

## The Centrality of Christ in the Epistle to the Hebrews: Theological Themes and Their Importance for the Present Day Church

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**ABSTRACT:** In a number of ways, the epistle to the Hebrews is a unique letter among the New Testament epistles because of its Jewish nuance and emphasis on the Mosaic Covenant. The author quotes and alludes to Old Testament texts in a variety of ways, which has aroused great interest for many theologians. The theological themes of the letter have also resulted in much study, particularly when one attempts to apply these unique themes to the present-day church. This study focuses on six of these themes (God, Christ, Priest, Covenant, Endurance, and Faith) and their significance for the current church contexts. A text analysis research method is employed to exegete various texts. In accordance with many other studies on the subject, this study also concludes that the epistle to the Hebrews is profoundly Christocentric. Christ is the primary focus in all the letter's emphases. The writer of Hebrews seeks to explain the superiority of the New Covenant, and how the Old Testament was ultimately focused on and fulfilled through Christ.

Keywords: Hebrew, Christ, theological themes, victim, High Priest

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### INTRODUCTION

The epistle to the Hebrews is very different from the other letters in the New Testament. The letter is characterized by a proudly Jewish feel with strong Old Testament doctrines. Many of the topics covered in this letter are not covered in other letters in the New Testament. No other book in the New Testament, except the book of Revelation, has as many references to the Old Testament (Beale & Carson, 2007, p. 919). The contribution of the theology of Hebrews to the overall understanding of biblical theology is enormous. The Hebrew epistle is an excellent example of early church teaching. As Ribbens (2021, p. 101) points out, the Hebrews epistle makes clear to modern readers how those in the early church interpreted the Old Testament.

Just as the author of the epistle to the Hebrews interpreted the Old Testament in a new a fresh way, there is today a need for theological

creativity for current church life. Bible studies and faith lessons from the past cannot be repeated indefinitely. The movement of time tends towards what is relatively new and unique, even when history seems to repeat itself. Eberhart and Schweitzer (2019, p. 2) revealed that the understanding of faith from the past needs to be rethought so that it can be related to what is relatively new and relevant today. Although theological creativity to understand Christian faith is carried out in different ways with new forms of thought and new experiences, this theological creativity must also be faithful to its past, namely to the Scriptures themselves.

The theological creativity of the Hebrews is built on important themes in Hebrews. These important themes are obtained through biblical studies. However, these important themes focus on one main theme. There are various opinions with

various arguments presented by scholars in offering the central theme of the Hebrew epistle, starting from the theme of covenant, faith, perseverance and the one that most often appears in scholarly discussions; that of the high priest (Stevens, 2020, p. 157). The discussion continues to this day. It is necessary to know the central theme of the Hebrew letters to get a good and accurate understanding of the other themes in the Hebrew epistle.

Research conducted by David Schorck addresses the same topic as the research in this article. Schorck in his research discusses Christology in the epistle to the Hebrews. The emphasis in his research is on the nature of His priesthood before Christ's death and resurrection (Schrock, 2014). Likewise, Kvidahl and Lioy conducted similar research, namely on the biblical theology of Christology in the epistle to the Hebrews. Kvidahl and Lioy are of the view that the most important contribution of the epistle to the Hebrews is Jesus as the High Priest. The emphasis in Kvidahl and Lioy's research is indeed on Christ, but more on His priestly role. The Christology that was built only focuses on His priesthood and does not relate Christ to other major themes in the epistle to the Hebrews (Kvidahl & Lioy, 2020).

The difference between this study and the two previous studies lies in the broader Christocentricity of Hebrew. The two previous studies did emphasize that Christ was the center in the letter to the Hebrews, but both of them only saw Christology in His priesthood, even though there was continuity and a close connection between Jesus' priesthood and other themes such as covenants, faith, sacrifice. The purpose of this study is to explain the central theme in the Hebrews epistle by looking at and examining the theological themes in this letter which are then linked to the central theme that the researcher proposes. Then through the theological themes studied, the researcher will explore them with theological creativity for the life of the church today while remaining faithful to the central theme proposed.

## **METHOD**

The author uses a text analysis research method with an exegesis approach because the investigation in this study is related to biblical texts. Text analysis seeks to understand a biblical text by analyzing the text in the original language (Bungan, 2020, p. 260). Interacting directly with the original language will help to find a complete and deep meaning in the theological themes studied because good theological themes are built on the basis of good text analysis. The exegesis approach is to study and investigate the Bible systematically to find its original meaning by paying attention to historical and theological contexts (Sanda, 2020, p. 38).

