

Dr. David A. deSilva, Hebrews, Session 1a, Introduction to the “Letter to the Hebrews”: the Who, What, and Why of the Sermon (Part 1)

© 2024 David deSilva and Ted Hildebrandt

When asked, what is your favorite book of the New Testament? Not many people reply, Hebrews. The letter to the Hebrews can come across as inaccessible, with its intricate investigation of the Levitical cult and the day of atonement ritual, and its attempts to connect these with the work of Jesus, or its extensive, and to modern ears often odd, interpretation of a wide variety of Old Testament passages. It is, in many ways, a mysterious text, and it requires a great deal of work in familiarizing ourselves afresh with the Old Testament to appreciate what the message of Hebrews actually is.

However, Hebrews is a very important part of our canon, and it makes some distinctive contributions to the formation of Christian theology and the vision for discipleship. It, therefore, rewards our close study in many ways. One of the things that the letter to the Hebrews gives us, in a way different from and in greater depth than any other New Testament text, is a look at the person and achievement of Jesus beyond the realm of his earthly ministry.

The author of Hebrews talks at some length about the activity of the Son before the Word became flesh. He provided the early church with some very important starting points for developing a Christology of what the Son was up to, as it were, before his incarnation in the person of Jesus. The author of Hebrews provides theological reflection on the significance of Jesus' death and ascension in ways that moved the early church forward significantly in developing its doctrines of the atonement and its understanding of the meaningfulness of the crucifixion and its aftermath, Jesus' death and resurrection, for our relationship with God and for the inauguration of the new covenant.

Hebrews also explores, to a greater degree, the importance of the Old Testament as a witness to Jesus. Now, any reader of a gospel encounters this theme as well. Any reader of a Pauline letter encounters this theme.

But the author of Hebrews is particularly far-ranging in where he goes in the Old Testament to find testimonies to what God would do in the person of the Son. So, he presents us with a distinctive hermeneutic of the Old Testament, whereby in some cases we find the larger meaning, the fuller sense of an Old Testament text, by reading it as addressed to the Son, or as about the Son, or even, most extraordinarily, placed on the lips of the Son. Hebrews is probably most well-known for its chapter

on faith, which is a parade of heroes of those who have exemplified the virtue of faith in this world.

In chapter 11, but also in other passages, Hebrews have much to tell us about the nature of faith, how faith behaves, and what faith in action looks like in this world. Therefore, it becomes an important resource for thinking about Christian ethics and our response to God. The epistle to the Hebrews also gives a fair amount of attention to cosmology, to questions about ultimate reality, the way the cosmos is constructed, and, therefore, how we navigate wisely through this present visible reality.

Finally, the author of Hebrews, because of the nature of the challenges his own congregation is facing, gives a lot of attention to the problem of suffering, a perennially important problem in the Christian experience. He looks particularly at how to interpret the experience of suffering when that suffering is the result of one's obedience to God's call. He provides the church in every age thereafter with resources for understanding suffering for the sake of allegiance and obedience to Jesus in such a way as to be empowered to withstand it and even triumph through it.

The book of Hebrews also presents challenges that Christians of every age must hear if their discipleship is to be full-bodied. First, Hebrews is very much a summons to gratitude, to acknowledge not just that God has been gracious but also that the grace of God has placed certain obligations upon us to respond in ways that are ultimately for our own benefit as we allow God's favor and God's kindness to impact our lives, transforming us into people who will honor God, remain loyal to God, and serve God. Hebrews is also a summons to despise shame in the sense of finding freedom from living for the approval of those who are not themselves oriented toward God.

Hebrews, therefore, continually challenges the church in every age to live for the applause of heaven and not to be distracted and potentially derailed by concern for approval in this life. Finally, Hebrews also gives substantial attention to the importance of forming an adequately supportive Christian community. If individual disciples are going to be able to persevere in discipleship or are going to be able to run the race that is set before them in our increasingly privatized and individualized world, this is a particularly important challenge to hear from this ancient preacher.

