incarnation. However, the initial sentence of Mark’s gospel declares the work to be “the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (τοῦ ἐυαγγελίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, ὁ θεός; 1:1). Furthermore, Mark attests to Jesus divine parentage through the exclamations of God himself (1:11; 9:7), foreigners (15:39), and even evil spirits (3:11; 5:7).

The infancy narratives of Matt 1–2 and Luke 1–2 adverzize their affirmation of Jesus’ divine and royal parentage. Even though their accounts vary in content and emphases, they each show his maternal and step-paternal links to numerous heroes of the

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10 Although his views may be controversial, Larry W. Hurtado provides insight and summaries of significant studies in the complicated origins of Christian worship of Christ, and in particular Paul’s contribution. See Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 13–25; and At the Origins of Christian Worship: The Context and Character of Earliest Christian Devotion (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).
Jewish and Christian heritages (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, etc.) and royal lineage (Judah, David, Solomon, etc.).

The circumstances surrounding the birth of Christ differs in some respects from the birth narratives of Hellenistic heroes. God did not take human form to indulge himself or to beguile a mortal woman, as Greek gods—in particular Zeus—commonly did.\textsuperscript{11} Furthermore, the physical union commonly portrayed between gods and mortals which beget heroes is absent from the Gospels. The Gospel accounts convey infancy narratives consistent with their Jewish backgrounds insofar as they utilize such elements as foretelling, theophany (or announcement by angels), and fulfillment formulas to convey the phenomenon of Jesus’ birth. Only Luke offers an “explanation” of Jesus’ divine-human conception (Luke 1:35)—and the explanation does not contain a physical description of the occurrence. Johannine literature contributes a particular perspective to the subject of Jesus’ divine parentage. Although he does not include a formal infancy narrative, John 1 describes the incarnation in terms of the Logos “becoming flesh” (σὰρξ ὑγειετο). Such highly philosophical language was used to explain Jesus’ divinity.

Although Paul refers both to the humanity and divinity of Christ, he does not mention Mary by name or refer to Jesus’ mortal family. Paul’s perspective concerning this issue is summarized in Gal 4:4 where he states that “God sent forth His Son, born of a woman…. ” Paul—whose writings and subjects addressed some of the earliest issues of

\textsuperscript{11}Zeus was infamous for taking various forms to have sexual unions with mortal females (Isocrates, Helen 59). He took the forms of animals (a swan for Sparta’s queen Leda (Euripides, Helen 1.16–24; a bull for Phoenician princess Europa) as well as phenomena (a shower of gold for Princess Danaë (Aeschylus, Persians 80). In the case of Alcmena, Zeus took the form of her husband and the result of the union was Heracles.
Christology—faced a greater challenge in affirming the divinity of Christ than his earthly origins. In Phil 2:6–11, Paul clearly affirms Jesus’ divine origins. Jesus “emptied himself” (κενόω) to become human (Phil 2:7).

**Christ of Hebrews: Divine-Royal Parentage**

The author of Hebrews begins his portrayal of Christ in the epistle as the “Son” of God (1:1–3). In order for the author to discuss Jesus’ humanity as he does in chapter 2, it appears that he recognized Jesus’ mortal origins as consistent with the Gospel infancy narratives. In order for Jesus to be mortal, he would have to experience a physical birth.

The author does not deviate from the Judeo-Christian monotheistic tradition. Rather, Jesus’ divinity is explained in terms of his filial relationship to the one true God. While there are obviously other “divine” or “super-mortal” beings (angels, the devil, departed humans)—all of whom play a role in the audience’s current mortal world—one God reigns as Sovereign over all. Jesus Christ is the unique divine Son of the One True God.

In Hebrews 7:3, the author of Hebrews states that Melchizedek was “without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life, resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest forever” (ἀπατωρ ἀμήτωρ ἀγενεαλόγητος, μήτε ἀρχὴν ἡμερῶν μήτε ζωῆς τέλος ἔχων, ἀφωμοιωμένος δὲ τῷ υἱῷ τοῦ θεοῦ, μένει ἱερεὺς εἰς τὸ διηνεκές). O’Brien categorizes the two main interpretations of this passage referring to Melchizedek (and the Son). The first interpretation places the phrases in the context of Hellenistic descriptions of the god, which would reinforce that

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the figures are truly God (or God-like) and not merely divinized mortals.\textsuperscript{13} The second interpretation sees this phraseology in a human Greco-Roman context involving genealogical legitimacy. In this case, the author of Hebrews makes the argument that Melchizedek (and the Son) are recognized as priests by God—without the physical and genealogical limitations which are placed upon human Levitical priests.\textsuperscript{14} As Koester points out, an important element to interpreting Heb 7:3 is seeing how the text changes the direction of typology. Instead of seeing how Christ is like the figure Melchizedek, Melchizedek was “made to resemble” (ἀφιμοιώτω) and in essence foreshadow—the coming Jesus.\textsuperscript{15}

It is likely that the author of Hebrews again uses specific terms with multiple nuances to convey multiple truths. Jesus’ divine pre-existence extended beyond that of mortals. More important to the author, in Heb 7 Jesus’ existence (both human and divine) is outside the confines of the Levitical priesthood—but within the more ancient and legitimate order of Melchizedek. Or to state it in the same rhetorical direction as the author of Hebrews, Melchizedek was in the “order” (τάξις; Heb 7:17; cf. Ps 110:4) of the Son’s priesthood.

In Hebrews, there is also an expression of filial relationship between God, the Son, and further “siblings” (2:11). Again, in keeping with the traditional Christian

\textsuperscript{13} Jerome H. Neyrey sees Hebrews 7:3 as reflective of Hellenistic “god-talk.” Quoting Diodorus of Sicily, Neyrey differentiates between the nature of gods, and divinized heroes who attain immortality. See Neyrey, “‘Without Beginning of Days or End of Life’ (Hebrews 7:3): Topos for a True Deity,” \textit{CBQ} 53 (1991), 439–55.


record, Jesus had no physical descendants.\textsuperscript{16} In a spiritual-metaphorical sense, however, Jesus was the “firstborn” (12:23) among many children of God. Jesus does not have children, but rather “proclaims” (καλεῖο; 2:11) others to be God’s children—and makes this relationship possible by his own actions.

Heroes Have Solidarity With Humanity

**Classic Heroes: Solidarity**

Although heroes were esteemed for their extraordinary physical prowess and mental agility, their veneration as heroes was due largely to their association with humanity. Unlike the ever-transcendent gods, heroes could sympathize with mortals because they themselves were once mortal. Granted, their semi-divine natures gave them exceptional abilities, but these did not alleviate the sufferings and trials they endured. They served to inspire other mortals to similarly endure their sufferings.

The belief that the hero was human was vital to their being worshipped as a hero.\textsuperscript{17} Their life achievements were the result of toil and suffering. Some of the earliest known heroes were declared to be so in no small part due to their participation in the Trojan War (Achilles, Odysseus, Paris, and Hector). In Homer’s *The Odyssey*, Odysseus was noted for his endurance of many trials to return to his homeland from this war. Whatever supernatural destiny may have awaited them, it was necessary for them to endure the hardships of life as mortals before inheriting their destiny.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{16} Jesus’ “family”—in addition to their appearance in the infancy narratives—is referred to in the NT several times (Matt 12:46–50; Mark 3:31–35; Luke 8:19–21; Acts 15; Gal 1:19).


Heracles: Solidarity

Heracles had a firmly established divine-royal lineage which endowed him with tremendous strength and courage. As a mortal, however, he still had to endure the threats of harm and death. Heracles possessed innate power, but had to learn discipline or his own gifts could betray him. Even though he survived many adventures and encounters with dangerous enemies, he still had to have the courage and skill to face the limitations of his humanity.

Christ of the New Testament: Solidarity

The NT contributes a rich and, at times, diverse incarnational Christology. The place of the incarnation in Christology extends beyond the mere physicality of Jesus to emphasize Jesus’ humanity in a larger sense. Jesus experienced all of the limitations and mortal suffering all other humans experienced—in terms of suffering even more so.

The Gospels testify to the humanity of Jesus in a number of ways and in particular in the birth narratives. Even though Matthew and Luke contain the infancy narratives which emphasize Jesus’ divine parentage, they also contain genealogies which—among other things—promote Jesus’ royal lineage. 19 Jesus’ human existence is not only confirmed by the genealogies, but his place in humanity’s history (as a human) is highlighted by the gospel writers.

This is to say nothing of the multiple examples of Jesus’ physical presence and humanity found throughout the gospel narratives. He aged, worked, travelled, ate, drank, hungered, and slept as a human (Luke 2:40; 4:2; 8:23; 24:39). Even though his divine

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parentage and role as God’s agent would have qualified him above any other to initiate new religious practices, he conformed to the example of his Jewish religious heritage. For example, he was circumcised (Luke 2:21), observed assembly at synagogues, respected the Temple as a Holy Place, and Jesus ministered to people in the office of a “teacher” or “rabbi.” He did not presume to function as a priest because he was not from the tribe of Levi. He did not desire to rule as sovereign, even though he was from the Davidic line of Judah. Such humility would serve to inspire those who testified concerning him to proclaim his manner of life and death and to consider their own lives in respect to his.

In Pauline literature, Jesus’ “emptying” (κενόω) of himself in terms of his acceptance of a mortal life over his strictly divine life appears in relation to his divinity is the theme of the so-entitled “kenosis hymn” of Philippians 2:6–11. Paul instructs the Philippians to consider others before themselves in like manner as Christ:

Who—already in the form (μμορφή) of God—did not deem equality with God as something to be held firmly (ἀρπαγμός). Instead, he emptied himself, and appropriated the form (μμορφή) of a slave—conforming in likeness as humanity. Indeed, being identifiable in every way as a human, he humbled (ταπείνω) himself—becoming obedient until death—moreover, the death of the cross.