Therefore, the writer will determine the keywords related to the topic to be investigated in the epistle to the Hebrews (Budiman & Pangara, 2022, p. 31). There are several guidelines for determining keywords, including considering words that are already known through the theological context, paying attention to which words clearly convey a different meaning in the text, and investigating any words that are repeated or that appear as prompts in a section or paragraph (Fee, 2002, p. 80–81). Then the results of the analysis of the text becomes a framework for building theological themes and seeing the centrality of Christ in them. The author then gives implications by explaining the importance of these theological themes for believers today.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **The Centrality of Christ in the Important Themes of the Hebrew Epistle**

The proposed main theme in the Hebrew epistle is Christology. Although many other emphases and Old Testament themes are discussed by the writer of Hebrews, in this paper a different approach is taken, by examining the dominant themes in Hebrews and Christ's connection to those themes.

### **God in Christ**

The discussion of God in Hebrews is dominant throughout the entire book. The word "God" (*θεός/theos*) is used 68 times in Hebrews (*BibleWorks*, 2007, No. Strong: 2316). The writer of Hebrews describes God's glorious character and how God reveals Himself to man. The word *Πολυμερῶς* (*polymeros*) which is translated "repeatedly" can also be understood as "part by part", however it can also be understood as "many ways" or "to come separately" (Pfeiffer & Harrison, 2001, s.v. Ibrani 1:1). Thus, one can say that God has "part by part" / "in many ways" spoken through the intercession of the prophet (1:1). God has poured His wisdom to and through humanity.

There are several persons of God mentioned by the writer of Hebrews including the living God (3:12), the most high God (7:1), God as the Judge of all people (12:23) and "a consuming fire" (12:29). The word ζάω (*zao*) in the phrase "the living God" refers to the person of God. God is a living God and different from inanimate gods. This word is also understood as the God who gives life, the God who lives for eternity. The most important meaning of the word *zao*, which is intended for God, is that He alone has life and that life is in Him (Bromiley, 2016, p. 255)

But the most important emphasis in Hebrews about God is not His majesty but rather His grace. How God first revealed Himself to Abraham (6:13), to David (4:7), and to the prophets (1:1) but that now He speaks through His Son (1:1-2). God is still actively working to save people through Jesus and God himself is actively providing salvation to mankind (Morris, 2019, p. 418).

The writer of Hebrews did not intend to demean the divine nature of Jesus and consider the Father to be superior to the Son. There is a paradox that the writer of Hebrews describes showing that there is equality between the Son and the Father. The Son is God and the Father is God. Wenkel explains the unity of the identity of the Father and the Son, namely that the Father "adopted" the Son as heir (Heb. 1:2), and that the Father is the one who

"glorifies" the Son (Heb. 1:13). The Son is "Lord" (Heb 1:8) and worthy of worship, and the Father is "Lord" and also worthy of being glorified (Heb 1:1) (Wenkel, 2018, p. 435). The writer of Hebrews wants to explain that there is a union between the God (Father) and Christ. There is unity, intimacy, and fellowship between God the Father and the Son, and although assuming different roles, the duties and functions of God and the Son are carried out together and in unity.

The author of Hebrews also quotes Psalm 102:26 which states that God originally laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of His hands. The expression "heaven and earth" means to represent the entire world created by God (Yohanes, 2020, p. 158). The writer of Hebrews wanted to emphasize that God is the Creator of everything that exists. The interesting thing about these attentions is that they all refer to Jesus personally. The creation of everything that happened by the Word (Jesus) and in Him everything was created (Suwandi et al., 2021, p. 116). It is this understanding that the writer of Hebrews wants to emphasize that there is oneness between God and Christ. Jesus is fully God and equal to God (Father) in divine and in divine glory (Gause, 2022, p. 21).

### **The Superiority of Christ**

Christology emerges as the central theme of the Hebrew epistle. The book itself begins with the person of Jesus. In Hebrews 1:3, Jesus is referred to as the light of God's glory. The word "light" uses the word *ἀπαύγασμα* (*apaugasma*), which can be understood as the relationship of the sun to sunlight. This means that in the context of Christ, He perfectly reflects the majesty of God (Bromiley, 2016, p. 79). Indeed, in verse 3, the word is described as being "the exact imprint of [God's] nature." The word used, *χαρακτήρ* (*kharakter*), is the same word used to denote engraving done by a carving tool (Enns, 2016, p. 129). That is to say, Jesus is the perfect visible "engraving" of the Father, which is a clear reference to Jesus' divinity.

