

“Famous Last Word”—Hebrews 1:1-4

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[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions please contact Southern Oaks Baptist Church through their official website, www.welovethegospel.com.]

Take your Bibles and turn with me to Hebrews, chapter 1. Feel free to use the table of contents to find it. It's a book toward the end of the Bible, which can be found in the pew Bibles on page ____.

Today we begin a new series on the book of Hebrews. I can't think of a better way to describe what this book (and, by extension, series) is about than a scene in the New Testament known as the transfiguration. On that particular day, Peter, James, and John had accompanied Jesus up a mountain where they saw something spectacular. Appearing before them was Moses and Elijah (who had long since departed from this earth) speaking to Jesus. Upon seeing this, Peter speaks up, noting that it is a good thing that he came along because he can make three tents, one for Jesus and his conversation partners. All of the sudden a cloud overtook them and a voice came saying, *“This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.”* The disciples fell on their faces in terror. When they finally looked up they saw only Jesus. In the words of A. W. Pink, *“The glory associated with Moses and Elijah was so eclipsed by the infinitely greater glory connected with Christ, that they faded from view.”*¹ That's what Hebrews is about—the absolute supremacy of Christ.

Richard Phillips writes,

“The Epistle to the Hebrews was written because of...[a] kind of pressure. Then, as now, faith in Jesus came at a price. You could not be a Christian without carrying a cross and suffering at the hands of the world. Therefore, it had to be worth it to believe on Jesus Christ. This is what the writer of Hebrews wanted to impress upon his readers...he directs us to the supremacy of our Lord. He knows that if we perceive Jesus in the marvel of his person and his work—as God's Son and as our Savior—then instead of doubting or trembling in fear we will respond with words like those from the great hymn: ‘I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I've committed unto him against that day.’”²

The title of the series is “The G.O.A.T.” As strange as that may seem, it has something of a double meaning. I won't explain it all yet, but the gist of it is expressed in the series graphic. On the one hand, “the G.O.A.T.” is a figure of speech that is quite common today in some circles (e.g., Sports Radio). It's an acronym that stands for the “greatest of all time.” So, for example, someone today might say, in reference to NBA basketball, “Lebron James is the Goat.” Those people would be wrong, of course, because everyone who knows anything knows that Michael Jordan is the goat (i.e. the greatest basketball player of all time). Do you see how this works?

In sports or entertainment, these things can be highly subjective. But when it comes to Christ, the writer of Hebrews wants to make it clear in all of our minds that there is no one greater than Jesus Christ. That is the main point of this book. He will labor to show us that Christ is greater than this, and Christ is greater than that, and Christ is greater than these, and greater than those... That's the book in a nutshell. So in the modern lingo, we might say that Christ is the “Greatest of All Time,” the G.O.A.T.

But the series title fits in another way as well, because one of the things that we will discover is that Christ offered Himself up on the cross as a sacrifice for sin. And the imagery we find in Hebrews relates to the Old Testament's Day of Atonement, the priest would offer up a goat for the sins of the people (really two goats, each with a different function). Out of this ritual comes the term "scapegoat," because that goat is said to have borne the people's sin on their behalf. This whole ritual, from the High Priest, to the goat, to the blood, and so on, is fulfilled in Christ. And the writer of Hebrews is going to show us how.

Christ is our scapegoat. And Christ is the greatest of all time. My prayer is that this journey through the book of Hebrews will impress those two realities on our hearts. It has changed my life. It has helped me understand the Old Testament and the work of Christ as much, if not more, than any other part of God's Word. For these reasons, this is one of my favorite books in the Bible and one I've dedicated a lot of doctoral work to understanding.³ This book is not for "the theologically faint at heart" but it "is for those whose endurance will be richly rewarded with a remarkable portrait of Christ."⁴ May that prove to be each of us.

Being that this is our first sermon in the series, some background comments are in order. Hebrews is considered a letter, though you wouldn't guess that based on the way it begins. Typically New Testament letters follow the standard form of their day, introducing the author and intended recipients in a brief word of greeting. Hebrews doesn't begin that way. It does, however, end like a first-century letter. It's probably best then to view Hebrews as a sermon that was circulated as a letter in the early church. This conclusion is quite common.