(Phil 2:6–8)

In this hymn, we see a two-fold self-emptying of Christ. First, he became human and subject to death (Phil 2:7). Next, he became an obedient human who subjected himself to the shameful death of crucifixion (Phil 2:8). Insofar as this hymn addresses Christ’s humility, it addresses Christ’s status as a mortal being.
Christ of Hebrews: Solidarity

The author of Hebrews emphasizes Jesus’ humanity throughout the epistle and in Heb 2 in particular. As I discussed in the previous chapter, the author interprets Ps 8 in both a messianic and anthropological way so as to clearly identify Jesus—the mortal Christ—as the subject of the psalm. The author discusses Jesus’ humanity in terms of his physical body and associated suffering and vulnerability (2:9–10; 3:15; 5:7–10) and uses those references to emphasize the filial relationship between the hero Jesus and the rest of humanity (2:10–18). In his discussion of the priestly system under the new covenant, the author mentions God’s choice of Jesus as priest to be appropriate in that he was in every respect human (2:17–18; 5:1–4). However, the choice of Jesus was non-traditional regarding his genealogical heritage—further relating his humanity on a physical level (7:14). Of course, no blood sacrifice could occur without Jesus’ body and blood being a physical reality (10:10, 19–20).

The author also discusses Jesus’ humanity in terms of his relationship to God. While he was in many respects unique as God’s “Son” and “firstborn” (πρωτότοκος; 1:5–6; 2:9), he was also related to humanity as a fellow “child” (παιδίον) of God and “sibling” (ἀδέλφος) (2:11–14, 17). When Jesus is compared with angels, archetypal leaders and previous covenant systems, he is shown to be superior (1:4; 3:1–4; 9:11). However, the author intentionally refers to Jesus’ fraternal relationship with humanity as a fellow mortal. He was subject to obedience to God’s will as all believers (or beings) were also subject (3:2; 5:4–5). As discussed above concerning Heb 7:3, Jesus’ nature was both divine and human. The author states that his “perfection” (τελειόω; 2:10; 5:9;
7:28; 9:11; 12:2) and cosmic redemptive actions guaranteed the efficacy of his role as the high-priest who offered sacrifice for humankind (Heb 7–10). His true humanity, suffering and self-sacrifice qualified him to serve as the most appropriate high-priest (2:14–18).

While Jesus shares the characteristic of solidarity with humanity with other heroes, the purpose behind his human existence differs from theirs. Hellenistic heroes are born human and they perform amazing feats which in turn shape their destinies. Jesus’ existence as a human was the result of a miraculous occurrence. His humanity had purpose. His life was not significant only because he was a hero—he was a hero—his life was significant because he was human. In Hebrews, the author makes it clear that Jesus’ humanity—and everything associated with it—was a necessary part of the process to bring about the desired relationship between God and humanity (2:17–18). Jesus became human for a purpose.

Heroes Perform Supernatural Deeds and Victories

**Classic Heroes: Deeds and Victories**

Heroes were remarkable because of their great deeds and victories. They were renowned for their physical and/or mental prowess and their bravery in situations where their skills were tested. Heroes were those who contested with opposing forces and emerged victorious. Their endurance of trials and contests need not always be magnanimous or beneficent, but they do serve to further indicate the hero’s qualities. As will be evident in this section and the next, their victories were tied closely to their sufferings.
Heroes chose or were divinely appointed to carry out many tasks. Even though their super-mortal abilities might have given them an advantage over average mortals, they still had to endure whatever may befall them in completing the task. In Herodotus’ retelling of the planned Persian invasion of Greece, the Persian emperor Xerxes speaks of his martial commitments against his enemies, “It is certainly not possible for either of us to retreat: to do or to suffer (πάσχω) is our task (άγων).”

The term άγων was used to describe an organized group of people or gods who had assembled with the purpose of seeing an athletic contest. It was believed that the patron gods of the contests would preside over the contests and determine the winners. In Euripides’ Orestes, it is said that the hero stood public “trial for [his] life” (ψυχής άγώνα). This sentiment was also carried into the battlefield and was used to describe the feats of the heroes. The terms “combat/trial” άγών and “combat” άθλησις (also άθλεω) are related. The contests (running, wrestling, use of weapons) were martial in nature. “Champions” (άγωνιστής) were victorious afforded the “prize of the contest” (αεθλος άγώνιος).

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20 “Ούκων ἔξαισαναρέειν οὐδετέροις δυνατῶς ἔχει, ἀλλὰ ποίειν ἢ παθεῖν πρόκεται άγών” Hist. 7.11.3.

21 Aeschylus, Agamemnon 13; Suppliant Women 189, 242; Pindar, Isthmian Odes 1.160.

22 Zeus was believed to have presided over the Olympian games. See Aeschylus, Suppliant Women 189; Sophocles, Trachiniae 26.

23 Euripides, Orestes 67.

24 Pindar, Isthmian Odes 5.7; Aeschines, Against Ctesiphon 3.180.
Heracles: Deeds and Victories

In the case of Heracles, his most famous deeds (the Δώδεκαθλού) were the most consistent sources of his ἀγώνα. A person need not be a hero in the classic sense to experience trials or sufferings (ἀγωνία), but one could not be a hero without them. By and large, Heracles’ deeds and victories—both for himself and for humankind—earned him the status of “hero” and “champion” as evident in his title ἀρχηγός (for discussion of his deeds and this term see chapter two above).

Christ of the New Testament: Deeds and Victories

In the NT, the tales of Jesus’ extraordinary deeds were used to testify to the faithful community of his legitimacy and authority as God’s Son. He did not kill wild beasts or perform miraculous feats of strength in the manner of many heroes. Mostly he taught, and performed miracles. Jesus’ most heroic deeds occurred in conjunction with his last few days of life as a mortal. In heroic fashion, Jesus endured suffering and death to benefit others. The details of these final deeds will be discussed in the next section on death and suffering. In most of the miracle stories, it was obvious that his performance of miracles directly benefited those around him—which provided further testimony concerning his own beneficent character. At the same time, Jesus’ actions served to confirm his own identity and character, and to reinforce his teachings to the communities who encountered the stories of his life.

Jesus miraculously healed people. He restored sight (Matt 9:27–31), removed leprosy (Mark 1:40–45), and in general cured the physically challenged and fragile (Luke

In the realm of physical healings, the most impressive deed Jesus performed was the resurrection of the dead (Mark 5:21–43; Luke 7:11–17; John 11:1–44). He did not journey to the corners of civilization to wrestle prizes or remedies. Instead, he journeyed as a person among the people he helped.

Jesus also confronted the forces of evil. Sometimes healings occurred in the form of exorcisms (or vice-versa) and those suffering from demon possession experienced extreme adverse physical effects (e.g. blindness in Matt 12:22–32; epileptic-like seizures in Luke 9:37–49). When Jesus healed people and raised them from death, he in essence defeated evil and its effects.

Jesus did not physically combat his enemies in the manner of many heroes. Instead, he verbally confronted them. Other than his debate with the devil during the temptation episode (Matt 4:1–11), the Evangelists do not include any communication between Jesus and the devil. When the demons spoke to Jesus (or about him) in the exorcism episodes, he commanded them to be silent. Such encounters further testified to the essence of Jesus’ sovereignty. Even though he had the ultimate authority as God’s Son, his victories were spiritual in nature. The result of every exorcism was that Jesus

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26 The items listed here are example texts only of various forms of maladies that Jesus miraculously cured. See John 21:25.

27 This is not to say that Jesus was always physically passive. In the episode(s) of Jesus expelling the money changers from the Temple, he shows at physical—albeit uncharacteristic—side to his method of intervention. See Matt 21:12–17; 21:23–27; Mark 11:15–19, 11:27–33; Luke 19:45–48; 20:1–8; John 2:13–16.

28 Jesus’ opponents criticized him and promoted the concept that Jesus could exorcise demons because he was affiliated with Beelzebul (the dark ruler of demons). Jesus responded to the ridiculousness of this notion (Matt 12:22–29).
rescued and liberated the afflicted person from a cursed life. These actions served to confirm his authority as divine, and his character as kind.

Jesus also exercised control over the elements. Jesus was able to manifest matter or alter the physical world. In his “first” miracle, he changed water to wine in Cana (John 2:1–11). In one, possibly two episodes, Jesus manifests food for several thousand people (Matt 14:13–21; 15:32–39; Mark 6:45–52; 8:1–9; Luke 9:10–17; John 6:5–15).

Whether it was miraculous foresight or the manipulation of physical matter, Jesus directed his disciples to find money in a fish’s mouth (Matt 17:24–27) and to reap miraculous catches of fish (Luke 5:1–11; John 21:1–24). There was even an instance where Jesus showed his power to exact judgment or to curse (the unfruitful fig tree; Mark 11:12–14; Matt 21:18–22). Such control over the elements further testified to Jesus’ divine affiliation.

Concerning the miracles where Jesus controls the elements, the most impressive exhibitions of his divine power occurred in the midst of storms at sea. These miracles would have been particularly impressive given the belief that storms and bodies of water were considered to be divine entities themselves. Genesis 1 reflects a common concept in the ancient Near East—that the sea represented the formidable remnant of the pre-creation chaos. \(^{29}\) Numerous texts in the Jewish Scriptures depict the Lord as a mighty warrior in combat with the elements of chaos ( Isa 27:1; Job 7:12; Ps 77:16, etc.). In the

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\(^{29}\) The *Enuma Elish* tells the saga of how the dragon Tiamat is defeated by the god Marduk who splits her being to form heaven and earth. Since the discovery of this Babylonian creation epic, scholars have noted many parallels between the *Enuma Elish* and creation biblical literature. See John B. Gabel, et al., *The Bible As Literature: An Introduction*, 5th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 49–50; and Victor H. Matthews and Don C. Benjamin, *Old Testament Parallels: Laws and Stories from the Ancient Near East*, rev. 2nd ed. (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 9–18.
Hellenistic pantheon, the elements of storms and seas were governed by the foremost of gods, Zeus and his brother Poseidon, respectively. Any person who exercised control over these elements would be considered divine.