Jesus is also not only a manifestation of the fulfillment of King David, but Jesus is also a Person who is greater than David. Jesus is referred to as (*Χριστός/khristos*) is twelve times. The word is also translated “Anointed One” which is used to denote Jesus as the Messiah and a King (Enns, 2016, p. 128). The word “Son” (used twenty-three times in Hebrews and mostly refers to Jesus) uses the word *υἱός (huios)* which not only shows that Jesus came from God, but also shows that Jesus is the fulfillment of the promises that God gave to mankind through the intercession of the prophets. The phrase “as the recipient” uses the word *κληρονόμον (kleronomon)* from the root word *κληρονόμος (kleronomos)* which is also translated as “heir” (*BibleWorks*, 2007, No. Strong: 2818). The word *kleronomos* is a clear allusion to the inheritance promised to King David found in Psalm 2:8. The word *huios* also refers to the inheritance given to Jesus which makes Him higher than David and the angels (Schreiner, 2019, p. 263).

Rodrigues (2020, p. 42) argues that the Hebrew epistle describes the three offices of Jesus all at once. The Christological category is generally known as the *munus triplex* (prophet, priest, and king). All three functions are seen concurrently in Jesus. A prophetic function (prophet) focuses on the idea of revelation. The function of the priesthood (priest) describes the mediation of the cult of salvation and specifically matters of sacrifice and intercession. Finally, the King function centers on the idea of Jesus' deity as the King to Come.

Jesus is also far superior to the angels. The author of Hebrews quotes Psalm 97:7 and 104:4 saying the angels are His servants and they must worship Him (Mackie, 2020, p. 48). The writer of Hebrews also explains that Jesus is higher than Moses and even Joshua. Moses is described as a faithful servant of God (3:2,5). Moses even spoke with God “face to face, frankly, not in riddles, and he beheld the image of the LORD” (Num. 12:6-7). How great and glorious is the figure of Moses. But Jesus is greater than Moses because He is not only a faithful servant of God, but a faithful Son of God

(3:6). Jesus is also bigger than Joshua. While Joshua brought God's people to rest, Jesus also brought those who believe in Him to rest, but an even more glorious rest than what Joshua did, a perfect rest, the “eschatological rest” (Docherty, 2016, p. 394).

With regard to bringing His people to rest, the word *φέρων (pheroo)* in Hebrews 1:3 provides a solid foundation. The word *pheroo* has the meaning of bringing creation with it, perhaps towards a certain goal (Morris, 2019, p. 419). Jesus became the “pioneer” who brought many people to rest, which represented the entrance to the heavenly sanctuary (Dyer, 2019, p. 548). Jesus sustains (*pheroo*) believers in their perfect rest. While some scholars argue that Hebrews 3:7-4:13 does not highlight Christology, Moore (Moore, 2014, p. 397) argues that Christology has always been present in the thoughts of the writer of Hebrews, including the verse about the rest. Moore argues that rest here is Christocentric, as Jesus is the foundation, center, and goal of the believer's rest.

### ***Superior Priest***

The writer of the book of Hebrews had a unique view of the priest or high priest. He uses the word “priest” (*ἱερεὺς/heireus*) fourteen times and the “high priest” (*ἀρχιερεὺς/archiereus*) seventeen times, more than any New Testament writer and it seems that the writer of the Hebrews did not distinguish the meaning of the two (Morris, 2019, p. 442).

Henry (2016, p. 82–83) in his commentary on Hebrews explains the characteristics that a high priest must have. He must be a human being, having bones, flesh, have a human spirit, a human nature, and be an ordinary human being who has many weaknesses, so that he can proclaim and feel human-like circumstances.

Chapter 5 explains the requirements of a high priest and that Jesus had fulfilled the requirements to become a High Priest. Jesus was a true man who represented man to offer “offerings and sacrifices” for sin (5:1). Jesus also understands the situation of “the ignorant” and “the lost ones”

because He is also subject to human weakness (Regev, n.d., p. 2). The word "understand" uses the word *μετριοπαθεῖν* (*metriopatheo*), which means that a person can "measure his own feelings". That means that the high priest must serve with a sense of control and self-control, including when ministering to the "ignorant" and "the heretic" (Hagelberg, 1996, p. 33). Jesus fulfilled this requirement with evidence that He had not sinned (4:15).