One of the mysteries of Hebrews is its authorship. It has typically been assumed that Hebrews was a letter of Paul, despite the fact that the text itself is, from beginning to end, anonymous. Nevertheless, Pauline authorship is assumed as in the title given to this letter in the King James Version, the letter of Paul to the Hebrews.

This assumption is ancient. In the manuscript known only as P46, papyrus number 46, an early papyrus collection of Paul's letters from about the year 200, the scribe has placed Hebrews directly after Romans, giving it second place within the Pauline

corpus. Undoubtedly, the reference to Timothy in Hebrews chapter 13, verse 23, has contributed to this tendency.

Timothy was, of course, a well-known traveling and missionary companion of Paul and very often a co-sender or co-author of known Pauline letters. It is, however, highly unlikely that Paul wrote Hebrews. First, the author of Hebrews speaks as one who is converted to faith in Christ by the preaching of others.

He makes this very clear in chapter 2, verses 3 and 4. Paul, on the other hand, is adamant that he became a believer and an apostle not through any human being's agency but through God's direct intervention. Galatians 1:11 to 17 and 1 Corinthians 15:3 to 10 make this point emphatically, with Paul even making an oath to this effect in Galatians. It would be highly unlikely, then, for Paul to admit in Hebrews that, in fact, it was the preaching of Christ's witnesses that converted him, as this is incompatible with Paul's own adamant claims elsewhere.

A second factor that makes it highly unlikely that Paul wrote this letter is the author's evident commitment to rhetorical artistry. This runs counter to Paul's own philosophy of preaching. In 1 Corinthians, chapter 2, verses 1 to 5, Paul writes that he preached, quote, not in the loftiness of words or wisdom, end quote, lest the Corinthians' persuasion be grounded in the speaker's skill rather than in the Holy Spirit's conviction.

The author of Hebrews, however, freely and pervasively uses the art of rhetorical ornamentation to delight the ears of his hearers and to help them believe and feel that they are listening to the sermon of a highly skilled orator, something that Paul is never accused of or credited with being in his existing letters, as 2 Corinthians makes abundantly clear. Disputes over the canonicity of Hebrews also reveal the early church's basic uncertainty about the letter's authorship. If the letter were confidently known to have come from Paul's hand, it would have had wider acceptance as an apostolic and, therefore, a canonical text throughout both the Western and the Eastern churches.

However, this was a matter of serious debate through the end of the fourth century. This dispute also reveals a motive for asserting Pauline authorship on the part of those who held the letter to be authoritative since this assertion augmented the chances of its recognition by the whole church. Two things seem certain regarding the authorship of Hebrews.

Paul did not write it, but someone in the Pauline circle did. Origen, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, and other early church fathers, if they don't attribute the work to Paul, attribute it to someone closely associated with Paul. Again, this is probably the best way to read the reference to Timothy in chapter 13, verse 23.

I want you to know that our brother Timothy has been set free, and if he comes in time, he will be with me when I see you. One of Paul's co-workers is still trying to coordinate his movements with another of Paul's co-workers, namely Timothy. Tertullian, a Latin church father of the late second and early third century, favored Barnabas as a candidate for authorship here since Barnabas was known to have been a Levite, and of course, the Levitical priesthood is a major topic in Hebrews.

Apollos was also frequently proposed because he was remembered in Acts chapter 18 verse 24 as being an honor logios, a skilled speaker. Apollos's rhetorical ability is also behind his popularity among the Corinthian churches, especially among those who criticized Paul for being feeble in speaking. It has become popular in recent decades to nominate Prisca, or Priscilla, as the author, someone who had a hand in teaching Apollos himself about the faith and half of a prominent missionary couple in the Pauline circle.