There are two such episodes which occur in the Gospels. The first episode occurred early in his ministry where he and his disciples were aboard a boat together (Matt 8:23–27; Mark 4:35–41; Luke 8:22–25). The disciples awoke Jesus and pleaded for his help. Jesus rebuked the disciples for their lack of faith, and “rebuked the winds and the sea and they became perfectly calm” (Matt 8:26b). The response of the disciples to this episode was wonder and amazement at his power to control the elements. The second episode occurred later in his ministry (Matt 14:22–33; Mark 6:45–52; John 6:16–21). This time the disciples were in boat by themselves when a storm came upon them. In the midst of the storm and darkness, Jesus became visible to them “walking on the sea” (περιπατῶν ἐπὶ τὴν θάλασσαν; Matt 14:25b). In Matthew’s account, the disciple Peter temporarily walked on the sea at Jesus’ invitation (Matt 14:28–33). The episodes where Jesus exercises control over the wind and waves elevate his powers to an exclusively God-like level. Furthermore, there exists an undercurrent to the episodes of Jesus’ conflict with evil (chaos) in similar fashion to the Lord’s defeat of chaos in Gen 1.

The disciples (later apostles) of Jesus were likewise given the ability to perform deeds similar to their master. They were, in a sense, Jesus’ progeny and heroes by

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30 There are a number of differences between the accounts of Matthew, Mark and John in the episode of Jesus’ walking on the sea—most of which concern the reaction of the disciples to the events.

association and in their own right. This was true both during Jesus’ ministry (Mark 6:7) and after his ascension.

In the Book of Acts the Apostle Peter—who is the first of Jesus’ disciples to declare Jesus’ identity to the masses—refers to Jesus as “the author (ἀρχηγός) of life” (Acts 3:15) and the exalted “prince (ἀρχηγός) and savior (σωτήρ)” (Acts 5:31). These are the only occurrences of ἀρχηγός outside of Hebrews, yet they similarly appear in contexts discussing Jesus’ death, resurrection and exaltation.

The majority of Acts narrates the actions of Christianity’s significant hero Paul (Acts 14:3; 15:12; 19:11–12). Paul refers to his own performance of miracles which served to demonstrate his authority to speak the gospel message (Rom 15:18–19; 1 Cor 2:4–5; 2 Cor 12:1–12). Paul also adopts the battle-contest language to describe his own “fight” (ἀγωνία) to remain faithful and to promote the Christian faith among those who would resist it (Col 2:1; 1 Thess 2:2; 1 Tim 6:12; 2 Tim 4:7). Particularly in 2 Tim 2:5, Paul speaks of personal discipline as an important element in “competing” (ἀθλητή) as an “athlete” (ἀθλήση). In 1 Cor 9:25, Paul again uses athletic-battle-contest-language to convey the necessity of “exhibiting self-control” (ἐγκρατεύσεως) for those who “contend in the struggle” or “enter the contest” (ἀγωνίζομαι). Paul viewed the Christian quest as a battle, and the Christian life as one of preparing and participating in that battle.

All in all, the NT portrays Christ to be a powerful being who performed miraculous deeds to help people which also served to confirm his identity as divine. Although he did not martially combat the forces of evil, NT writers spoke of their own
lives metaphorically as athletic engagements. Such endeavors were in emulation of their ἀρχιγός who fought, liberated and saved the covenant community.

**Christ of Hebrews: Deeds and Victories**

Concerning Jesus’ deeds and victories as a mortal, the author of Hebrews refers briefly to the miraculous actions of his ministry. In Heb 2:1–4, the author uses a typical divine-power formula (“signs” (σημεῖον); “portents/miracles” (τέρας); “miracles/displays of power” (δύναμις) for the discussion of God’s displays of power of earth (cf. Exod 7:3; Deut 4:34; Dan 6:27). Although the power formula could refer to God’s actions on His own, they could also refer to actions through human agency (e.g. Moses in Deut 34:11–12). Both interpretations would be appropriate in the author’s discussion of Jesus in Heb 1–2, since God himself, heavenly beings, and Christ’s own actions confirm the confession and Jesus’ identification with the Son (1:1–4).

The most significant action that Jesus performs is the sacrifice of himself (i.e. his death on the cross). The details and ramifications of this action will be discussed in the next section on suffering and death. However, it must be stated here that the author of Hebrews portrays Jesus’ particular victory over death to be indelibly linked to his endurance in life (12:1–2).

The author of Hebrews also refers to the deeds and victories of Christ in terms of his resurrection and exaltation. By his resurrection, Jesus achieves victory over death for himself and for others. His own “indestructible life” (ζωὴ ἁκαταλύτου; 7:16) establishes his permanent place at God’s “right hand” (1:3, 13; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2) to serve permanently as the heavenly High Priest (7:16, 23–25). In his victory, all things
(including his enemies) have been (and will be) made subject to him (1:13; 2:7–9; 10:13, 26–31). Jesus’ victory in life is certified by his exaltation.

Heroes Experience Suffering and Death

Classic Heroes: Suffering and Death

Unlike the immortal gods, mortals experienced suffering and death. Likewise, heroes suffer and die as mortals, but the manner of their suffering and death provides a key to their being regarded as heroes. A hero’s glory was joined with their suffering. The hero’s suffering and death had to be remarkable in some way which would lend the hero a place in the afterlife from which to influence the world.32

Achilles’ otherworldly mother attempted to give her son immortality by dipping him in the river Styx (the river one must traverse in entering the underworld). He was immersed with the exception of his heel—a flaw which led to his death. After a lifetime of martial victories, Achilles was faced with the opportunity to participate in the siege of Troy. His mother informed him of his choice—a life of peace that would soon be forgotten, or a glorious death in the Trojan War. He chose death and glory.33

Achilles is but one example of numerous heroic warriors that became known for their dangerous exploits and trials of endurance. The Hellenistic term for “contest” (ἀγών) is a cognate to the term for personal experiences of “anguish” (ἀγωνία) commonly used in heroic tales.34 The battles, contests, and trials carried with them the

33 Homer, Iliad 9.308–429.
hero’s opportunity for glorification. The heroic stories promote the idea that trials are a form of education. Wisdom comes from the testing of endurance.

**Heracles: Suffering and Death**

Heracles’ life was simultaneously blessed by many divine beings (Zeus, Athena) and was constantly under divine threat as well (Hera and her allies). As stated above, his ἀγών and ἀγωνία were often joined experiences. Heracles faced the greatest ἀγών and ἀγωνία of his life in his final act of self-immolation. He victoriously faced death numerous times, but this would be the only time he was certain he would die. This did not mean, however, that he would not remain victorious.

Heracles knew his death was certain from the moment the cursed robe he wore began to burn him, but he did not fear at the prospect of it. As related above in chapter two, his own arrangement of his funeral pyre on Mount Oeta symbolized his will to master the terms of his own death and, in essence, to master death itself. He died knowing his eternal destiny would be to live forever as an apotheosized hero. For Heracles, the result of his suffering and death was essentially perfection as an object of worship, and one of the highest examples of courage in the face of death in Greek mythology (see below).

**Christ of the New Testament: Suffering and Death**

Insofar as the NT writers communicated the humanity of Jesus, they also communicated his experiences of suffering as a mortal. From the moment of his birth he received blessing from God, as well as the threat and promise of destruction from the supernatural forces of evil and their minions (e.g. Matt 2:16–18). While these
experiences were day-to-day realities for Jesus, his greatest heroic endeavor came at the conclusion of his young and victorious life.

In addition to his numerous battles with evil to benefit others, Jesus had to deal with the personal “agony” (ἀγωνία) of contemplating the most challenging contest of his life—his own crucifixion (Luke 22:44; cf. Heb 5:7–10). Jesus’ constancy and endurance during the final days of his mortal life were heroic endeavors. The Gospels attest unanimously in the “passion” narratives that Jesus’ ἀγωνία was the most significant and arduous experience of his life. Furthermore, Jesus’ many prophesies about his suffering and death indicate that he was aware of the forthcoming trial throughout his ministry—perhaps longer (Matt 16: 21–23; Mark 8:31–33; Luke 9:22; John 10:1–18).

All four Gospels relate the accounts of Jesus’ final week (triumphal entry, observance of Passover and initiation of the Lord’s Supper, arrest, trial, torture, crucifixion, and resurrection). The importance of this final week cannot be overstated. The passion narratives constitute between 20 and 30 percent of the Gospels themselves. Thematically and structurally, Jesus’ final week forms the climax of the Gospels and of his life. Therein he would experience the heights of adulation (the triumphal entry into Jerusalem; Matt 21:1–13 and parallels), and the lowest forms of shame and humiliation at the hands of his enemies (Matt 26–27; Mark 14–15; Luke 22–23; John 19).

In addition to the physical trial, Jesus experienced emotional agonies as well.

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35 The “passion” of Christ is derived from the Latin patiō, “to suffer or endure” which would be parallel to the Greek terms (ἀγωνία, ἀγωνία, ἕπομένω) associated with Jesus’ endurance in the NT and Hebrews in particular (Heb 12:1–3).

Those closest to him—his most devout followers—did not adequately support him in his time of need (Matt 26:40). They responded with fear, doubt, denial and betrayal—the most notable being Judas’ betrayal (John 13:27–30; Matt 26:47) and Peter’s denials (Matt 26:69–75; Mark 14:66–72). The hero had to face his greatest trial alone. At the brink of his arrest and trial, the Gospels draw attention to Jesus’ suffering in his prayers at the garden of Gethsemane (Matt 26:36–41; Mark 14:32–42; Luke 22:39–46).

The Gospels convey in graphic detail the horrors of the physical torture he endured. Jesus was beaten and mocked (Matt 26:67; 27:29–30; Mark 14:65; 15:17–19). After being sentenced to death, he was scourged (Matt 27:26; Mark 15:15; Luke 23:25). Finally, he was marched to his place of execution—Golgotha—and crucified there as a criminal.37

In his greatest suffering, Jesus endured being forsaken by God, his father (Matt 27:46; Mark 15:34). In Matt 27:46 and Mark 15:34, Jesus speaks the first lines of Psalm 22:1.38 The significance of this utterance is such that Matthew and Mark retain a transliteration of the Aramaic phrase spoken by Jesus (ηλι ηλι λεμα σαβαχθαινι) as well as the translation “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (θεε μου θεε μου, ἵς θατί με ἐγκατέλιπες;). In Matthew and Mark, these are his final words before crying

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37 The Synoptic Gospels relate the tradition that Simon of Cyrene was forced to carry Jesus’ cross to Golgotha—presumably because Jesus’ physical condition rendered him unable to do so (Matt 27:32; Mark 15:21; Luke 23:26). The Gospel of John does not mention that anyone other than Jesus carried his cross (John 19:17).