Scholars don't do well with anonymity though, so it's not surprising that there's been a lot of speculation surrounding the authorship and destination of this letter. Over the centuries that these things have been debated, the most common suggestions for authorship tend to be Paul, Luke, Apollos, or Barnabas.

Paul is suggested because the letter is very consistent with Paul's theology and the final chapter mentions Timothy, who was one of Paul's protégés (13:23). However, Pauline authorship seems unlikely for a number of reasons. We have a lot of his letters in the New Testament, so we know his style and Hebrews doesn't bear much resemblance. We don't find the typical features of his letter openings, his common emphasis on apostolic authority, or the language he tends to use when talking about the same subjects.⁵ So while the theological content and conclusions of Hebrews are very consistent with Paul's own, the style of the letter as a whole doesn't seem to favor him as the author.⁶ Still, since Timothy is mentioned, it is likely that the author was someone connected to Paul.

Luke was connected to Paul. But Luke was also a Gentile. For this reason, some find it unpalatable that a Gentile would write a book marked by such an intimate familiarity with Judaism, especially one that at times is critical of Jewish temple practices. He's certainly capable of the advanced Greek style present in the letter (cf. Luke-Acts), but some have wondered if an audience that was likely predominately Jewish would have been receptive to such a letter coming from a Gentile like Luke? Still a decent case can be made for Luke as the author, even if it's not airtight.⁷

If I'm not mistaken, Martin Luther was the first to suggest Apollos was the author.⁸ In Acts 18, Apollos is described as "*a Jew...an eloquent man, competent in the Scriptures...instructed in the way of the Lord*" and as one who "*spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus*" as he "*powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the Scriptures that the Christ was Jesus*" (Acts 18:24, 25, 28). That's exactly the kind of man we would expect to have written Hebrews, given its content. But is that enough to

determine that he's the author? Of course not. Someone highly esteemed in the early church like Apollos may have written the letter, but, since we don't know anything of his writing or preaching style, it's hard to come to the conclusion that he was the author. It's possible that he was, but it's impossible to know for sure.

Another popular suggestion has been Barnabas.⁹ Not only was he one of Paul's close companions, but he was also a Levite, so he was from the Israelite tribe associated with the Jewish priesthood. Since that priesthood and the rituals they carried out are prominent topics in this letter, we could easily imagine Barnabas being well suited to write on their relationship to Christ. Furthermore, Hebrews describes itself as a "*word of exhortation*" (13:22) and Barnabas' name means "son of exhortation."¹⁰ It's an interesting theory, but once again, is highly speculative. At the end of the day, we simply do not know who wrote the letter. All suggestions are, at best, merely educated guesses.¹¹

It's also difficult to establish with any precision to whom the letter was originally addressed. It will be clear to us all as we go along that the audience primarily consisted of Jewish Christians tempted to walk away from Christ and go back into their former Judaism,¹² but it's hard to say much more than that about their identity. Most commentators have suggested that these Jewish Christians were located either in Palestine or Rome, for reasons we don't have time to get into this morning.¹³ In fact, that's about all the time we have for background today.

The rest of this sermon and all of next Sunday we will consider the opening sentence of the letter that lays the theological groundwork for what follows. You heard me right—two sermons, one sentence. To be fair though, the opening sentence in Greek amounts to four verses (and broken up into 3 sentences) in our English text. I'll read all four verses this morning, but we will consider just the first two with our remaining time. Follow along as I read, beginning in verse 1. This is God's Word...

"Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets,² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.³ He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high,⁴ having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs." (Hebrews 1:1-4)

As I said, this is one very eloquent and elaborate sentence in Greek. I'll show you some of the beauty of the sentence next week (Lord willing), but for now I'll simply say that there is one main clause that everything else in the sentence serves as commentary on. The main clause is "*God...has spoken to us by his Son...*"¹⁴ That's what this sentence is about and that's what this whole book is trying to explain, namely, what God has communicated "*by his Son.*"

Before we get to what God has communicated, it's worth pausing for a moment and just reminding ourselves of the fundamental truth that God is a speaking God.¹⁵ We don't have to figure out who God is. He has taken the guesswork out of the whole affair. God has communicated to us and He has communicated Himself to us. He has not remained silent. He's outspoken. As one preacher put it, "He is not an idea to be thought about. He is a person to be listened to and understood and enjoyed and obeyed."¹⁶ The question for us is will we actually listen to what He has said?