However desirable it might be to have a New Testament text from the hand of a female leader in the early church, there are certain indications against it. The most telling of these is a participle in Hebrews chapter 11, verse 32. In Greek, participles and adjectives have gender.

They are either masculine, feminine, or neuter, depending on what they are describing. The author of Hebrews uses a masculine participle when referring to himself. It is first impossible that an author who is so skilled in Greek as the author of Hebrews is would simply make that mistake, but it's also highly unlikely that a female teacher in the first century would try to disguise her gender by projecting her identity as that of a male preacher.

The early church was open to female teachers. But even more telling, the author of Hebrews knows, the audience of Hebrews knows this preacher personally from previous encounters, as we learn in chapter 13, verse 19, where the clause, I hope to be restored to you, indicates an earlier time when the author and the audience were together. Thus, there would be no fooling them in regard to the preacher's gender.

Thus, if it were Prisca or Priscilla, she would have had no reason to use a masculine participle to disguise her identity somehow. In the end, Origen's solution to the authorship of Hebrews remains the most sound. But who wrote the epistle? God knows.

We don't know who among Paul's rather large ministry team might have written this sermon, and we ultimately gain nothing by hazarding a guess. Even if we do not know the name of the author of Hebrews, we can learn some important things about him. For one thing, he was a well-educated man.

Among all the authors of the New Testament, the author of Hebrews stands out as a master of the Greek language. We find this in his liberal use of participles, including many genitive absolute constructions and one of the very few future participles in all of the New Testament. He is also given to what grammarians call hypotactic syntax.

This means an extensive use of subordinating clauses, which shows a higher level of sophistication in terms of his facility in the Greek language. Mark, the author of the second gospel, by contrast, uses paratactic syntax. He links his thoughts and clauses together with conjunctions rather than subordinating one to the other.

That is to say, Mark's use of Greek is much more than what one would expect from someone who has learned Greek as a second language and perhaps has never gotten fully comfortable with composition in that language. On the other hand, the author of Hebrews uses Greek like a native speaker. He also gives evidence of having had formal training in the art of rhetoric, at least at the pre-gymnasium level.

That is, at the level of training in the Greco-Roman educational system prior to what we would consider college or university-level education. Now, it's a much-debated point in New Testament studies whether one can say about an author that he has had formal training in rhetoric at any level. However, in regard to the author of Hebrews, there is less room for debate than, for example, with an author like Mark or John.

For example, within the textbooks from this pre-gymnasium level of education, textbooks called the *pro-gymnasmata* are exercises of elaboration of a theme or a topic that move through a series of argumentative steps. This kind of exercise is foundational to the pro-gymnastic training. A typical exercise in a rhetorical school involved taking a saying of a famous person or a bit of proverbial wisdom or proposing a thesis and working out a series of arguments in support of it.

The pattern looked very much like this. First, an introduction to the topic, followed by the statement that is to be argued. The statement is then supported by a rationale.

The statement is then further supported by an argument from the contrary, that is, if the statement were not true, this would be the case. But since this isn't the case, the statement must be true. This would then be followed by an argument from comparison or analogy, looking to another realm of human experience where the underlying logic of the statement is demonstrated as a kind of corroborating proof.

This could be followed then by an historical example or precedent where the statement proved itself true in the case of some famous person or event in the past. This, in turn, could be followed by a quotation from a respected authority, someone whose voice carries weight in the culture, and then conclude with a restatement of

the thesis or an exhortation to act on that statement. This basic pattern appears in several of the surviving textbooks of the pro-gymnasmata, as well as handbooks on rhetoric, like the *rhetorica ad herenium* that is attributed to Cicero.

We find precisely this school book pattern employed in Hebrews chapter 12, verses 5 to 11, with very minor modifications. In this passage, the author offers an introduction to his thesis. You have forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons.

The thesis itself comes from a quotation from Proverbs. My son, do not regard the formative discipline, the *paideia*, of the Lord lightly, nor lose courage while being reproved by him. This thesis is then supported by a rationale, which is also a part of that quotation from Proverbs.