38 Some scholars hold that the Marcan account was specifically constructed to quote or allude to verses in Psalm 22 in reverse order as they appear in the psalm. This construction has the effect of beginning the Marcan account with hope and finishing it in despair—which is the reverse of the progression in Psalm 22 where the psalm begins with despair and ends with hope. See Sharyn Echols Dowd, Reading Mark: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Second Gospel (Macon, Georgia: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2001), 160.
out and dying (Matt 27:50; Mark 15:37). They indicate the degree of agony that Jesus experienced in his last few moments.

The depictions and last words of Jesus differ in the Gospels of Luke and John. Luke 23:46 has Jesus uttering a different Psalm as his last words, “Father, ‘into your hands I commit my spirit’” (πάτερ, έις χειράς σου παρατίθεμαι το πνεύμα μου; Psalm 31:5). In the gospel of John 19:30, Jesus’ final words are “It is finished” (τετέλεσται from τελέω) which would have applied to his mission on earth as well as his life. The Lucan and Johannine endings show the final moment of Jesus’ life to be more hopeful than the Matthean and Markan endings show. But all of the Gospels conclude with declarations about the resurrected Jesus (Mark 16 original ending) or declarations by the resurrected Jesus (Matthew, Luke, John).

Just as the crucifixion and resurrection form the climax of the Gospels, so do they anchor the atonement Christology in the Pauline epistles. For example, in nearly every Pauline epistle, reference is made to Christ’s atonement, blood, and/or his propitiatory sacrifice. Thusly, the death of Jesus becomes the climax to his own life, and the most significant act in the life of everyone else in the Christian community.

**Christ of Hebrews: Suffering and Death**

The author of Hebrews gives considerable attention to the subject of Jesus’ suffering and death. These two related issues form the crux of the author’s argument concerning the appropriateness of Christ’s priesthood. In Heb 2, the author links Jesus’ suffering and death with his role as a “hero” (ἀρχιγιγος; 2:10). He was “made perfect

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through sufferings” (διὰ παθημάτων τελειόσα) and through this perfection is qualified to save humanity from the powers of evil. His sufferings were not the result of fate or unfortunate circumstances that befell him. His life and sufferings were intended to perfect him or complete him in like manner to his final utterance on the cross in John 19:30 (cf. τελέω). His sufferings and death were the driving reason for his coming to earth in the first place to save humanity.

At the conclusion of Heb 2, the author introduces the topic of Jesus’ role as high priest. The author identifies Jesus’ experience of being human as the qualifier for this role—including “being tempted” (πειράζω), “suffering” (πάσχω) and “death” (θάνατος) (2:14–18). The ultimate suffering which Jesus experiences is the “suffering (πάθημα) of death” (2:9). In this seeming insurmountable defeat of the mortal man, the hero Jesus emerges as the victor of an epic battle (2:14–15). Jesus defeats death and liberates humanity from this mortal foe.

The hero Jesus departs his mortal life bringing salvation to the community. He experienced being forsaken by God and spoke Psalm 22:1 on the cross (cf. Matt 27:46; Mark 15:34). By so doing this, he made it possible for humanity to have the same level of familial relationship with God (Psalm 22:22 in Heb 2:12). His innocent suffering and death marked him as a martyr and hero. These themes are built into his construction of a priestly portrayal of Christ.

The author resumes the theme of Jesus’ priesthood in 4:14–5:10 where he again lists such elements as Jesus’ subjection to the trials of temptation and “weakness” (ἀσθένεια; 4:15; 5:2). Hebrews 5:7–10 encapsulates Jesus’ accomplishment of
successfully enduring the sufferings, as well as the benefit his accomplishment gives to the covenant community:

Who in the days of his mortal life (σώφρος)—having offered up entreaties and supplications with strong outcries and tears to Him who was able to save him from death, and having been heard because of his reverent piety (even though he was a Son)—he learned obedience (ὑπάκοη) from the things which he suffered (πάσχω), and—having been perfected (τελειώσω)—became the source (ἀρτίος) of eternal salvation to all those who obey him (having been designated by God as high priest according to the order of Melchizedek). (Heb 5:7–10)

The core of Hebrews discusses the sacrificial and priestly system under Christ (Heb 7:1–10:25). As mentioned previously in this chapter, wherever Jesus’ sacrifice of blood and body is discussed, his death is implied. Furthermore, the manner of Jesus’ death by crucifixion constituted the highest conceivable degree of a suffering and shameful death. The severity of Jesus’ suffering and death was essential for his death to be considered once-and-for-all propitiatory for human sin (Heb 9:28).

The manner in which Jesus dies is also addressed by author of Hebrews. In two passages, the author explicitly refers to the crucifixion. In Heb 6:4–6, the author states that those who have “deviated” or “fallen away” (παραπτώματα) from the confession are lost, otherwise “they are crucifying (ἀνασταρίζω) the Son of God again themselves and are exposing him to public disgrace” (παραπτωματισμός) (6:6b). The severity of the sin of deviation is placed in the context of the severity of Christ’s crucifixion.

The second explicit mention of the cross occurs in Heb 12: 2 where the author exhorts the audience to “endure” (ὑπομένω) as Jesus “endured” the cross. It is in Hebrews 12 where the sufferings of Christ and the endurance of the audience is brought
together. Jesus’ endurance of sufferings is upheld as the virtuous standard to which the audience is to aspire (see below for the discussion on the hero’s virtuous example).

The author casts Jesus’ endurance (victory) using athletic-battle imagery and heroic metaphors. In the author’s previous attention to the audience’s former example of faithfulness, he refers to their own “endurance” of their “great conflict/combat of sufferings” (πολλήν ἀθλησίν ὑπεμείνατε παθημάτων; 10:32). These terms and themes appear in Heb 12 when the exhortation is resumed. He then introduces the hero list of Hebrews 11 which climaxes in the exhortation to emulate the greatest contestant, athlete, and hero—Jesus himself (12:1–3).

In Hebrews 12 the author combines all of the elements of Jesus role as “hero” (ἀρχηγός) and “perfector” (τελειωτής) in the context of athletic-battle imagery. Jesus exemplifies the epitome of the hero who suffered, endured, and achieved perfection as a result. Jesus’ victory is certified by his declaration of Jesus’ exaltation.

The author of Hebrews discusses the suffering and death of the hero Jesus for a number of reasons. The author he refers to these themes as a testament to the legitimacy, endurance and sacrifice of the hero. Also, the author mentions them to instill courage and fortitude in the audience that they may share his sufferings and likewise share his glory.

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Heroes Become Objects of Worship

**Classic Heroes: Object of Worship**

In many instances, heroes became objects of veneration and even worship as a result of their apotheosis (or otherwise exceptional status in the afterlife). Worship or ritual respect of the departed has been a part of many cultures. In the case of Hellenistic heroes, the rituals to honor, placate or petition were often similar to rituals designed for ancestor worship. However, in many cases the forms of worship showed a greater level of respect—even so far at times to reflect those given to the gods.

The subject of Hellenistic views of the afterlife is too extensive of a subject to address in depth at this point. Legendary heroes and heroines were often granted special entry into blessed realms where they could enjoy eternity free of care and suffering.\(^41\) Access to heroes was most often found in proximity to their earthly remains. Hero-cults situated their rituals of appeasement and supplication around real or perceived tombs (*heroon*) which were sometimes set on city gates as a means of protection against outside evils (e.g. the tomb of Iolaus in Thebes at the city gate).\(^42\) Reputed “tombs” were also found in city centers (*ἀγορά*) dedicated to divine matrons or patrons.\(^43\)

As stated previously in chapter 2, sometimes forms of hero worship were conflated with worship of the deities of Olympus. In particular, heroes such as Heracles

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\(^{41}\) The “Islands of the Blessed” was such a realm where heroes particularly blessed by Zeus dwelt. See Hesiod, *Works and Days* 156ff; Pindar, *Olympian Odes* 2.57ff.


and Asclepius were given such honors. In the case of Asclepius, he was given the status of a god because of his role in bringing life-saving and life-restoring healing to humanity. The greater the regard for the hero, the more likely the hero would receive divine-status in the minds of their followers.

**Heracles: Object of Worship**

Through his suffering and death, Heracles achieved perfection and divine status. His mortal remains were destroyed in his self-immolation, but his soul was carried to Mount Olympus by his father Zeus. His constellation was assigned a place in the sky, and his image a place in the Greek pantheon.

The achievement of his godhead was not an easy task. In *Hercules furens*, Heracles’ first wife, Megara, exclaims, “There is no easy way to the stars from the earth.” But his journey “to the stars” (i.e. heaven) became commonly known as his final destiny. In *Hercules Oetaeus*, Heracles’ mother announces that she would “proclaim the new god added to their temples” (Heracles) at Thebes. Furthermore, she and the chorus not only convey their belief in the hero’s apotheosis, but plead with the “new god” to do greater work than his father, and be with those on the earth in their hour of need.

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44 Pindar, *Odes*, 3.28 refers to Heracles as “hero-god.”


46 “Non est ad astra mollis e terris via.” *Hercules furens* 437.


48 *Hercules Oetaeus*, 1979-96.
Christ of the New Testament: Object of Worship

Jesus Christ was worshipped by the NT community. The NT’s theology reasserted that the Lord alone was worthy of worship (Matt 4:10; Acts 17:22–31; cf. Deut 5:6–10; 6:4–6; Exod 20:2–6), and equated Jesus Christ with the Lord (1 Cor 8:4–6). In the Second Temple period there is evidence of increased interest in the various levels or increments of heavenly forces. The divisions and hierarchy of angels and demons could at times be very elaborate. The NT reflected such awareness by specifically identifying various angels like Gabriel (Luke 1:19, 26) or Michael (Jude 1:9; Rev 12:7) and even demons at times such as Legion (Mark 5:9; Luke 8:30) and Beelzebul (Matt 12:24; Mark 3:22). All the while, the NT authors reinforced the teachings of the Torah and the teaching of Jesus (Luke 4:8; John 4:24) that it is only appropriate to worship God alone. New Testament authors included God’s Son as part of God and hence worthy of worship (John 1; 1 John 1).

