

## Genre

## Bibliography

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In the manuscript tradition of the NT Hebrews appears exclusively in association with the letters of Paul. The oldest copy of this document is found in a collection of Pauline letters, the Chester Beatty Papyrus (P<sup>46</sup>), which is dated at the beginning of the third century. There it is identified as "To the Hebrews," in the same manner that a letter of Paul's is identified as "To the Romans" or "To the Corinthians." In this manuscript Hebrews is positioned after Romans and before 1 Corinthians. In several of the later uncial codices (8, B, A, C, H, I, K, and P), it is placed after the letters to the churches, i.e., after 2 Thessalonians

and before 1 Timothy. The association of Hebrews with the epistolary order of the NT has encouraged readers to regard this document as a letter. It is conventional to refer to the "Letter to the Hebrews" or to the "Epistle to the Hebrews."

Nevertheless, Hebrews does not possess the form of an ancient letter. It lacks the conventional prescript of a letter and has none of the characteristic features of ordinary letters from this general time period. (For a helpful summary of recent research, see W. G. Doty, *Letters in Primitive Christianity*, especially 21–47.) In the opening lines the writer fails to identify himself or the group to whom he was writing. He offers no prayer for grace and peace and no expression of thanksgiving or blessing. The document begins with a stately periodic sentence acclaiming the dignity of the Son through whom God has spoken his final word (Heb 1:1–4). These opening lines are without doubt a real introduction, which would not tolerate any prescript preceding them. (For the suggestion that very early in the textual transmission of Hebrews the initial epistolary protocol of the letter ceased to be copied, see Renner, 94–119, who finds the "missing" protocol in Rom 16:25–27; Bickermann, *RB* 88 [1981] 28–30, 36–41; and in response, see Vanhoye, *Situation du Christ*, 14–15.) The opening periodic sentence commands attention and engages a reader or auditor immediately. Hebrews begins like a sermon.

#### THE HOMILY OR SERMON FORM

The accuracy of this first impression is confirmed by the writer himself. In brief personal remarks appended to the close of the document, he describes what he has sent as a "word of exhortation" (ὁ λόγος τῆς παρακλήσεως) (13:22). This descriptive phrase evokes the invitation extended to Barnabas and Paul by synagogue officials in Antioch of Pisidia after the public reading from the Law and the Prophets to deliver to the congregation "a word of exhortation" (Acts 13:15). Paul responded by addressing the assembly in a homily or edifying discourse (Acts 13:16–41). "Word of exhortation" appears to be an idiomatic, fixed expression for a sermon in Jewish-hellenistic and early Christian circles (see *Comment* on 13:22).

The classic study of the Jewish-hellenistic and early Christian homily form in the period close to the first century is the investigation of H. Thyen, *Der Stil des jüdisch-hellenistischen Homilie* (1955). Thyen proposed that a number of Jewish and Christian writings in Greek from this general period reflect the style and influence of a Jewish-hellenistic homily. He based his study on Philo's allegorical commentary on Genesis, 1 *Clement*, 4 Maccabees, James, Hebrews, parts of 1 Maccabees and 3 Maccabees, Stephen's speech in Acts 7, *Didache* 1–6 and 16, *Barnabas*, the *Shepherd of Hermas*, parts of Tobit, the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, and the Wisdom of Solomon. For each of these primary sources he sought to trace the influence of the Cynic-Stoic diatribe (a particular style of popular preaching in Hellenism), the use of the OT, and the variety of ways in which parenetic tradition was treated. The following were factors that led him to classify Hebrews as a parenetic homily in the Jewish-hellenistic synagogue tradition:

(1) Hebrews shares in common with the parenetic sections of Jewish-hellenistic synagogue homilies numerous characteristics, including the communal "we" (as

opposed to the general use of the third person), the use of *ἀδελφοί*, "brothers," to address the congregation, the employment of the inferential particles or phrases *διό*, "therefore," *διὰ τοῦτο*, "for this reason," or *οὖν*, "therefore," to effect a transition from exposition to exhortation, the use of the second-person plural to address the auditors directly (as well as the shift back and forth between "we" and "you"), a personal, warm tone, the use of *exempla*, and an apocalyptic background to the thoughts being addressed (Thyen, *Stil*, 7–39, 85–110).

(2) The characteristic source of the Jewish-hellenistic homilies is the LXX. The writer of Hebrews has a remarkable knowledge of the LXX and used it exclusively. Moreover, Jewish-hellenistic homilies draw heavily upon the Pentateuch and Psalms, as does the writer of Hebrews. The mode of citing the biblical text in Hebrews exhibits a pattern readily discerned in the Jewish-hellenistic homilies (Thyen, *Stil*, 17, 62, 67, 69–74).