For whom the Lord loves, the Lord disciplines and he chastens every son whom he receives. The author follows this up with a restatement of the thesis, as is common in these exercises. Endure, then, for the sake of formative discipline.

God is treating you as sons. He then adds confirmation of the rationale, that is to say, a further rationale supporting the rationale, here appealing to the audience's general experience of being raised and of parenting themselves. For who is the son whom a father does not discipline? After this, we find an argument from the contrary.

If you are without formative discipline, in which all children have become partakers, then you are illegitimate and not true sons. This, in turn, is followed by an argument from comparison or analogy. In this case, it is a very close analogy, looking to the realm of natural biological parents to talk about the divine parent.

Since we have had our biological fathers as educators and showed reverence, shall we not much more be subject to the father of spirits and live? This argument from analogy is, in turn, supported by another rationale. For they disciplined us for a few days as seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our benefit, that we may share his holiness. The author then wraps all of this up with a conclusion that incorporates a quotation of a standard maxim.

All formative discipline, while it is present, does not seem to be joyful but grievous, but later, it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained through it. The maxim undergirding this verse is actually one that shows up frequently in ancient educational texts, sometimes attributed to Isocrates, sometimes to Aristotle. The roots of education are bitter, but its fruit is sweet.

The author has modified and expanded that maxim, which is itself another one of the preliminary exercises in composition in these textbooks, but it's still plainly visible here. The author has even preserved two keywords, discipline or education, *paideia*,

and fruit, karpos. The author of Hebrews thus exhibits a clear knowledge and a mastery of a preliminary pattern of rhetorical argumentation, using it with modest variation.

For example, adding rationales to the argument from comparison, concluding it with a well-known maxim that was itself at the heart of ancient education. In all of these ways, the author shows himself to have had a strong educational foundation as the basis for his homiletical excellence. Consideration of the author's rhetorical skill raises the question of what Hebrews itself really is and how we should think about this piece of communication.

We typically refer to it as the letter to the Hebrews or the epistle to the Hebrews, in analogy with Paul's letter to the Galatians or the letter to the Philippians. However, Hebrews does not start as a letter would typically start with a sender identifying himself and his addressees and passing along greetings. In place of that typical letter opening, we find instead a polished opening statement that seems to have been calculated to have a powerful effect on the hearers to sound beautiful to their ears.

God, having spoken long ago to our ancestors through the prophets in varied and piecemeal fashion, in these most recent days has spoken to us in a son, whom he appointed to be the heir of all things, through whom he also made the ages, who being the radiance of God's glory and the imprint of God's very essence, sustaining all things by his powerful word, having himself made purification for sins, sat down at the right hand of the majesty in the high places. In this opening, the author uses several rhetorical devices known from ancient rhetorical handbooks that are purely decorative. First, the opening 12 words of the sermon in Greek greet the hearers with a striking use of alliteration.

Alliteration is a very common device still used and loved by preachers today. An initial consonant is used several times, perhaps to outline the major points of a sermon. Here, our author uses alliteration five times within 12 words to decorate the opening verse, repeating this P sound. Two parallel clauses just two verses later in chapter one, verse three, employ other recognizable ancient stylistic devices.

These are called homo-arcton and homo-taluton, beginning or ending words or phrases with the same series of sounds to create in effect internal rhymes. Thus, in chapter one, verse three, we have these repeated cadences. These are ornaments that suggest a second layer of attention to rhetorical artistry but also hold up for us the author's awareness that what he is crafting is not a text so much as an utterance, a piece for oral delivery to be heard and appreciated by the ear rather than by the eye.

This opening also employs the rhetorical device of antithesis, constructing clauses with multiple elements, each of which contrasts with a correlating member in the

other clause. Thus, the author says that, in the old days, God spoke to the ancestors through the prophets. Then, in the antithetical clause that follows, in these last days, he spoke to us in a son.