The Gospels portrayed Jesus as God’s Son—a divine being as evidenced not only by his miraculous powers but also by divine declaration (Luke 9:35). Although many heroes and heavenly agents of God could perform signs and wonders, only Jesus was portrayed as being worthy of worship. As a mortal, he received worship—particularly when he was recognized as the Messiah (Matt 2:2, 8, 11; 14:33; John 9:38). As a resurrected being, he likewise received worship (Matt 28:9, 17; Luke 24:52). Jesus himself both directed worship towards God, and yet received that which was given to him

as appropriate. He “ascended” (ἀναβαίνω) to God as he promised (Mark 16:19; Luke 22:69; John 20:17; Acts 1:2, 9–11; 2:34. The disciples testified to the “exalted” (ὑψώ) Christ (Acts 2:33; 5:31).

As discussed above concerning Jesus’ divine origins, Paul provides some of the highest examples of the divine-exalted Christ in the NT.50 Philippians 2:6–11 unquestionably conveys that the Son has always been divine, and that all of creation will recognize the status of the “ascended” and “exalted” Jesus (Eph 4:8–10). Through Christ’s humility and willing sacrifice on the cross, he was declared worthy of worship and exaltation by God (Phil 2:9).

**Christ of Hebrews: Object of Worship**

In much the same manner as Pauline and Johannine depictions, the author of Hebrews portrays Christ as “the exact expression of the substance [of God]” (χαρακτήρ τῆς ὑποστάσεως; 1:3). In Hebrews, Jesus is portrayed as a mortal, a hero and as a supremely divine being. God directs his angels to “worship” (προσκυνέω) the Son (1:6). If God’s angels are to worship His Son, certainly humanity which is “lower than the angels” (2:7) must also worship him.

As God’s Son, he would be considered to be in some respects to be other than God (“heir” in 1:2; “right hand” in 1:3; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2). And yet of all the heavenly beings over which God reigns, the Son is superior (1:4–14). As discussed above concerning Jesus’ divinity, these characteristics are depicted as intrinsic to Jesus’ nature.

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50 See Hurtado for summaries and explanations of early forms of Christ worship.
Still, the NT speaks of Christ’s exaltation as a post-incarnation/post-resurrection event in addition to his divine nature.

In Heb 2:9, the author quotes and interprets Psalm 8 in such a way as to portray Jesus as the Son of Man now “crowned with glory and honor” (δόξας καὶ τιμὴν ἐστεφανωμένον; 2:9). Furthermore he speaks of Jesus’ “perfection” and “leading” others to “glory” (2:10; 5:9). In Hebrews, the glorification of Christ is portrayed as an event which occurred upon his successful completion of the will of God—and also as part of his successful completion. His exaltation was as much a part of his destiny as his humanity and suffering. Even if Jesus’ journey could be considered a return to his homeland (heaven), he does not return strictly as “the Word” now without flesh. Rather, he returns as a unique being who is a physically resurrected and glorified Christ and—eschatologically speaking—the firstborn among many children of God.

The author speaks of Jesus’ perfection and glorification as necessary for the performance of his duties as high-priest. Having already met the condition of being a human (Heb 2), he had to be perfect, permanent and exalted to serve as the heavenly high-priest (Heb 4:14; 7:3, 23–28; 9:24). Jesus met all of these conditions.

Jesus is worthy of worship by right of his intrinsically divine nature and as the Son so perfected and glorified by God. Yet the author of Hebrews does not command humanity to worship Christ. Rather, Christ—through his qualities and actions on behalf of humanity—makes it possible for humanity to worship God in the proper heavenly manner (Heb 9:1, 6, 9; 10:2). Humanity is perpetually dependent upon Christ for the means of worshipping God.
Heroes Are Considered Beneficent Forces of Post-Mortem Power

Classic Heroes: Beneficent Force

The reason that heroes were petitioned in their afterlives was because they were considered to be able to influence events in the current world of their supplicants. The supplication was more than an attempt at respect for the hero. It was truly believed that the heroes—when properly petitioned—would act to benefit the supplicant and, in effect, benefit themselves by serving their own interests.

The heroes were credited with power from beyond the grave. Their spirits resided in the earth to bless or punish mortals. Hence, the worship of the heroes was often practiced in underground places near their tombs (a chthonic form of worship). For the most part, heroes were believed to dwell in their tombs. This did not strictly apply to the spirits of all heroes—some of whom were believed to have transcended or been spared from the unpleasant portions of the underworld. In fact, the greater of the heroes were believed to have existed in places of ease and comfort—such as the Islands of the Blessed.

Heracles’ mother Alcmena was afforded a blessed afterlife by Zeus who arranged for her body to be taken to the Islands of the Blessed—and thus her “heroa” (ἥρωις) were established throughout central Greece. The more grand the hero (or heroine) the greater their ability to influence the world. Aeschylus’ play *The Choephori* begins at the tomb of

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53 Alcmena’s tombs were reported to be: at Magara (Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 1.41.1), Haliartus (Plutarch, *Moralia* 577e) and Thebes (Antoninus Liberalis, *Metamorphōseōn synagōge* 33).
the hero Agamemnon where his son Orestes and later his sister Electra offer up prayers to Agamemnon via the messenger god Hermes. Electra asks Agamemnon to be “the channel of blessings up from thy grave to us, aided by the gods, by Earth, and by victorious Justice.”

Heroes were venerated as beneficent powers who often carried their interests in helping others into the afterlife. The hero Theseus was credited with driving out bandits, civilizing the Attic countryside, and establishing a centralized political government in Athens. A supernatural healer such as Asclepius was revered as “healing hero” (睐φως ἵατρός) and “benefactor” (ἐὔρηγήτης). In much the same way as gods, many heroes were considered founders and protectors of settlements and cities. Their tombs (whether actual or honorary) are found in city centers and at city gates to ward off evils.

**Heracles: Beneficent Force**

As detailed in chapter two, Heracles performed numerous deeds which benefited humankind. Even as he slew dangerous beasts, he freed humanity from the oppression of the danger the creature posed to them. Heracles’ strength and strategy overcame such formidable foes as Death and even enemy gods (Hera and Hades). He became the model hero for divine *philanthropia* in aiding humanity and providing hope from the fear of such enemies.

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Since Heracles achieved apotheosis and no earthly tomb of Heracles was known to exist, many lands and cities could designate themselves as centers of worship for the hero. His status as the greatest of warriors and athletes led those who participated in battles and battle-games (the Olympics) to pray to him for aid in their victories. As Heracles’ legends developed and were adopted by philosophers, his philanthropic nature was used as a center for their discussions on virtue.

**Christ of the New Testament: Beneficent Force**

The NT authors portrayed Jesus as one could perform extraordinary feats that served to benefit those who were with him. He performed miracles, healings, exorcisms, and exercised power over the elements. However, Jesus’ death and resurrection marked an important point of transition whereby the mortal Jesus became an immortal being whose displays of power would likewise transition in scope. As the exalted Jesus, he would continue to act on behalf of his people as defender and mediator for his church.

The Gospels and the Book of Acts contain numerous accounts of Jesus’ post-mortem/resurrection interactions with people after his resurrection. In each of these interactions there were displays of power. Some of the displays were similar to those he performed while living (e.g. the post-resurrection miraculous catch of fish in John 21:1–14 mimics the miracle of Luke 5:1–11 set in the early days of Jesus’ ministry). However, some elements of the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus display abilities which were previously not shown (e.g. a sometimes morphed appearance (Mark 16:12; Luke 24:16; John 20:15; 21:1); and the ability to materialize/de-materialize his physical form (Luke
Jesus’ teachings and encouragements continued to be the motivations at the center of these displays of power. He instructed the disciples that the events of his crucifixion and resurrection were the markers of a transition in their own lives and that he would be leaving them soon that they may continue his good work (Matt 28:18–20).

In addition to episodes of Jesus’ post-resurrection powers, the Book of Acts testifies concerning his post-ascension/post-exaltation powers. After the occasion of his ascension (Mark 16:19; Acts 1:9), the only direct interaction documented in the NT between the resurrected Christ and people occurs in the episodes of Stephen’s martyrdom (Acts 7:56), Saul’s/Paul’s conversion episodes (Acts 9:–19; 22:6–16; 26:12–18) and Jesus’ warnings/encouragements to Paul (Acts 22:17–21; 23:11).57

Jesus also appeared to comfort his followers after his ascension. The most detailed physical description of the ascended and exalted Christ comes from the earliest interaction account, where Stephen proclaimed “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing (ἐσθήμη) at the right hand (δεκα/j) of God” (Acts 7:56).58 Ironically, Saul was likely there to hear Stephen’s proclamation and would later himself have an encounter with the exalted Jesus.

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56 It should be noted that in Acts 8:39 Philip, a mortal, was “snatched away” (ἀρπάζω) by “the Spirit of the Lord.” Although the meaning is unclear, this seems to be some sort of literal and physical occurrence—unique to the NT.

57 Acts 23:11 is the closest we see to a “physical” description of the Lord appearing on the earth again, where it says “the Lord stood (ἐσθήμη) near Paul.” It would also fit the context that the “voice” (φωνή Acts 10:13, 15) that spoke to Peter in his vision of the heavenly meal would correspond to the ascended Christ as well, but the voice never identifies itself as it does to Paul in Acts 9:4–5.

58 Paul likely heard Stephen say this and recalls Stephen’s martyrdom when speaking to the Lord in his vision in Acts 22:17–21.
In the conversion episodes, both Saul and Ananias were said to have experienced a “vision” (Acts 9:10–11). The text states that Saul was left temporarily blinded as a result of the bright light—which may constitute a form of divine intervention. Except for Paul’s seeing a “light from heaven” (9:3), the episodes only speak of their having an audible conversation with Jesus (now “the Lord,” Acts 9:5, 10–11, 13, 17). Although the experience was confrontational, Paul certainly benefited from the interaction. Jesus also appeared to Paul who was on a missionary journey. In his warning “trance,” Paul says that he “saw the Lord speaking” (Acts 22:18) but did not describe him. Jesus (the Lord) directed Paul to leave his location before his enemies could capture him.