An interesting point is revealed in chapters 7:13-17, in which one reads that Jesus' priesthood did not fulfill the regulations of the Law. The descendants of Levi and especially the descendants of Aaron were appointed to be priests. Jesus himself was born as a descendant of Judah, and Moses never designated a priestly role for the tribe of Judah (7:14). Jesus, however, became a priest not according to the standards of the Law, but according to the order of Melchizedek. The priesthood of Jesus is not built on the foundation of any law, rather the priesthood of Jesus is built on the foundation of a perfect life (Kvidahl & Liroy, 2020, p. 53).

The priesthood according to the Melchizedek regulations is: 1) Continuous and does not require lineage; 2) Imperishable/eternal (7:16); 3) Royal. These markers of the Melchizedek priesthood categorically mark this priesthood as being superior to the Levitical priesthood regulations (Hagelberg, 1996, p. 41). They are also descriptors of Jesus himself (Guthrie, 1995, p. 106–107). Furthermore, the description of Melchizedek as a "mortal" man emphasizes Jesus' human nature; He was truly human and experienced all the things that humans feel.

David Schrock has presented a number of different points in relation to the priesthood of Jesus (Schrock, 2014, p. 102). He sees in the Old Testament the fall of Eli's priesthood due to the wickedness of his sons, and God's promise to raise up a faithful priest (1 Sam. 2:35). The promise in those verses seemingly refers, in some ways to David. David was responsible for leading his people to the temple, was dressed as a priest, offered sacrifices, and issued a priest's blessing. The

ultimate fulfillment of God's promise in 1 Samuel 2:35, however, culminates in Christ (who is a descendant of David). That is, Jesus is not only a Priest and King like Melchizedek; He also fulfilled the substance of the Old Testament priesthood as King David (Schrock, 2014, p. 104).

The author of Hebrews clearly demonstrates that the task of Jesus as High Priest is greater than that of Aaron and his descendants. First, Jesus as High Priest did not enter into a man-made tabernacle, but directly entered into the presence of God Himself (9:11, 23-24). Second, Jesus' sacrifice and entry into the heavenly tabernacle were not repeated, but only once and for all; His sacrificial offering was a perfect sacrifice. Third, Jesus did not enter with the blood of animal sacrifices, but His own blood as a perfect sacrifice (Moffitt, 2016, p. 12). Fourth, the High Priestly work of Christ has an impact not only outwardly, but also cleanses the conscience. Similarly, through His ministry, forgiveness of sins is not temporary, but eternal (Zuck, 2021, p. 450–453).

The priesthood of Jesus "could not be transferred to another" (7:24). The phrase "cannot switch" is translated from the word *απαρβατος* (*aparabatos*), a legal term that means "inviolable". It is the word used when a judge determines that his decision will not change. It can also be used to describe something that belongs to someone that can never be transferred to someone else (Barclay, 2008, p. 111). That is to say, the writer of Hebrews wants to state that the office of the priest belongs to Jesus and cannot be transferred to another person. It is His ministry, and only His.

### ***The Perfect Sacrifice***

The word "sacrifice" appears in Hebrews 21 times. It's used in a variety of contexts, there are at least 3 verses in which it refers to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ (10:14, 12; 9:26). The word *θυσια* (*thusia*) is employed to denote sacrifice, while the word *προσφερω* (*prosphero*) is the verb to describe that act of sacrificing. The word *thusia* comes from the root word *thuo*, which was originally employed

in relation to the sacrifice of burnt offerings. The word was then developed and used in relation to sacrifices both to God and to foreign gods. The word is also translated “kill” in relation to the Passover lamb (cf. Mark 14:12; 1 Cor. 6:7) (Bromiley, 2016, p. 1138).

The word *prosphero* has a comparatively large semantic range. In secular literature, this word has the meaning of “bringing, setting before, taking, enjoying, offering”. In Hellenistic literature, the word is mostly used in relation to sacrifices. In the Hebrews context, in particular, the word *prosphero* is used to denote Jesus' perfect sacrifice which was offered once for all His people (Vine et al., 2016, p. 332). His sacrifice is therefore presented as being superior to those offered through the Old Testament sacrificial system.