In this way, the author creates a pleasing, artistic balance between how God formerly spoke and how God speaks now in communicating content beautifully and artistically. In many such ways, the author gives evidence of rhetorical training even beyond the basic level of the pro-gymnasmata. The author also gives attention throughout his sermon to the presumed acts of speaking and hearing rather than reading with the eyes.

That is to say, from beginning to end, he's very much aware that his message is a spoken message that will be heard, not a written message that will be read. So we read, ironically, about this, and we have much to say that is hard to explain since you have become sluggish in hearing. Or, therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, today if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.

Or, now, God did not subject the coming world about which we are speaking to angels. And a bit later in the sermon, even though we speak in this way, beloved, we are confident of better things in your case. The author shows in this way that he is composing the sermon to the Hebrews, conscious of the oral delivery of the message and of the oratorical nature of its composition.

Something else about the author of Hebrews that comes across clearly in his preaching is his cultural location. If we were to grant that he had some level of formal rhetorical training, it does not follow that that training happened in the midst of some Greco-Roman or Gentile-based school. On the contrary, from beginning to end, he gives a picture of being primarily located in a Jewish environment for the course of his upbringing.

The Old Testament provides our author's primary set of cultural resources. It's very important for us to bear in mind, however, that he engages the Old Testament primarily in its Greek translation, commonly called the Septuagint. The Septuagint was a very early translation project undertaken by Greek-speaking Jews for the benefit of Jewish populations outside of Judea, for whom Greek had become the primary language and who had pretty much left behind their ancestral tongue.

The first five books, the Books of the Law, were probably available in Greek as early as 250 BC. Now, every act of translation introduces some distance from the original. Even ancient writers like the translator of the apocryphal book, The Wisdom of Ben Sirah, show an awareness of this distance.

Ben Sirah's grandson, the translator, was fluent in both Hebrew and Greek. After translating his grandfather's work from Hebrew to Greek, he apologizes for some of

the places where he might have gotten it wrong or missed the nuance that his grandfather was seeking to communicate. In the prologue to his translation, he tells us that even the Law and the Prophets and the other books show distance in translation from the original.

The distance introduced between the Hebrew text of the Old Testament and the Greek translation, the Septuagint, is something that the author of Hebrews capitalizes upon in the course of his argumentation. For example, in the Hebrew text of Psalm 8, we read, you made him, humankind, a little lower than the angels. In Hebrew, the word little unambiguously signifies a space lower on the ladder of creation.

But in Greek, there's some ambiguity. It could indicate a lower spatial distance or a little bit of time. The author of Hebrews is able to capitalize on that ambiguity to turn Psalm 8 into a testimony to Jesus' incarnation, when for a short while, the little bit of time of his earthly life, the sun was made lower than the angels.

More strikingly, the author will quote Psalm 40 in Hebrews 10 as the capstone of his argument about Jesus' offering of himself as a sacrifice that was acceptable to God at a level and to a degree to which the animal sacrifices prescribed under Leviticus could never achieve. In the Hebrew text of Psalm 40, we read, sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but ears you have dug for me. Now, that image of digging out ears, of course, recalls the creation story of Genesis 2, where God shaped human beings out of the dust of the earth, out of the dirt, as it were, molding it.

And, of course, the meaning of the text is that, having created ears, you want me to listen to your law and do it. The Greek version of that Psalm yields something quite different: not ears you have dug for me, but a body you have prepared for me. Presumably, the Greek-speaking Jew who translated that Psalm did not like the image of God digging out ears and so generalized it to this phrase, a body you have prepared for me, still referring to God's act of creating the human being and still meaning a body with which to act in obedience to your commands, O God.