If we don't, we can know nothing about Him. Here again Phillips has wise words for us,

“By definition, God is beyond the realm of our senses, from which all our self-gained knowledge has to come. Therefore, if God is there and wants us to know him—if he has an answer, a plan, or a salvation—he is going to have to speak to us. And he must speak in a way we can understand. Therefore, there is nothing more important, nothing more essential, than what Hebrews says in its very first verse: ‘God has spoken.’”¹⁷

Don't miss how vital that reality is and how dependent we are on God for knowledge of Him. The writer of Hebrews grasped this and so he comes right out of the gate rejoicing in the fact that God has spoken and, better still, He has spoken “*by his Son.*” I love the way Raymond Brown puts this in his commentary: “In Christ God has closed the greatest communication gap of all time, that which exists between a holy God and sinful mankind.”¹⁸

You guys are a bit too quiet to suggest that you get how amazing this is! Let's dig a bit deeper and maybe you will wake up. To help us grasp how blessed we are, the writer of Hebrews contrasts how God has spoken in days gone by and how God has spoken to us. There are four contrasts in verses 1 and 2. Here's the first one has to do with timing...

LONG AGO

IN THESE LAST DAYS

The thing to note here is when “the past” turned to the “the last days.” The dividing line is Christ. When Christ arrived it was the turn of the age. So as we enter into the Christmas season it's good to remember that when Jesus arrived on earth He was inaugurating “the last days.” People sometimes come up to pastors and ask questions like, “Do you think we are living in the last days?” I have to be careful how I answer that. The answer is *yes*. But what I mean by “yes” is not usually what they think I mean. When the biblical writers use language like “last days,” they tend to use it as a description of that period of time that stretches between the first coming of Christ and His second coming (still in the future). That's quite a bit different than many of you have been conditioned to think from many of the popular end-times, fiction books out there. But the writer of Hebrews isn't saying anything unusual for the New Testament. He even adds the word “*these*” so there's no mistaking that we are living in the “*last days*” from his perspective. We are living in the days when all those “end time” prophecies are fulfilled in the person and work of Christ.¹⁹ In Paul's words, “*the end of the ages has come*” (1 Corinthians 10:11).

Next notice the contrast between who received the revelation in each age...

LONG AGO
GOD SPOKE TO OUR FATHERS

IN THESE LAST DAYS
GOD HAS SPOKEN TO US

When the author refers to “our fathers,” he is referring to the people of God in the past.²⁰ The contrast is between God's people under the Old Covenant and God's people under the New Covenant. We will have a lot to say about that as we progress in the series, so don't worry if that sounds confusing at the moment.

What God spoke to the fathers, those Old Covenant folks, has been preserved in the Scriptures. Think of this as a reference to the Old Testament. The contrast is between two stages of divine revelation. The Christian Scriptures begin in Genesis, not Matthew. As important as the New Testament is we must remember that “the Old Testament cannot be ignored, for it provides us with the theological and redemptive-historical context for understanding the gospel.”²¹ Hebrews will prove what I tell you all the time, the better you know your Old Testament, the better you will understand the New.

But the reverse is also true. The author reminds us that it was in fact *God* who spoke to our fathers. So, just like them, we are legitimately hearing the voice of God when we hear the Old Testament (or the New Testament, for that matter).²² This is why whenever we pause and read the text that the sermon will focus on I always pause and remind you that what I am about to read is “the Word of God.” These aren’t just words. These are words in which we can actually hear the voice of the living God. Never forget that.