The writer of Hebrews frequently explains what the old covenant couldn't do, and how these inabilities are perfectly performed and covered through Christ's person and ministry. There are many examples of this: sacrifices for sin (5:30), the need for proper worship (10:20), general offerings and sacrifices (5:1) as well as the more particular burnt offerings and sin offerings (10:6) (Morris, 2019, p. 428). Humanity's fundamental problem is described as sin, which is solved perfectly and permanently through Christ's sacrifice. This deep and powerful truth would have given the original readership (as well as present-day readership) enormous confidence; Christ's sacrifice was truly effective in addressing the most fundamental of human problems and has met the needs of the human heart.

Christ's sacrifice was not only the means through which sins were remitted; it also opened a new covenant in a similar way to what is in the Old Testament. The sacrifice of Jesus Christ is a typology of the actions performed by Moses in the Law. As Manka (2019, p. 103) says that just as Moses inaugurated the covenant with a splash of blood after proclaiming all the commandments of the Law, so Jesus also instituted the New Testament after His teaching ministry with His own blood.

Jordaan (2016, p. 7) sees a comparison between Cain and Abel's sacrifice and Abel's blood and Jesus' blood. Jordaan explains that Abel's sacrifice was acceptable before God because he had faith, unlike Cain. Cain was cast out before God. The history of Cain is an illustration of the extended history of the fall of Adam and Eve, in which man had to face the consequences of his evil deeds. Then from Abel, in the book of Genesis, not a single word was spoken by Abel, but through his faith Abel continued to speak even after he died. Jordaan then compares the blood of Abel and the blood of Jesus; the blood of Jesus speaks of better things than Abel's blood. The blood of Abel has a message of vengeance without reconciliation, but the blood of Jesus brings complete reconciliation, including reconciliation with God (Jordaan, 2016, p. 7).

### ***The New Covenant instituted through Christ***

The word covenant in Hebrews is 17 times. The Greek word, *διαθήκης* (*diathēkē*), comes from the root word *διατιθεμαι* (*diatithemai*). It contains the notion of an agreement with a binding emphasis, an agreement in the sense of God's stipulation in which only God determines the terms. That is, it is not an agreement made between equals (Bateman, 2017, p. 885).

Significantly, the more precise Greek word for "covenant" is *syntheke*. This word refers to an agreement made between two parties. This word, however, is never used in the New Testament. The word *diathēkē*, on the other hand, is actually frequently used in contexts in which one “wills” something to someone else. That is to say, the word encapsulates a concept which is somewhat different to what is usually seen in the Old Testament in relation to the covenant/s that God has made. Nevertheless, the New Testament authors evidently considered the word *diathēkē* to suitably represent to explain the concept of the covenant that God made; it is employed a staggering 277 times (Morris, 2019, p. 425). In the book of Hebrews the word is frequently used in relation to the New Covenant which God has made with His people, in

contrast to the Mosaic Covenant (Vine et al., 2016, p. 91)

The theme of Covenant in Hebrews is one of the themes that expresses a significant change from what one sees in the Old Testament as opposed to the New. Indeed, this truth is encapsulated in 10:9, in which the author writes: "The first he blotted out, that he might establish the second".

Changes in the covenant are also seen in chapters 7:12 and 18. The word "changed" in verse 12 is based on the word *μεταθεσις* (*metathesis*) and in verse 18, the word "cancelled" is the word *αθητησις* (*athetesis*), which means not just a change or annulment, but rather a legal change, abolition, and replacement (Zuck, 2021, p. 460). Thus, the law in the Old Testament has been changed/replaced (or more precisely, fulfilled) by the law in the New Testament. Jesus gives a new meaning to the Law and in so doing became a minister of the covenant (Jordaan, 2016, p. 8). Moreover, the New Covenant is guaranteed, since it is based on Jesus. The word "guarantee" in chapter 7:22 is based on the word *εγγυος* (*egguos*). The word *egguos* represents a person who gives certainty. It is the word used for someone who at a bank who guarantees that loan will definitely be paid (Barclay, 2008, p. 111). It therefore describes a deep level of certainty.