(3) The writer of Hebrews displays a command of many different rhetorical devices familiar from the Cynic-Stoic diatribe that recur in Jewish-hellenistic synagogue preaching (Thyen, *Stil*, 43, 47, 50, 53, 58–59). Among them Hebrews shares in common with other Jewish-hellenistic homiletical literature the practice of introducing biblical quotations with a rhetorical question (Thyen, *Stil*, 73).

(4) The many contacts between Hebrews and Jewish-hellenistic writers, and in particular with Philo and the author of the Wisdom of Solomon, the use of Scripture, and the exegetical methods that the writer employed all demonstrate that he was a hellenistic Jewish-Christian (Thyen, *Stil*, 17).

(5) The typical Jewish-hellenistic homily concludes with parenetic instruction. Heb 10:19–13:21 conforms to this trait (Thyen, *Stil*, 87–96, 106–10). In the effective use made of parenesis throughout Hebrews, the document resembles Philo's allegorical commentary on Genesis (Thyen, *Stil*, 10).

Thyen concluded that with the exception of the postscript (13:22–25), which was appended when the homily was sent as a written communication, Hebrews is a skillfully crafted homily of the type delivered in a Diaspora synagogue (Thyen, *Stil*, 17). In fact, Hebrews is "the only example of a completely preserved homily" from this period (Thyen, *Stil*, 106).

Thyen's volume marked an important advance in establishing the genre of Hebrews (for a summary of Thyen's argument in English, and a mildly critical evaluation, see J. Swetnam, *NovT* 11 [1969] 261–69; for a more recent investigation of synagogue preaching in the Diaspora, see W. R. Stegner, "The Ancient Jewish Synagogue Homily," 51–69). That Jewish-hellenistic preaching was a primary influence on Hebrews is today common opinion, and in the judgment of E. Grässer has been "convincingly established" by Thyen (*TRu* 30 [1964] 153; cf. 160, where Grässer calls Hebrews "a sermon sent from one place to another"). In his magisterial commentary on Hebrews, published prior to the work of Thyen, C. Spicq had already described Hebrews as "an apologetic treatise" that has "the eloquence of a discourse and the form of a homily." Writing subsequently to the publication of Thyen's book, O. Michel, in the masterful sixth edition of his own commentary on Hebrews, wrote, "Hebrews is the first complete primitive Christian sermon, perhaps built up from several independent parts, which has come down to us" (24; cf. Braun, 1–2; Attridge, 13–14). Thyen's work appeared to have provided a firm foundation for further study of the genre or form of Hebrews.

## DEFINING THE GENRE

In spite of the generally positive reception Thyen's volume has received, more recent scholars have reminded their colleagues of the paucity of the evidence for what Jewish and Christian preaching was like in the period prior to the middle of the second century of the Common Era. H. Koester, for example, finds the terms "sermon" and "homily" imprecise and vague. He calls into question the categorization of Hebrews as a sermon on the grounds that the genre has not been defined (*Introduction to the New Testament*, 2:273). K. P. Donfried rejects the form-critical designations of sermon and homily as hopelessly vague and speculative. With characteristic vigor he writes, "We know virtually nothing about the contours of such a genre in the first century A.D.," and argues that "the term 'homily' is so vague and ambiguous that it should be withdrawn until its literarily generic legitimacy has been demonstrated" (*The Setting of Second Clement in Early Christianity* [Leiden: Brill, 1974] 26).

By way of response, in 1984 L. Wills published his research on a common form of the hellenistic Jewish and early Christian oral sermon that can be reconstructed in a precise way (*HTR* 77 [1984] 277-99). Using Acts 13:16-41 as a paradigmatic homily, Wills discerned a firmly entrenched pattern of argumentation that appears to reflect the typical synagogue hortatory homily. He tentatively applied the label "word of exhortation" to this oral form on the basis of Acts 13:15. The pattern can be divided formally in three parts:

(1) authoritative *exempla*, i.e., evidence in the form of biblical quotations, examples from the past or present, or reasoned exposition adduced to commend the points that follow; (2) a conclusion inferred from the preceding examples, indicating their relevance for the audience; and (3) a final exhortation. This identifiable tripartite pattern can be found in many early Christian writings (Hebrews, *1 Clement*, other speeches in Acts, 2 Cor 6:14-7:1, 1 Cor 10:1-14, 1 and 2 Peter, the Letters of Ignatius, *Barnabas*) and in Jewish sources from the hellenistic period (e.g., the old LXX version of Susanna and the Elders, where the story of Susanna becomes the *exemplum*, to which there has been appended a homiletical conclusion [v 63a] and an exhortation [v 63b]; the Epistle of Jeremy, where the several instances of idolatry provide the *exempla*, followed by the conclusion and exhortation in v 68; cf. *T. Reub.* 5:1-5; *T. Levi* 2:6-4:1; *T. Naph.* 1:1-8:2; Aristobulus [in Eusebius, *Preparation for the Gospel* 13.12, 664c-666d]; 4 Macc 16:16-22; Jos., *J. W.* 5.362-415; 7.341-80).