And yet the Old Testament, spoken to the fathers, was incomplete. It contains revelation that progressively develops²³ as you move from one page to the next and that revelation doesn’t culminate until Christ is revealed in the New Testament.²⁴ So, as F. F. Bruce, one of the most important biblical scholars of our lifetimes, has carefully noted:

“Divine revelation is thus seen to be progressive—but the progression is not from the less true to the more true, from the less worthy to the more worthy or from the less mature to the more mature. How could it be so when it is one and the same God who is revealed throughout?...The progression is one from promise to fulfillment...”²⁵

So then, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, seen most brilliantly in the New Testament, “is the long-awaited conclusion that fulfills all promises and realizes all types and shadows of the Old Testament”.²⁶ It’s not that the Gospel is not in the Old Testament. It is. But you might say that we can see the Gospel “in bud” in the Old Testament and we see it “in bloom” in the New Testament.²⁷ Therefore, it’s equally valid to say that you will understand your Old Testament better when you understand the New.²⁸ Hebrews will demonstrate this as well. So I agree with Al Mohler, the President of Southern Seminary, “In order to live faithfully before God, we must not only read the Old Testament, but also learn to read it rightly in relation to Christ.”²⁹

I’ve tried to model this during my tenure here. And it’s one of the reasons we have had a pretty equal split of sermons between the Old and New Testaments and why, when I’ve preached from the Old Testament, I’ve always taken the time to help us understand it in light of the person and work of Christ. All Scripture does, after all, point to Him and His Gospel. If you hang at Southern Oaks long enough, that should be pretty hard to deny.

The third contrast has to do with the instrument God used to communicate...

LONG AGO
GOD SPOKE TO OUR FATHERS
BY THE PROPHETS

IN THESE LAST DAYS
GOD HAS SPOKEN TO US
BY HIS SON

We should notice what the author *didn’t* say. He didn’t say that in the past God spoke to us by the prophets and in these last days he has spoken to us by apostles. If he had said that it would be true, of course, and

indeed he will say something similar to that in the next chapter (2:3-4).³⁰ But here he is emphasizing a different truth. At the climax of God's communication, He chose not to send a mere prophet. He sent His own Son.

Kent Hughes tells the story of an unbeliever who was wrestling with the idea that knowing God seemed impossible.

“His thinking was that as Creator, God created us in the same way as a dramatist creates his characters and that the gap was so vast between God and man that men could no more know God than Hamlet could know his author-creator Shakespeare. But as the man thought further, he realized that his analogy suggested just the opposite: for Shakespeare as creator could make it possible. Extending the analogy, Shakespeare could, in principle, write himself into the play and dialogue with Hamlet. The ‘Shakespeare’ [character in the play] would of course be both Shakespeare and one of Shakespeare's creatures. It is an imperfect analogy, but God...did write himself into life in his Son, making the ultimate communication.”³¹

The unbeliever in question was C. S. Lewis, who describes the evolution of his thought on this in his autobiography, called *Surprised By Joy*.³²

Even before the Son is described in what immediately follows in Hebrews, we are left with the distinct feeling that there is something greater about God's communication in these last days. Why? Because there is a “clear qualitative difference” between a son and a prophet. And furthermore, in the next verses the author will begin to show that the Son shares in the divine nature. He's second person of the Trinity.³³ He is God in the flesh. So if God has spoken to us by His Son, then He has given us the greatest possible revelation of Himself that can be given to sinful humanity.³⁴ There is no greater word to be communicated, than, in the language of the Apostle John, “*the Word [who] was God*” (John 1:1).

John Piper captures the idea well:

“The word that God spoke by his Son is the decisive word. It will not be followed in this age by any greater word or replacement word. This is *the Word of God*—the person of Jesus, the teaching of Jesus, the work of Jesus.”³⁵

Concerning this “final and decisive”³⁶ word, Martin Luther, the Protestant Reformer said this:

“If the word of the prophets is accepted, how much more ought we to seize the gospel of Christ, since it is not a prophet speaking to us but the Lord of the prophets, not a servant but a son, not an angel but God.”³⁷

But perhaps no one said it better than John the Baptist when He pointed us to Jesus:

“*He who comes from above is above all. He who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks in an earthly way. He who comes from heaven is above all.*” (John 3:31)³⁸

And, finally, the superiority of God's communication by His Son is seen in one more contrast...