For the Christian faith, Jesus was the greatest benefactor and foundational character ever. The interactions between the exalted Jesus and the mortals are spiritual or heavenly in nature—not physical. Jesus does not physically intervene as he did in life, or even as he did in his post-resurrection pre-ascension interactions. Instead he intervenes/mediates between humanity and God (1 Tim 2:5–6). Through his mediations as heavenly high-priest, the ascended-exalted Jesus exerted more influence in the world than when he was walking the earth as a mortal.

**Christ of Hebrews: Beneficent Force**

The significance and power of the reigning Christ is a recurrent role in Hebrews. The author of Hebrews recognizes that the audience once held to the “confession” (ὑμολογία; 3:1; 4:14; 10:23)—so much so that they have suffered for their faith (Heb 10:32–39). However, the author’s consistent exhortations to hold true to the confession

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59 Those travelling with Saul also “heard the sound but did not see anyone” (Acts 9:7) which neither confirms nor denies that Paul “saw” the Lord Jesus during this episode.
and to develop their faith beyond the fundamentals (ἀρχή...λόγος; 6:1) seem to suggest that the audience’s faith in the power of their hero was waning. In response to this potential disloyalty to Christ, the author reiterates Jesus’ place in the universe—and the lives of the audience—as a relevant and beneficent hero.

In the exordium (1:1–4) the author begins the epistle by summarizing the Son’s roles as the most significant and powerful imaginable. He is God’s spokesman, heir, and partner in creation. Furthermore, his role sustains its relevancy as co-creator by his continuing to “uphold all things (φέρων τε τὰ πάντα; 1:3). The Son’s action which resulted in “the purification of sins” (καθαρισμὸν τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν)—namely his sacrificial death—was followed by his being seated at God’s right hand. On these bases alone, Jesus’ post-mortem power and relevancy can be established—to say nothing of his role as mediator (see below). But the author does not only seek to communicate that Jesus is powerful, but also that he continues to serve the same humanity that he came to save.

Jesus is the foundation of God’s covenant community. Just as he was the founder/co-founder of creation itself (Heb 1), so did he come to lead humanity into fellowship with God (2:10–13) and to communicate the word of God to his people (1:1–4). He role as hero (ἀρχηγός) encompasses his qualities as leader, source, pioneer and forerunner on behalf of the faithful community (2:10; 5:9; 6:20; 12:2).

Jesus initiated and enacted the new covenant under God as a “sponsor” or “guarantee” (ἐγγυός) of the covenant (7:22). As the heavenly high priest and sacrificial offering, Jesus provides continual benefit to the covenant community by interceding to
God on their behalf (7:25). The author of Hebrews centers his Christology on Christ the mediator of the new and better covenant (7:22; 8:6) which benefits those in keeping with the covenant by perfecting them as well (7:1–10:39).

Heroes Are Upheld for Their Virtuous Example

**Classic Heroes: Virtuous Example**

Beginning with Plato, qualities of philosophic interest began to be assigned the designation of “virtue, moral excellence, perfection” (ἀρετή). Aristotelean usage developed a sense a “contemplative” ἀρετή to achieve ἐυδαιμονία “happiness.” 60 Any human characteristic (pride, courage, etc.) had to be properly balanced in the middle. For example, too little courage would make one a coward and too much courage would make one act in rashness. 61 Over time, philosophers began to focus on the internal characteristics of the heroes—in particular their qualities that exemplified ἀρετή and φιλανθρωπία. The external, and eventually the internal elements of ἀρετή began to be taught to children in an educational setting.

The great heroes became exemplars of virtue. The Homeric usage of ἀρετή applied particularly to revered heroes for their martial exploits and strategic prowess. In the realm of combat, ἀρετή referred to the “excellence” of the hero’s impressive accomplishments or the hero’s “mettle” (e.g. Hector and Achilles). 62 Although Odysseus

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61 See Aristotle’s “Doctrine of the Mean” in *Nichomachean Ethics*.

was an epic warrior, he showed an array of excellent qualities that included courage and wisdom.\textsuperscript{63}

**Heracles: Virtuous Example**

The exemplary ἀρετή of Heracles was applied generously by philosophers to their own perspectives of the virtuous life. David Aune draws upon a variety of philosophic texts where the figure of Heracles is utilized.\textsuperscript{64} Aune states that Heracles’ was viewed by some philosophers to be the best example of the Stoic-Cynic life.\textsuperscript{65} Drawing from Aune’s collection of authors (including Seneca, Dio Chrysostom, Xenophon and Diogenes Laertius), the following main philosophic points made by the authors can be used to show how Heracles was viewed by the philosophic community.

First, Heracles gave an example of how one could be liberated from the “constraints of physical life.”\textsuperscript{66} Heracles was seen to have mastered the life of virtue, including how to endure the suffering that often accompanied such a life. The greatest limitation and suffering for mortals was considered to be death and the fear of death. As shown in chapter two, Heracles was victorious over death as a personified being and as a concept that could be feared.

Harold Attridge argues that the author of *Hercules Oetaeus* uses the stories of Heracles’ deeds and victories in the underworld as a means of promoting the idea that

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{63} Homer, *Iliad* 2.174; *Odyssey* 2.212; 22.210.
\item \textsuperscript{64} Aune, “Heracles,” 8–10.
\item \textsuperscript{65} Aune cites Julian *Oration* 6.187, as making this point directly. See Aune, “Heracles,” 8.
\item \textsuperscript{66} See Aune, 8-9 which cites Dio Chrysostom *Oration* 8; Philo’s *That Every Good Person is Free* 18.120; and Pseudo-Diogenes *Epistle* 10.1; 26).
\end{itemize}
mortals could live free from the fear of death. In essence, the author of Hercules Oetaeus viewed living in fear of death as a living hell. Thus, Heracles’ feat of returning from Tartarus conquers fear of the underworld—something which can also be applied to all mortal lives. “He has crossed the streams of Tartarus, subdued the gods of the underworld, and has returned. And now no fear remains; naught lies beyond the underworld.” Attridge also refers to Heracles’ self-sacrifice in Hercules Oetaeus as being consistent with the theme of confrontation with death (acceptance of one’s death) as a reality to be faced within this life. The courage and perspective drawn from Heracles’ example might serve to liberate mortals from the fear of death.

The second main point in which the philosophic community upheld Heracles as exemplary was in the area of philantropia (φιλανθρωπία). Heracles was shown to be the “savior” model of courage and victory who embodied philantropia in the world. Earliest depictions of Heracles characterize him as a powerful being carrying out divine mandates and seeking his own glory along the way. Over time, his descriptions became more introspective, and he helped people of his own volition. Hercules was often


68 “transvectus vada Tartari pacatis reedit inferis; iam nullus superest timor; nil ultra iacet inferos.” Hercules furens 889-92.


70 Kevin B. McCruden, Solidarity Perfected: Beneficent Christology in the Epistle to the Hebrews (BZNW 159; New York: W. de Gruyter GmbH, 2008), 55.

71 See Aune, “Heracles,” 9-10 which cites Seneca Hercules Oetaeus 1330; Julian Oration 7.220; and Isocrates Oration 5.109–15.

referred to as the model for emperors or kings who sought to rule justly (or at least to be perceived as doing so).

The third and final major point in which philosophers upheld Heracles to be exemplary was in the area of personal discipline. Heracles was a symbol of the rewards for adherence to moral training. By his self-sacrifice (figurative and literal), Heracles embodied the present and future rewards for living the Cynic-Stoic lifestyle. The prime narrative example of this appears in the commonly called “Choice of Heracles” from Prodicus via Xenophon’s Memorabilia (see chapter two). Heracles was used as the prime example for willingly enduring the life of virtue and for looking beyond his own self-interests.

Christ of the New Testament: Virtuous Example

The NT portrays Jesus as the ultimate example of all Judeo-Christian virtues including faith, endurance, courage and love. He commanded and embodied divine “perfection” (τελειός; Matt 5:48) which is the utmost virtue of the ethical and religious areas of life. The way in which the NT writers revered his behavior implied that he was upheld as the prime example for living a perfect life of faith and obedience to God.

Expressing the sinlessness of Jesus was crucial to the Christian understanding of his life and sacrifice. Only the Gospel of John records an instance where Jesus refers to his own guiltlessness (John 8:46). Elsewhere, the descriptions of his life showed him to possess the characteristic. He endured temptation from the devil himself without sin (Matt 4:1–11). In humility, Jesus washed the feet of his disciples and pointed to his

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73 See Aune, “Heracles,” 10 which cites Diogenes Laertius book 6; Dio Chrysostom’s Oration 1 and 8; and “The Choice of Heracles” as told in Xenophon Memorabilia 2.1.21–33).
behavior as an “example” (ὑπόδειγμα) for them (John 13:14–15). Even though he was accused of wrongdoing, the Gospels reiterate that the accusations which led to his trial and crucifixion were based on gross misunderstandings or outright malice (Luke 23:2).

Insofar as Jesus was considered God’s divine Son, the Gospel writers (in particular John) attributed the same level of perfection to him as to God (John 1:14). Jesus taught that to achieve perfection, people must be benevolent (Matt 19:21) and “love” (ἀγάπη; Matt 5:44; 22:37–40; John 13:34–35)—the very essence of philanthropy (φιλανθρωπία). Jesus could teach such virtues because he exemplified them.

The NT writers reflected upon virtue, beneficence and philanthropia. God’s virtue and excellence are mentioned (ἀρετὴ in 1 Pet 2:9; ἀρετὴ in 2 Pet 1:3). Pauline and Petrine writings speak of ἀρετὴ as the highest of moral thoughts and actions to which people should aspire to achieve (Phil 4:8; 2 Pet 1:5 (2x)).

The NT writers did not explicitly state that Jesus exemplified ἀρετὴ or φιλανθρωπία in those terms. Rather, Jesus’ very being exemplified God’s φιλανθρωπία for humankind (Titus 3:4). The writers referred to Jesus as the sinless, perfect, loving, victorious Son of God who loved God and humankind as proven by his life, death, and continuing efforts on humanity’s behalf. There was no greater person to emulate than Jesus Christ. To aspire to his level of perfection, one had to emulate Christ in everything—notably in love (Col 3:14; 1 John 2:5).