Goswell (2016, p. 758) explains that the concept of a covenant in the Old Testament is only a description of the coming "real covenant." He explains that the "first covenant" that God gave through Moses was a temporary and anticipatory covenant. The Mosaic Covenant did not effectively deal with the basic human problem, namely sin. In the "last days" God has spoken once again and inaugurated a "better covenant" (Hebrews 7:22; 8:6). This new covenant offers internal purification and the perfect sacrifice for sin. The new covenant through the sacrifice of Jesus sanctifies the conscience once and for all.

### **Perseverance**

Perseverance in Hebrews is another important theme, although the word "perseverance",

namely *ὑπομονή* (*hypomone*), only appears twice (10:36; 12:1). The purpose for perseverance is found in chapter 10:36; one need to endure to obtain God's will and what is promised. The emphasis is slightly different, therefore, from what one sees in some other New Testament epistles which address perseverance.

The reason for this has to do with the context of the recipients of the letter. The epistle was written for those who were being persecuted; the letter encourages the recipients of the letter to keep trusting in Christ and not to deviate even in the midst of persecution (Lee, 2020, p. 12). The writer of Hebrews encouraged his readers to remain firm in their faith and persevere; He did not want his readership to return to their old Jewish ways of thinking (Luthy & Panggara, 2021, p. 278).

To understand the meaning of perseverance in Hebrew theology, it is very important to first look at the meaning of the word *hypomone*. The word can be translated as "patience", "steadfastness", "perseverance", or "patience (in hope)" (*BibleWorks*, 2007, No. Strongs: 5278). The word is frequently seen as the attitude of believers in the New Testament, who are called to survive in the world despite various difficulties. Importantly, the focus of *hypomone* is not self-strength or even the problems faced, but rather faith and hope. In the context of Hebrews, the word *hypomone* is used as a form of counsel for believers in the face of persecution so that their focus is on Christ (Vine et al., 2016, p. 1220).

Another phrase related to perseverance is "hold on" (3:6, 14; 4:14; 10:23). The two words used to translate this phrase are *κατέχω* (*katecho*) and *κρατέω* (*krateo*). The word *katecho* means that the believer already has a spiritual blessing, but they must hold on to it till the end (Bromiley, 2016, p. 254). But what needs to be considered, however, is the purpose of *katecho*. In 3:14, the text reads, "... we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we *hold* our original confidence firm to the end" (emphasis added).

The basis of perseverance in Hebrews is Christ and not the Law. As stated by Guzman and Martin (2015, pp. 302–304), the Law and the Prophets are only "basic teachings" and believers need "perfection" in Jesus. Based on Hebrews, Guzman and Martin provide examples of comparisons, namely: angels vs. Jesus, Moses vs. Jesus, Aaron vs. Jesus, and the Levitical priesthood ministry vs. Melchizedekian priesthood ministry. Early readers were urged to move from their untrained state to Christlikeness. That is, from "basic teaching" to "perfection" (Guzmán & Martin, 2015, p. 310).

Importantly, perseverance is not pictured as a condition for believers to gain salvation, but it is integrally linked to salvation. Bruce argues that perseverance in faith is evidence that a person has a genuine relationship with God, whereas failure to persevere indicates a false relationship with God (Bruce, 1984, p. 59). According to McAfee, however, if someone in a covenant relationship with God is found to be intentionally unfaithful to the covenant and not persevering in it, he will be expelled from God's covenant relationship (McAfee, 2014, p. 552). Regardless, it is clear that perseverance in Hebrews is required to obtain divine blessings.

### ***Faith in Christ***

The theme of faith in Hebrews is seemingly a little different from what one sees in Paul and John. The teaching of faith in Hebrews is unique in at least three ways: First, faith in Hebrews does not focus on justification and soteriology, but rather on diligence and ethics. Second, Christ is not the object of faith in Hebrews, but God is the emphasis. Third, the orientation of faith in Hebrews always refers to the future, in contrast to Paul, who for example, refers to faith in the past (the cross of Christ) or the present (Zuck, 2021, p. 471).

Although the faith described in Hebrews is not past-oriented, Hebrews nonetheless emphasizes the example of faith set by the forefathers of Israel. The writer of Hebrews tries to explain the desire and

surrender of the patriarchs to God as the motivation for their every action. The patriarchs did not base their faith on any alternative to the goal to be achieved, but their aim and desire was to move closer to God and dwell with Him (Malina, 2021, p. 475). The faith of the patriarchs is presented as a model for the letter's readers.