LONG AGO
GOD SPOKE TO OUR FATHERS
BY THE PROPHETS
MANY TIMES AND MANY WAYS

IN THESE LAST DAYS
GOD HAS SPOKEN TO US
BY HIS SON
ONE DECISIVE WAY (Implied)

This final contrast is partially implied. The author says that God's former communication came at various times/parts³⁹ and in various ways, but, unlike the other three statements, this one has no counterpart. Why? Because it's implied. The author expects us to fill in the gap and thereby see his point. God speaking by His Son is so much greater that it doesn't require the same multifaceted expression as we find in the Old Testament. In the Old Testament God communicated through prophets, signs, writing on a wall, angels, songs, a still small voice, a cloud, a burning bush, and even a donkey (just to name a few examples). That last one I think about regularly. It reminds me that, if God wanted, He could use a donkey to do my job every week. That's how dispensable I am. Don't clap at that! I'm just saying, it's a humbling story, that's all. I can't even look at a donkey without tearing up anymore.⁴⁰

But in all seriousness, it is pretty encouraging to see the multiplicity of ways God has communicated. Why? Here's how one preacher answers that question:

“Because we all know that some of those portions and ways are hard to understand. If God had only spoken in one portion or one way and we couldn't get it, we would be very frustrated and very disadvantaged. But God has not done it that way. He has spoken in many places and times and portions and in many ways. So if you have difficulty grasping his word in Leviticus, you may hear him clearly in Proverbs. If you don't see the point clearly in Zechariah, you may still be deeply moved by the message of Jonah. If you don't catch on yet to some strange vision in Ezekiel, you may be sustained by the sufferings of Job. The point is this: God means to provide a lot of possibilities in the Old Testament where you can hear him.”⁴¹

But the larger point that the writer of Hebrews is making is that every means of communicating that God has used in the past pales in comparison to Him speaking by the person of His Son! “The story of divine revelation is a story of progression up to Christ, but there is no progression beyond him.”⁴² Why? Because Christ is greater. He's the greatest word of all time. The G.O.A.T.

Now there is much more I would like to say about this, but, alas, we are almost out of time. Perhaps we will get to them next week, when we examine what the author says about the superiority of God's Son-revelation. He gives us seven statements in his opening statement that show the superiority of Christ. I can't wait for us to consider them together. Bring a friend.

But, as I close, let me leave you with a thought. We have all had those moments of angst or silence when we have caught ourselves thinking in desperation, “God, will you please just speak to me? Please, God, don't be silent. I need you now!” We have all been there. Maybe that exactly describes what you were feeling when you came into this place.

Well, friends, perhaps we should consider these first couple verses as God's gentle, loving, and patient rebuke. They remind us that God has spoken. He has not been silent. He has given His Son. So before we get carried away in our desperation or frustrated in our longing to hear from God, we need to ask ourselves if we have listened to this Word, Jesus Christ? As someone else has put it, “Have I really heard the word of God in the person and the teaching and the work of the Son? Is the aching of my soul and the confusion of

my mind really owing to the fact that I have exhausted hearing his word and need another word?"⁴³ The answer, church, is most certainly no.

So this text is a gentle rebuke for us. It reminds me that these feelings of God's silence in my own life so often accompany my neglect of God's Word. And I know it's not just me. It amazes me how often people express their desire to hear from God and yet their Bibles remain un-cracked. What might you hear, if you regularly sought to hear God's voice through pages of God's revealed Word that shows us His final Word in Christ, rather than the tea leaves of your life circumstances? What might the Spirit allow you to hear?

So perhaps a good challenge is in order. I challenge you between now and the end of the year to pick one of the first four books of the New Testament (Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John), which tell the story of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and read it. Don't rush it. Begin each reading by praying earnestly that God would help you to hear His voice. That's not complicated, is it? What do you have to lose? If you need a Bible, you can steal one of the free ones in the foyer. It's the only time, I'll give you permission to steal from the church. If you want a nicer one, there's a lost and found in the back. (I don't think anyone's been using those). And if you are having trouble tracking one down, let me know and I'll hook you up.