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Christ of Hebrews: Virtuous Example

The author of Hebrews attributes the highest of virtuous qualities to the hero Jesus. He is portrayed as sinless, perfect, and the prime example of faith. The author attributes Jesus’ degree of excellence in every realm as related to his divine beneficence for humankind. Finally, the culmination of the author’s exhortations to the audience climaxes in his directive to emulate the hero of faith in their own lives (Heb 12:1–3).

Jesus is portrayed as “without sin” (χωρίς άμαρτίας; 4:15). This is an essential ritual element to his role as high-priest and atoning sacrifice. His primary purpose in coming to the world was to atone for the sin of humankind (1:3; 2:17; 5:3; 9:26; 10:12; 13:11). His sinlessness qualified him above all others to serve as high priest on behalf of humanity (7:26–28). In addition to his role as high-priest, being “without sin” was a necessary qualification in order for him to serve as the sacrificial offering for humankind (7:27; 8:11–9:18).

In addition to his “sinlessness”—a necessary quality to serve as priest and sacrifice—Jesus is portrayed as having been “perfected” in this life by means of his endurance and suffering. He was appointed for suffering as part of his being a suitable “hero/source of eternal salvation” (τὸν ἀρχηγὸν τῆς σωτηρίας) for his people (2:10; 5:9). The perfection of Christ also carries ritualistic connotations as well—for Jesus’ sacrificial body is the “perfect tabernacle” (τελειοτέρον σκηνῆς) through whom people may also receive perfection (9:9, 11; 10:1, 14; 12:23). The goal for believers in receiving the perfection Christ offers would be to be able to approach God (10:19–22).
The author of Hebrews builds the final section of the epistle to a climax by focusing on the virtue of faithfulness (10:22–12:2). Prior to making the subject of faith central to his argument, the author comments on the faithfulness Christ (2:17; 3:6) and the importance of faith for the believers (4:2; 6:1, 12). Beginning in 10:19, the author speaks of faith as the suitable response to God’s provision of Christ. After describing the virtue of faith as the means to receive approval from God, the author lists examples of people who have exemplified faith (11:1–38). The author lauds the efforts of many heroes of the Jewish Scriptures and beyond who directed their lives according to their belief in the promises of God. Yet with all of their sacrifices, their faith was not complete without Christ (11:39–40).

In Heb 12:1–2, Jesus is recognized as “the hero and perfector of our faith” (τὴν πίστεως ἡρῴδην καὶ τελειωτὴν). He was the greatest example of faith, obedience, reverence and submission to God (5:7–8). His “endurance” is to be the inspiration and focal point for any believer who seeks to succeed in the manner of this hero (12:3). Then the author brings the discussion back to the audience, and explains that their endurance of suffering is a mark of their close relationship with God. If the greatest hero and closest person ever to live had to endure suffering, so would any who desired such a relationship with God (12:4–13).

All of the sacrificial and perfect attributes of Jesus contribute to his bestowing divine beneficence on humankind. He overcame death that all might also overcome it.

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(2:14–15). His name “surpassed” (διάφορος) any angel’s name (1:4), and any faithful person may join his family. Jesus’ ministry of benefaction (λειτουργία)\(^{76}\) has “surpassed” that of any other form of service (8:6). The audience is invited to participate in every virtue that Jesus exemplified, and to draw near to God because of the gifts Jesus has bestowed (10:19–25).

**Conclusion**

Jesus Christ as portrayed in the epistle to the Hebrews conforms in many ways to the heroic paradigm derived from classic Hellenistic heroes. The author of Hebrews’ portrayal of Jesus would have resonated very closely with his audience’s knowledge of Hellenistic heroes. The many shared elements between Heracles and Jesus in Hebrews would have been recognized by the audience—in particular Heracles’ defeat of death and philanthropia. However, the author of Hebrews does not confine his portrayal of Jesus strictly to a Hellenistic hero, but to a Christian hero.

\(^{76}\) The term λειτουργία referred to priestly ministry and also to acts of beneficence for the needy.
CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION: THE HEROIC PORTRAIT OF CHRIST IN HEBREWS

Introduction

In the preceding chapter, I explored how the author of Hebrews portrayed Christ using characteristics of classic Hellenistic heroes. In this chapter, I will show how the author of Hebrews portrays Christ as a unique Christian hero. First, I will show how the author distinguishes his heroic portrait of Christ from the portrayals of classic heroes. Next, I will discuss how the author reveals this distinctive yet familiar image of Christ the hero in Heb 2 and 11–12, as well as the relationship between these passages. I will then discuss the significance of Jesus’ portrayal as a Christian hero. Finally, I will suggest various areas for future study.

Where the Author of Hebrews Diverges from the Classic Heroic Portrait

While there are parallels between Christ and classical Hellenistic heroes (in particular Heracles), there are also significant differences that cannot be forgotten or underestimated. I have noted above several points at which the Christology of the NT diverges from the polytheistic notions of ancient Greek religion (e.g. the manner of divine birth). In this section I will draw together the major differences between the Hellenistic hero paradigm and the author of Hebrews’ portrayal of Christ.

First, Hebrews 1:2–3 expresses Jesus’ pre-existence and divine nature in language similar to John 1 and 1 John 1. Jesus is often referred to as “firstborn” (1:5–14; 12:23) and thus occupies a unique place in the author’s perspective of the universe. He co-
created the world and had been present at least since that time (9:26). Heroes initially came into being as humans regardless of their eternal destinies. Jesus—in essence—existed in perpetuity and played a central role in creation (13:8).

Second, the author reinforces the concept that the incarnation of God’s Son served a purpose. In Heb 1–2, the author establishes the divine sonship of Jesus as well as his humanity. His interpretation of Psalm 8 is that the incarnation of Jesus was a purposeful subjection (as in Phil 2). Even if a hero’s birth was foretold (as was the case with some heroes—but not Heracles), none of the births were purposeful incarnations or intentional subjections of divine beings. Certainly none were like Jesus whose purpose in being born was to act as a sacrifice.

Third, Jesus embodied beneficence and philanthropia to the world. Unlike Heracles and other heroes, the nature of his beneficence was always to fulfill God’s will and sacrifice himself (Heb 7). Hellenistic heroes often sought to accomplish their feats in pursuit of their own glory. Regardless of the glory he received, his victories and deeds were motivated by his God-given purpose to serve humanity (Heb 2; 12:1–3).

Fourth, the means by which Jesus served humanity was to suffer and die on their behalf. Jesus came to offer himself as a sacrifice for the sins of humanity. Even though heroes served humanity, no Hellenistic hero-cult promoted the beneficence of a hero’s death on the same level as that of Christians regarding Christ’s death. Jesus was innocent and never self-seeking, and yet he died for sin of humankind. This was the purpose behind his incarnation.
Fifth, the author of Hebrews supported the concept of Christ’s resurrection. The exalted status of Christ could, to a degree, parallel the apotheosis of heroes. However, the concept of resurrection—especially physical resurrection—would not apply to Hellenistic heroes. The permanence of Jesus’ post-death existence is reiterated in the epistle (2:9; 5:6; 7:16, 23–25). Specific to the Christian believer was the physical resurrection of Jesus (6:2; 13:20).

Six, Jesus’ method of intercession is connected in many ways to the Jewish priestly system. The author of Hebrews shows Jesus’ priesthood and sacrifice to be superior to the limited and inadequate Levitical priesthood and rituals. The sacrifice of himself “once and for all” (7:27) transcended all other sacrifices and rituals. Still, the basis for the author’s discussion of Christ’s intercession contains imagery and metaphors which would only be considered appropriate within the context of the priesthood established under the Mosaic covenant. In Heb 7–10, Jesus’ role as heavenly mediator is described in similar terms with metaphors and imagery in keeping with the priestly system under the Mosaic covenant.

Seven, in accordance with a developing Christian eschatology evident elsewhere in the NT, the author of Hebrews refers to Jesus’ eschatological role. The world will be made subject to the Son (2:5). Eternal judgment awaits the enemies of Jesus (6:2; 10:13) as well as any who neglect his message or the message concerning him (2:2–3). His second coming is imminent and decisive (9:28; 10:25, 37). If any eschatological role was acknowledged for Hellenistic heroes, it was not dominant in popular culture.
The differences between the author of Hebrews’ portrayal of Christ and that of classic Hellenistic heroes are notable. The heroic portrayal of Jesus by the author of Hebrews does not violate the integrity of NT Christology. Nevertheless, the author makes significant use of heroic imagery and metaphors in his casting of Jesus. By making these distinct points about Jesus, the author conforms to Christian tenets while still relating elements of Jesus’ characteristics to popular heroic images. In a manner similar to how the author uses Jewish oriented concepts to show Jesus’ superiority, the author portrays Jesus to be the greatest hero of both Hellenistic and Jewish cultures.

The Heroic Portrait in Hebrews 2 and 11–12

The discussion of heroic language and imagery in Hebrews centers around two passages in Heb 2. In Heb 2:10, the heroic term ἀρχηγός joins with the heroic concept of being “made perfect...through sufferings” (διὰ παθημάτων τελείωσαι). In Heb 2:14–15, the text refers to him who overcame death to “liberate” (ἀπαλλάσσω) others. However, when it is considered that this term, otherwise uncommon in the Bible, appears again in 12:2, and that it again appears in the context of “perfecter” (τελειωτής), we can begin to see that the passages and their heroic references are related to each other structurally and thematically.¹ When the two passages and their contexts are seen side-by-side, the heroic portrait of Jesus emerges from the epistle.

The obvious point of contact concerns the term ἀρχηγός. This term appears as a heroic hook-word² at either end of the epistle’s main argument on the heavenly high-


² This term is taken from G. H. Guthrie’s, The Structure of Hebrews.
priesthood of Christ. Related terms appear elsewhere in the epistle (“source” (ἁγιός) in 5:9; “forerunner” (πρόδρομος) in 6:20). These terms are related because they are other descriptive titles that the author bestows on Jesus. These terms are also related because they speak to the primary nature of Jesus’ identification. Jesus is the first and most-critical part of the new covenant system.