In the original language, the Hebrew word "faith" uses the word *πίστις* (*pistis*) which can be understood in terms of trust or belief in an active sense, especially in relation to God and Christ (*BibleWorks*, 2007, No. Strongs: 4102). The word *pistis* in this letter does not use an article, which suggests that the faith in question is general and not specific. This implies that faith in Hebrews does not refer specifically to Jesus, as explained above (Guthrie, 1995, p. 241).

Regarding the object of faith in Hebrews, Easter (2017, p. 90) writes that all the cases presented by the writer of Hebrews show that God is the object of faith. Easter asserts that the motive for faith in each case in Hebrews is the hope that God will resurrect believers. The connection between faith in God and the hope of life after death provided hope for early readers in the face of persecution (Easter, 2017, p. 90).

All the faith figures that the writer of Hebrews describes in Hebrews 11 are typologies of the perfect faith of Jesus (Pate, 2017, p. 109). The writer of Hebrews saw faith in relation to perseverance. Faith is always associated with the advice to hold fast (Guthrie, 1995, p. 242). Faith in Hebrews is an active faith, a faith that includes acceptance, obedience, trust and perseverance (Zuck, 2021, p. 472). Faith that is exercised is what gets approval from God (Schreiner, 2019, p. 413). Active faith is strongly emphasized by the writer of Hebrews. There are several forms of active verbs that describe faith in Hebrews, namely: do not ignore (2:3), turn your attention to Jesus (3:1), hold fast (3:6), move forward towards maturity (6:1), don't be sluggish (6:12), run towards hope (6:18), must endure (10:36), run diligently and look to Jesus (12:1-2) (Peeler, 2018, p. 45). The author

reminds his readers to stay focused and not underestimate the gift of salvation that God has promised, as Esau underestimated his birthright (Heb. 12:16).

While there is a slightly different emphasis in Hebrews in relation to faith, this emphasis is not in opposition to what one sees in the rest of the New Testament. In Hebrews, Jesus “leads us in faith, and brings our faith to perfection” (12:2) and believers come to God through Him (7:25) (Morris, 2019, p. 430). Although the emphasis on the object of faith in Hebrews is more on God, one must also remember that Christ reveals God in Himself so that the reader is indirectly directed to faith in Christ. The object of faith is in God who has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ (Pattinama, 2017, p. 20).

### **The Importance of these Theological Themes for Today's Believers**

Understanding of faith in the past needs to be rethought so that it is relevant and applicable to the present. Likewise, with the teachings in the letter to the Hebrews, it needs to be analyzed carefully to find the message contained in it so that it can be applied in accordance with the present context, one of which is by analyzing theological themes and drawing their relevance for today's believers (Eberhart & Schweitzer, 2019, p. 2). The church now needs to show the superiority of Christ compared to the current developing ideologies (Anugerah, 2022, p. 31). As the writer of Hebrews has shown the superiority of Christ over Judaism. Therefore, the writer wants to explain the importance of the themes in the letter to the Hebrews for the understanding and application for today's believers.

#### ***Grace in Christ***

God's grace is expressed through the gift of salvation in Jesus Christ. The epistle to the Hebrews clearly states that Jesus Christ is the Person of God's final revelation. The person and work of Jesus is the guarantee of salvation for everyone who believes in Him (Scheunemann, 2021, p. 196). In Jesus, God

also gave the gift of “rest” to believers. Jesus sustains and brings believers to eternal rest, the perfect Sabbath for believers. Hebrews 3:7:4-10 is God's promise of rest; an eschatological rest into which the believer has not yet entered or accepted. It is an “already but not yet” rest; believers have obtained it through faith in Jesus, but it will only be enjoyed fully in the future (Waruwu, 2020, p. 257). By faith in Jesus, God has guaranteed believers heavenly rest.

God's grace is not only shown through the promise of salvation in Jesus Christ and the guarantee of eschatological rest; it is also shown through God's wisdom embodied in human written language, namely God's word. In his study of the use of the Old Testament in Hebrew, Harris (2021, p. 94) states that one of the most fundamental and remarkable aspects of the use of the Old Testament in Hebrews is how the writer of Hebrews realized that it was not only the grace of God's word that was presented in writing, but that the word of God is still speaking today. An example is a quote from Psalm 95:7-11 in Hebrews 3:7-11. The psalmist's advice was, “Today, if you could hear His voice, do not harden your hearts” (Ps. 95:7-8), which was written as an exhortation to the writer's contemporary readers. The author of Hebrews, however, employs that ancient text to speak to his contemporary audience. So the word continues to speak as long as it is called “today” (Hebrews 3:13) (Harris, 2021, p. 95). For the writer of Hebrews, God's word written hundreds of years ago is still valid and relevant to the people of his time. Likewise, the church today must know and acknowledge the truth of God's word, which still applies and speaks to this day.