From these documents, all of which reflect the "word of exhortation" form, Wills argued, "it can be reasonably hypothesized that it became the form of the sermon in Hellenistic synagogues" (Wills, *HTR* 77 [1984] 293; cf. 299, "When approached in this way, a large number of Hellenistic Jewish and early Christian writings come to light which can accurately be called sermons or sermon-influenced"). The progression from *exempla* to the conclusion to the final exhortation carried a cumulative force that was well suited to the oral sermon of the hellenistic synagogue and early house church.

From the numerous sources that betray the influence of the tripartite pattern identified by Wills, it is clear that the form is flexible and can be developed in a variety of ways. It can stand alone, as in Acts 13:16-41, or be extended in a cyclical fashion as the pattern is repeated in a longer sermon (e.g., Heb 1:5-4:16;

8:1–12:28; 1 Clem. 4:1–13a; 37:2–40:1b, Ign., Eph. 3:1–4:2; 5:1–36; 7:2–10:1). The writer of Hebrews appears to have followed a modified form of the latter pattern, creating a very complex sermonic text. Although Wills recognized that it was not possible to fit every section of Hebrews into the “word of exhortation” pattern, he was able to demonstrate that the writer used the form but adapted it to a more sophisticated structure (*HTR* 77 [1984] 280–83, where Wills is able to trace the pattern of argumentation in Heb 1–4 and 8–12). The assumption that a sermonic form lies behind the text of Hebrews, Wills insisted, “becomes compelling” (299).

In a follow-up article published in 1988, C. C. Black II stressed the remarkable coherence of the sermonic form discerned by Wills with the conventions of classical rhetoric (*HTR* 81 [1988] 1–18). He argued that “once the form of the hellenistic Jewish and early Christian sermon is viewed in alignment with the canons of Greco-Roman rhetoric, a number of Will’s perceptive intuitions receive primary verification, and residual problems associated with his proposal are dispelled” (Black, 4).

Black located the setting of the “word of exhortation” form in classical rhetoric (4–16; for Black’s own analysis of the paradigmatic homily, Acts 13:16–41, see 8–10, which identifies Paul’s speech as “an epideictic address, aimed at engendering belief” [10]). He argued that the mainstream of classical rhetoric was unquestionably a major contributor to the cultural milieu of hellenistic Jews and Christians. From this perspective he was able to address the issue of *why* the recurring pattern of argumentation based upon *exempla* would be regarded as convincing by a hellenistic audience, and to demonstrate the fundamental congruence of the “word of exhortation” with classical oratory (Black, 12–15). He asserted that “the structure of these hellenistic Jewish and early Christian sermons is perfectly understandable in terms of the rhetorical conventions outlined in such ancient handbooks as Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, Quintilian’s *Institutio oratoria*, and Cornificius’ *Rhetorica ad Herennium*” (Black, 11). It is characteristic of the documents to which Wills appealed, including Hebrews, that they were addressed not just to the eye but to the ear, and that they were written with the intent to persuade (cf. Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1.2.1355B).

Black freely illustrated his argument with reference to Hebrews, which he regards as an early Christian sermon exhibiting highly nuanced and sophisticated forms of proof (e.g., *HTR* 81 [1988] 13). He pointed out that to the extent that the various hortatory cycles in Hebrews attempt to augment complementary ideas with multiple arguments, the writer is engaging in what the classical handbooks refer to as “amplification” or “refinement” (15). He was able to account for the lengthy interruption in the “word of exhortation” form in Heb 5:1–10:18, where the writer deviates from the established hortatory pattern to present an extended exposition. The apparent anomaly vanishes once it is remembered that the writer explicitly aims not only to exhort his audience but also to fortify them in their present convictions on the basis of an exposition of the surpassing, unrepeatable priestly sacrifice of Jesus for the sins of the many (15, n. 42). Black discerns in Hebrews an “epideictic attempt to stimulate belief in the present” (5).

An independent approach to the “word of exhortation” form was published in 1990 by H. W. Attridge (*Semeia* 50 [1990], 215–17, 223). On the basis of an inductive analysis of the formal features of Hebrews, he suggests that the

"homily" or "word of exhortation" form is a sub-genre within the generic taxonomy of parenesis offered by J. G. Gammie (*Semeia* 50 [1990], 41-77). Attridge discerns a formal pattern that serves as a structuring device in important sections of Hebrews (3:1-4:16; 8:1-10:18; 12:1-13). The pattern consists of formal introduction (e.g., 3:1-6; 8:1-6; 12:1-3), scriptural citation (e.g., 3:7-11; 8:7-13; 12:4-6), exposition or thematic elaboration (e.g., 3:12-4:13; 9:1-10:18; 12:7-11), and application (4:14-16; 10:19-21; 12:12-13). This pattern of form and content is partially replicated in other portions of Hebrews as well (e.g., 7:1-28). Attridge suggests that in all of these sections of Hebrews the analogous formal pattern is a constitutive feature of what should be defined as a major sub-genre within the genre of parenetic literature for which it is appropriate to use the modern terms "homily" or "sermon." The technical literary designation for this sub-genre is "word of exhortation" (Heb 13:22; Acts 13:15) or "paraclesis."