George Guthrie attempts to outline the expository and hortatory sections of Hebrews nearly independently of each other.³ The subsequent correlation of form and subject results in an outline which links Heb 2 and 11–12 generally under the topic of “the Son as a supreme example for the faithful to emulate.”⁴ Thus it is possible to see that there are more links between these two passages in Hebrews than a single term. There is also the juxtaposed movement of the Son descending in Heb 2 and ascending in Heb 12. What remains to be fleshed out in the study is exactly how these passages comment on the author’s overall portrayal of Christ.

Jesus is also the primary heroic example who lived and acted as a person in covenant with God—and must therefore be emulated by anyone seeking to be in covenant with God. The author directs the audience in Heb 2:1 to “pay attention” (προσέχω) to the one (or ones) who proclaimed the message because of Jesus’ identity as God’s Son (Heb 1). In Heb 12, he directs the audience to “progress” (τρέχω) as the one who exemplified the “endurance” of faithfulness because of Jesus’ identity as the exalted Son of God (Heb 12:1–14). Imbedded within this directive of emulation is the

³ George H. Guthrie’s work, The Structure of Hebrews, summarizes the most notable published approaches to the structure. See The Structure of Hebrews, 3–41.

⁴ See G.H. Guthrie, Structure, 144.
comforting and encouraging knowledge that Jesus experienced everything the audience was experiencing—and was victorious. This notion is at the heart of the heroic ideal.

Jesus “tasted death” (γεύσηταί θανάτου; 2:9) and the community had not yet suffered as such (12:4). Jesus endured suffering and discipline that he might be perfected (2:10; 12:2), and the audience needed to expect the same if they were to be considered God’s children. The heroic portrait of Christ is couched in terms of his role as God’s Son. When the author begins to discuss the sonship (siblingship) of the audience in 12:3–17, it is the first time this particular familial reference is used in the epistle since Heb 2:10–18. The audience is again placed next to the hero Jesus—or to view it in reverse—Jesus is placed within the context of the audience’s experiences.

The author of Hebrews acknowledges that the heavenly realities are not obvious to the mortal eye—but that they are true nonetheless. The audience’s “vision” is addressed in both passages. Although the audience does not yet “see” (ὁράω) the world as subject (2:8–9), they are compelled to “look intently to Jesus” (ἀφοράω; 12:2). In fact, the author points out that it should be more obvious to the audience how to live a faithful life than it did to their predecessors who did not “see” Jesus as the audience could, but trusted God in faith anyway (11:1, 27).

Hebrews 2 provokes the idea that it is possible for humanity to achieve perfected exalted status as God’s children. Jesus’ role as divine mediator and high-priest makes it possible for flawed humanity to be in right covenant with God. In order to achieve and maintain the covenant with God, it would be necessary for the audience to emulate Christ’s faithfulness and perfective endurance as in Heb 12.
If the passages are considered in reverse order (and consider the content of Heb 2 in light of the heroic symmetry with Heb 11–12), there are two main points that may emerge. First, one of the rewards for enduring the faithful life as children of God (Heb 12), is freedom from the fear of death (Heb 2). Second, the group of notable heroes who have exemplified faithfulness to God throughout the millennia and are perfected in Christ (Heb 11–12) is a group to which the audience belongs if they remain faithful to the confession (Heb 2). The author of Hebrews seems just as concerned with placing the audience in the context of their relationship to God as he is with placing Christ in the context of his relationship to God.

Hebrews 2 and 11–12 each convey key messages which contribute to the heroic portrait of Jesus and his faithful followers. Hebrews 2 contributes particularly to the audience’s understanding of Jesus in terms of his heroic incarnation and sufferings. Hebrews 11–12 contributes particularly to the understanding of Jesus and the audience in terms of their place in the history of heroic faithfulness. Together, they portray Christ to be the hero of Hebrews.

The Significance of Jesus as a Christian Hero

The author of Hebrews portrays Christ’s identity and actions in heroic language, and this elucidated Christology reinforced the author’s message of how Christ was relevant to the audience. The author’s portrayal was conversant with the idea of a Hellenistic hero. In other words, the author’s answer to the search for the Christian hero was Christ the Champion. Every hero needs a worthy adversary (every protagonist needs an antagonist) which in Hebrews is personified in the character of the devil. Christ’s
labors entail the defeating of this antagonist by dealing with the dual threats of “sin” and “death.” This could very well be author’s rationale for the hortatory and expository pattern Hebrews—explicitly the exhortation against sin (abandoning confession in thought and practice), and the explanation about the author of life (and the means by which life is made eternally possible for the epistle’s audience).

The author’s portrayal of Christ the Hero gained more value from the story of Christ’s incarnation, sacrifice, and victory than the simple retelling of a classic heroic-tale can produce. The story of Christ drives the author's message to encourage the highest level of endurance. The author of Hebrews points to the incarnation and subsequent salvific work of Christ as both the deed of salvation (his sacrifice) and the impetus for the audience’s adherence to the confession. The author thereby builds on the heroic model to indicate that Christ the Champion, Redeemer, and Conqueror is to be revered and emulated above all other heroes.

Concerning a heroic portrayal of Christ in Hebrews, scholars have generally supported two major characteristics which are shared by Heracles and the Jesus. The first heroic characteristic is that of a model. Heracles represented the rewards of discipline, self-sacrifice and perfection through suffering. The second heroic characteristic is that of a liberating savior. His legend promoted courage in the face of life’s challenges, especially death.

On their own, these two major heroic characteristics relate closely to each other, and serve to strongly support a heroic portrayal of Heracles that would have been known to and would have appealed to fairly well educated Christians at the end of the 1st century
C.E. Heracles was a deliverer who liberated people (both by example and by leadership) from a life of fear and despair. His sufferings were an exercise of liberation themselves, showing that everything experienced in mortal life—including death—could be endured courageously and with benefit for those who persevere.

By his use of heroic imagery and language to describe Christ, the author shows Jesus to be a savior whose own person and exploits surpass any known hero. As I have shown in this dissertation, the author of Hebrews utilized several heroic characteristics, language and images to present a heroic portrait of Christ. This portrait shared many elements with heroes known to the audience—and Heracles in particular. Without jeopardizing the Judeo-Christian virtues, the author used common heroic elements to offer a unique portrait of Jesus as a hero of the new Christian covenant.

Jesus was not a mere human who lived and died. Neither was he only a divine being who lived separate from the world and without the personal experience of suffering. He was both human and divine simultaneously. Jesus Christ was the hero of the new covenant under God who made the covenant possible by his actions and his very being. In a way both familiar and unique, the author of Hebrews portrayed Jesus as the perfect hero of all time.

**Areas for Further Study**

In researching and writing this dissertation, I encountered subjects that would benefit from further examination. As I mentioned in chapter one, scholars have long seen evidence of heroic imagery or parallels in the New Testament and the Gospels in particular. One sizeable area I would like to explore further is the presence of heroic
imagery in the canonical, deuterocanonical and apocryphal books of the bible. Regardless of original provenance, all of the books passed through the period of Hellenistic heroic language and imagery.

Another parallel area to pursue would be the study of ancient Near Eastern heroes (or the approximate parallel of heroes). For instance, the Levantine “hero” Ba’al underwent interpretation and transformation by a number of cultures in the Near East, including the Israelite culture. In northern Palestine and Syria, the “hero” Melkart emerged as a Phoenician expression of a Ba’al-like hero. Consequently, when Hellenism reached communities such as Tyre, the “hero-god” Melkart was syncretized with the “hero-god” Heracles. I would suspect that similar transferences occurred throughout the Levantine region to the extent which Hellenism influenced cultic practices. The stories of Samson in the Book of Judges bear a remarkable resemblance to the kinds of exploits we see Heracles performing. While the lives of many OT heroes involved miraculous occurrences, the physical prowess of Samson stands apart from the rest of them.

Concerning the epistle to the Hebrews specifically, the Book of Maccabees seems to have contributed significantly to the author of Hebrews’ perspective on heroes. In chapter three, I noted some of the parallel language that is present in Heb 11–12 and 4 Macc. As the format of Heb 11 seems to follow a basic chronology, Heb 11:35–36 may be shown to approximate the relative point in history and the subject matter addressed in texts such as 2 Macc 7 as well as 4 Macc. The themes of fidelity and endurance correspond to these texts. It would be profitable to explore whether this is the extent of the correspondence.
I believe it would also be beneficial to re-examine the presence of heroic imagery in the Gospels, and to expand the search for heroic imagery to the larger NT. As I noted in my literature review, the Gospels have received the majority of attention in the search for heroic imagery in the NT. In chapter four, I mentioned concepts present elsewhere in the NT that the author of Hebrews used to formulate his heroic portrait of Christ. I would not expect that all of the texts that I mentioned were intentionally or unintentionally influenced by heroic language and imagery. Still, given the prevalence of Hellenistic hero mythology during the 1st to 2nd centuries C.E., I would expect that more has been influenced than select material in the Gospels and Hebrews. I would especially like to examine the use of heroic imagery in the Book of Revelation.

I would also be interested in pursuing how heroic imagery in the NT and Christian literature of the first two centuries C.E. impacted the worship of Christ in every particular. The earliest Christian communities seemed to navigate the ever-present tension between a human Christ and a divine Christ. They appealed to imagery and symbols present elsewhere in their world (e.g. heroes), while simultaneously redefining theology in light of Christ. Their efforts have influenced Christology and religion for thousands of years since. It would be interesting to explore whether or not the portrayals and descriptions of Christ the hero influenced pagan imagery and symbols.

Finally, I think it would be interesting to study the sociological impact of Christian heroes in the world. Every culture has heroes of one form or another. Although they may not conform to the classical definition of Hellenistic heroes, they would likely share many common characteristics such as fidelity to ideals, endurance and
personal sacrifice. The world is fascinated with larger-than-life figures who seem to transcend the mundane existence of average mortals. And yet, it is the hero’s or heroine’s ties to our everyday lives that keep us so interested in them. They inspire us to transcend the perceived limitations of mortality, and to find the hero within ourselves.
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**Dictionaries, Encyclopedias, Lexicons, Concordances, Grammars and Entries**


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