But the author of Hebrews sees in this translation an opportunity to talk much more particularly about one particular body that God prepared, namely, the body that the Son took on as Jesus. In a number of such ways, we'll find that the Old Testament, in its Greek translation, yields exegetical and theological fruit for the author that the original Hebrew text might not have done. The author assumes that the audience shares an awareness of the Septuagint text and, even more importantly, shares a commitment to the authority of these texts as God's oracles.

This is ultimately the author's own source of authority as he preaches his sermon. He expects to be heard and to be persuasive to the extent that he grounds his own message and his own exhortations in his exposition of these shared sacred texts.

What's very interesting about Hebrews is how the author interprets many of these texts.

The author shows us first and foremost how the piecemeal and partial witness of God through the prophets and psalms becomes a united witness to God's actions in the world in the Son, in the person and career of Jesus. As early as Hebrews chapter 1, verses 5 through 13, we encounter a flurry of verses from the Old Testament that the author believes find their meaning in connection to Jesus, and he shows us there is something of his hermeneutics, his interpretative strategies that we will encounter throughout his sermon. Old Testament texts reveal their meaning to him when they are read as spoken to the Son, as spoken about the Son, and in some cases, even when spoken by the Son, that is when they are placed on Jesus' own lips.

The author also works with a typological interpretation of the Old Testament texts. That means he finds throughout the Old Testament figures or activities that he believes point forward to the Son and to his deeds, which are shadows and hints of the Son and his achievements that were announced long before his arrival on the earthly scene. For example, he looks to Moses as a type or a model for Jesus, the mediator to come.

Similarly, he looks to the Levitical priesthood, its personnel, its rituals, and its sacred spaces as a type or model on which to talk about Jesus' priesthood and the consequences of Jesus' death for us. This also opens up for the author the possibility of creating exhortations to his audience based on a type. For example, based on the story of the Exodus generation and its poor response to Moses and to God's promises to help his own audience figure out how they need to respond to the ultimate mediation of Jesus.

The author also pursues a moral interpretation of the Old Testament from beginning to end, as he shows us in his use of his Old Testament examples as both positive and negative models of how to respond to God. While the author's primary cultural location can be said to be the world of the Jewish scriptures, upon which he draws more than anything else, the author also shows himself to be a citizen of the Greco-Roman world. This is not in opposition to his location as a Jewish Christian but in line with his location as a Hellenistic Jewish Christian, someone who was brought up in the larger Greco-Roman environment that has impacted how Judaism looks anywhere one finds it throughout the Mediterranean world of the first century AD.

One example appears in the author's use of the Greco-Roman pedagogical wisdom. In chapter 5, verse 8, the author says that Jesus, quote, learned obedience from the things he suffered or the things he experienced. In this verse, we find the Greek words *emaphen* and *epaphen*, words that constituted a common maxim in the ancient world, teaching that wisdom comes from suffering or learning comes through experience.

Epaphen, emaphen, he suffered, he learned. One can find this maxim in the works of Aeschylus, Herodotus, and many other authors of classical Greek, Hellenistic, and Roman eras. The author also shows his rootedness in Greco-Roman culture when he speaks of stages and progress in learning, the idea that there is an elementary stage of education and a more advanced stage of education, using the figures of drinking milk versus eating solid food, creating an analogy between the nurturing of children at the biological level with the nurturing or education of children at the pedagogical level.

Thus, he writes in chapter 5, verses 11 to 14, you have become sluggish in hearing, for indeed, though you ought to be teachers on account of the amount of time that has elapsed, you again have a need for someone to continue to teach you the most basic principles of the primary level of the oracles of God. You have come to stand in need of milk rather than solid food, for everyone who partakes of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he or she is an infant. But solid food is for the mature, who have had their faculties trained through constant practice for the discernment of the noble and the base.