#### ***The Perfect Sacrifice and Sacrifice Giver***

In relation to Jesus' sacrifice, one question which sometimes arises is, who *really* killed Jesus? This is an important question, since in the Law, it is the High Priest who offers the sacrifice after ritually purifying himself. Several names have been suggested. The first is the High Priest Caiaphas. When Jesus was arrested, Jesus was taken to the

High Priest Caiaphas and tried before the Sanhedrin where Caiaphas was the head of the Sanhedrin. They gave false accusations, and eventually the High Priest Caiaphas asked about Jesus' messiahship as the Son of God (Karman, 2021, p. 280). Another possibility is Pontius Pilate. During Roman rule, Palestinian administrators such as Pilate were authorized to carry out the death penalty. Pilate decided to release Barabbas and punish Jesus (Matt. 27:26). Others have suggested that perhaps those who killed Jesus are the Jews, particularly since in Matthew 27:25, they declared that the blood of Jesus' death be passed on to them and their children.

None of these characters, however, qualify as worthy to offer a sacrifice, which leaves the question, was Jesus' sacrifice contrary to the Law? And if so, is it invalid?

There is, however, another candidate for the one who offered the sacrifice – one which is supported through the text of Hebrews, namely Jesus Himself. Jesus knew there was a plan of the crowd to arrest and kill Him, but Jesus still went into the city of Jerusalem (Matt. 21:10). He then increased the risk of His own death through what can loosely be described as provocative actions in the Temple before the Passover celebration (Matt. 21:12). Following this, instead of leaving Jerusalem, Jesus stayed, since He was carrying out God's plan. Thus, it is entirely consistent with the Passion narrative to say that Jesus offered Himself as a sacrifice.

That is to say, Jesus was both the sacrifice and the High Priest who offers sacrifices; a truth which is seen very clearly in Hebrews 8-10. Jesus truly was the perfect sacrifice that surpassed even the best of lamb sacrifices. Jesus was also a High Priest far above Aaron and even Melchizedek.

### ***The Accessibility of God***

In the Old Testament, the Israelites believed that if they saw God they would instantly die (Ex. 33:20; Judg. 13:22). They also asked Moses to act as an intermediary for them and God (Ex. 20:19).

The person of God was so great and so glorious that the Israelites feared and trembled at the thought of being in His presence. In the New Testament era, however, God was present in the midst of mankind in Jesus Christ. He came during the Old Testament period, during which there were priests acting as intermediaries between humanity and God.

Through Jesus' ministry and sacrifice, however, believers are now able approach God's presence with confidence (Hebrews 4:16). Jesus has given access to His people to come to God. His salvation and intercession created the way for humanity to draw close to God. Indeed, Bockmuehl (Bockmuehl, 2019, p. 151) writes that Jesus' sacrifice became the "new and living" pathway by which believers can and should come to God with conviction (Hebrews 10:19-20).

Believers no longer need an intermediary aside from Jesus to represent them in praying or worshipping God. All believers can come to God without fear. Jesus has become the perfect Mediator so that all God's people can come directly to Him.

### **CONCLUSION**

There are many themes to explore in the epistle to the Hebrews, including the importance of the High Priest, the covenant, and faith. It cannot be denied, however, that the theological center of the letter is Christ. He is the focus of Old Testament prophecies, and His ministry is entirely superior to that seen in the Old Covenant.

From the various theological themes seen in Hebrews, believers rest in the truth that salvation is the result of God's grace and not due to human efforts. Jesus Himself has sacrificed Himself (Priest and Sacrifice) to reconcile humans with God. God who is portrayed as profoundly holy and powerful, is now able to be approached because of Jesus' High Priestly ministry. While a believer may face challenges in this world, one can (and should) direct one's faith and hope to Jesus. He is the same yesterday, today and forever (Heb 13:8), and so is a sure foundation for one's faith.

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