Attridge's analysis suggests the hortatory function of Hebrews and its unity as an example of "paraclesis." He proposes that the setting for the emergence of this homiletical form was the synagogue in the social world of the hellenistic city. Paraclesis is "the newly minted rhetorical form that actualizes traditional Scripture for a community in a non-traditional environment" (Attridge, *Semeia* 50 [1990] 217). The writer of Hebrews adapts this form in order to confirm the values and commitments of a Christian group who were experiencing social ostracism and alienation in their own environment (Attridge, 219-23).

While it is necessary to concede the tension between the analysis of the form of Hebrews in the articles by L. Wills, C. C. Black II, and H. W. Attridge, their research has done much to vindicate and refine the definition of Hebrews as a sermon or homily.

#### REFLECTIONS OF THE GENRE

Recognizing the oral, sermonic character of Hebrews permits important features of the style and structure to receive the attention they deserve. The writer skillfully conveys the impression that he is present with the assembled group and is actually delivering the sermon he has prepared. Until the postscript (13:22-25), he studiously avoids any reference to actions like writing or reading that would tend to emphasize the distance that separates him from the group he is addressing. Instead he stresses the actions of speaking and listening, which are appropriate to persons in conversation, and identifies himself with his audience in a direct way:

It is not to angels that he has subjected the world to come, about which we are speaking (2:5).

We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain intelligibly, since you have become hard of hearing (5:11).

Even though we speak like this, dear friends, . . . (6:9).

Now the crowning affirmation to what we are saying is this . . . (8:1).

But we cannot discuss these things in detail now (9:5).

And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about . . . (11:32).

The writer assumes a conversational tone in order to diminish the sense of geographical distance that separates him from his audience and makes writing necessary. He conceives of his work as speech. By referring to speaking and listening, he is able to establish a sense of presence with his audience.

The writer was clearly a gifted preacher. Hebrews is characterized by a skillful use of alliteration, of oratorical imperatives, of euphonic phrases, of unusual word order calculated to arouse the attention, and of literary devices designed to enhance rhetorical effectiveness. The alternation between exposition and exhortation characteristic of the literary structure of Hebrews provides an effective vehicle for oral impact. Hebrews was prepared for oral delivery to a specific community. (Andriessen, *En lisant*, 60, has made the important observation that the so-called *Epistle of Diognetus* is a writing of the same genre. It presupposes throughout a listener or listeners, never readers [*Diog.* 1; 2:1–10; 3:1; 6:1; 7:1], and the use of the first person is alternately singular and plural.)

The character of Hebrews as sermon discourse invites an interpreter or reader to be sensitive to the abrupt shifts from orality to textuality to orality. There is an important difference between oral preaching and written discourse (cf. E. des Places, "Style parlé at style oral chez les écrivains grecs," in *Mélanges Bidez*, AIPHO 2 [Brussels: Secrétariat de l'Institut, 1934] 267–86). The dynamic between speaker and audience is distinct in each case. The writer expressly declares in 13:22 that his "word of exhortation" has been reduced to writing. As such, it has become "frozen" and available for study to a modern reader, with a life of its own quite independent of the audience for whom it was written. But it is clear that that was not its original intention. It is equally clear that the writer would have preferred to have spoken directly and immediately with those whom he addressed (13:19, 23). In the realm of oral speech the speaker and the auditors are sustained in relationship within a world of sound. Although forced by geographical distance and a sense of urgency to reduce his homily to writing, the writer never loses sight of the power of oral impact.

Hebrews is a sermon prepared to be read aloud to a group of auditors who will receive its message not primarily through reading and leisured reflection but orally. Reading the document aloud entails oral performance, providing oral clues to those who listen to the public reading of the sermon. This complex reality underscores the importance of rhetorical form and the subtleties of expression in this homily. Hebrews was crafted to communicate its point as much aurally as logically. In point of fact, aural considerations, in the event of communication, often prove to be the decisive ones.

#### RHETORICAL ANALYSIS

#### Bibliography

- Attridge, H. W. "Paraenesis in a Homily (λόγος παρακλήσεως): The Possible Location of, and Socialization in, the 'Epistle to the Hebrews.'" *Semeia* 50 (1990) 211–26. Black, C. C. II. "The Rhetorical Form of the Hellenistic Jewish and Early Christian Sermon: A Response