Greco-Roman authors similarly use the analogy of milk versus meat or milk versus solid food as an image for levels of instruction. So, for example, the late first, early second-century Stoic philosopher Epictetus writes, are you not willing at this late date, like children, to be weaned and partake of more solid food? Or again, you have received the philosophical principles that you ought to accept, and you have accepted them. What sort of teacher then do you still wait for, that you should put yourself off, that you should put off reforming yourself until he arrives? You are no longer a lad but already a full-grown adult.

Both Epictetus and the author of Hebrews, moreover, use these metaphors specifically to shame the hearers for not measuring up to where they ought to be and to motivate them to prove themselves mature by their readiness to meet the expectations articulated by the author for the mature. In the same passage, we find the author of Hebrews describing the mature believer as someone who is equipped for the discernment of the noble and the base. This incorporates a standard definition of the virtue of wisdom, one of the four cardinal virtues promoted by Platonists and Stoics.

The mature person who has made sufficient progress in the formative discipline offered by a philosophical school, that group that he or she has joined, has attained wisdom. He or she has intelligence capable of a certain judicious method of distinguishing good and bad, as the author of the *Rhetorica ad helenium* puts it. In many such ways, the author of Hebrews incorporates the cultural knowledge of his larger Hellenistic environment into his thinking and his preaching.

At one point, the author presents Jesus not in terms of his Jewish heritage but in ways reminiscent of the great hero of almost all Greek and Roman philosophical schools, namely Socrates. In chapter 2, verses 14 and 15, the author of Hebrews writes, Since then, the children have shared flesh and blood in common. The son himself also fully shared the same things in order that, through death, he might destroy the one holding the power of death, namely the slanderer, and set free those who are liable to slavery all their lives by the fear of death.

With some adaptation, one can recognize echoes here of the way the first-century Roman philosopher Seneca portrayed Socrates as he faced his own death. Socrates declined to flee when certain persons gave him the opportunity to free humankind from the fear of two most grievous things: death and imprisonment. In the second century, Lucian, the satirist, wrote about a certain philosopher who was about to set himself on fire to teach his disciples the same lesson that Socrates taught his disciples.

Peregrinus was this particular ne'er-do-well philosopher's name, and Lucian writes, In Hebrews chapter 2, verses 14 and 15 then, we find our author presenting Jesus as someone who embraces hardship and the difficulties of death itself in order to liberate his followers from slavery to the fear of death. Of course, this is adapted appropriately for the author's worldview to include Jesus doing battle, in effect, with Satan, the slanderer, who was credited with holding the power of death and using it to keep God's children in bondage through fear. Another facet of Greco-Roman culture that appears in Hebrews is that of athletics.

In chapter 12, verses 1 to 4, at the conclusion of his encomium on the heroes of faith, the author of Hebrews creates a beautiful athletic metaphor. Having, therefore, such a great cloud of spectators surrounding us, let us also run with endurance the race laid out before us, putting off every weight and the sin that easily ensnares, looking away to the pioneer and perfecter of faith, Jesus. You have not yet, while facing off against sin, resisted to the point of bloodshed.

In these four short verses, we have the images of a race conducted in a stadium, the stands full of spectators, and also of a wrestling match in the last verse, a wrestling match against sin. The author brings images that are familiar to any Greek city into his sermon. Athletics had a prominent place in the ancient Greek or Roman cities, just as they do in modern cities.

The author capitalizes on this facet of Greco-Roman culture to create a powerful image to impel his heroes forward in their commitment specifically to Christian culture and its demands upon them. So then, while we may not know the name of this author, we do know several important things about him. He was, in all likelihood, part of the Pauline evangelistic team.

He was someone who was especially well trained among the members of that team in rhetoric, in the artistic expression of thought with a view to being persuasive. He was deeply grounded in the Old Testament scriptures, particularly as these scriptures existed in the ancient world in Greek translation. He is a citizen of the Greco-Roman world insofar as he drew upon its pedagogical, philosophical, and athletic life in the course of developing his distinctive presentation of the significance of Jesus and Jesus' claim upon the hearer's lives.