I'm not saying that if you do this you will have all your curiosities about life and God clarified. What I am saying is that, if you want to hear from God, you must not neglect how He has chosen to speak. And I'm quite confident that He speaks clearly in His Word on a great many things, not least of which, the fact that you are loved by Him and that is why He willingly sent His own Son to die for your sins so that you could inherit eternal life in His presence. You can't know everything about God, but you can know that and I'm quite confident that you will see that, if you do what I am asking over the next month. Why am I so confident? Because, as Todd Wagner puts it in a book called, *Come & See*,

"His Word certainly teaches us that there is a multiplicity of things only the Father fully understand, but His love, affection, and heart to rescue and bless His children are not intended to be among those mysteries. In fact, the very reason He sent Christ was to reveal the true image of Himself in present grace... So while God still possesses characteristics of His eternal existence that are utterly unknowable to us, the goodness of God—the kindness of His intention to us—should no longer be one of them. He sent Christ to remove the veil over this mystery and forever reveal His grace once and for all. You will never want to seek or know God's will more than He wants to show and reveal it to you."⁴⁴

Believe me when I tell you that you just might find Christ so compelling that you'll feel overwhelmingly drawn to Him and find yourself trusting in Him alone to save your soul, set you free, and steer your life. If that happens, you'll never be the same. You'll be God's child. Don't believe me? Take my challenge. God has spoke by His Son. Look, see, and listen.

Let's pray...

¹ A. W. Pink, *An Exposition of Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1954), 29, also cited by Richard D. Phillips, who uses a similar comparison to describe the point of the book of Hebrews. Richard D. Phillips, *Hebrews* (REC; Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2006), 5-6.

² *Ibid.*, 17.

³ John Calvin put it well, “Since the Epistle addressed to the Hebrews contains a full discussion of the eternal divinity of Christ, His supreme government, and only priesthood (which are the main points of heavenly wisdom), and as these things are so explained in it, that the whole power and work of Christ are set forth in the most graphic way, it rightly deserves to have the place and honor of an invaluable treasure in the Church” (John Calvin, *New Testament Commentaries*, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 12:xi; also cited in Phillips, 9).

⁴ R. Albert Mohler Jr., *Exalting Jesus in Hebrews* (CCEC; Nashville: B&H Academic, 2017), 12.

⁵ Phillips elaborates some of these commonly cited arguments against Pauline authorship: “First, in all of Paul’s other letters he identifies himself, blatantly asserting his apostolic authority. The writer of Hebrews does not identify himself, although some speculate that because of Jewish hostility Paul may have wanted to remain anonymous. More telling is the nature of the Greek in Hebrews, which is of a high literary style in striking contrast to Paul’s more common Greek. The structure of Hebrews, with its interspersed exhortations, contrasts with Paul’s tendency to save practical applications for the letter’s end. Most conclusive is the statement of Hebrews 2:3, which says the author’s message “was attested to us by those who heard.” In other words, the writer received his message from those who heard it firsthand from Jesus. This is the very thing Paul always denies in his letters, insisting that he received his revelation directly from the Lord and not from the other apostles (see Gal. 1:12).” Phillips, 6-7.

⁶ These reasons did not stop some of the earliest speculators from ascribing the book to Paul (e.g., Pantaenus, Clement of Alexandria, Eusebius, Athanasius, Didymus the Blind, Epiphanius, Cyril of Jerusalem, J. Chrysostom, Jerome [tentatively], Theodore of Mopsuestia, Augustine [tentatively], Cyril of Alexandria; et al). See Hebert W. Bateman, *Charts on the Book of Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2012), 17-34 (which contains a wealth of information on authorship consolidated in a series of short charts that I consulted and utilized for the list above and in the footnotes below related to Luke, Apollos, and Barnabas). One could argue that Pauline authorship was an appealing option since, if true, it would remove all controversy related to the letter’s canonicity.

⁷ Some historical figures that have argued for Lucan authorship include Thomas Aquinas (*Commentary on the Epistle of Hebrews*, trans. By C. Baer [South Bend: St. Augustine Press, 2006]) and John Calvin (who also thought it could have been Clement of Rome). There are not many commentators today that land on Luke, but the best case is made by David L. Allen, *Hebrews* (NAC 35; Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2010), 29-61 (especially 47ff).

⁸ He has not been alone in this suggestion though, as some later commentators have arrived at the same conclusion: F. Bleek, *Der Brief an die Hebräer* (Berlin: F. Dümmler, 1828); F. W. Farrar, *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews* (Cambridge: University Press, 1888); R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Epistle to the Hebrews and of the Epistle of James* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House); T. W. Manson, “The Problem of the Epistle to the Hebrews,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 32 (September 1949): 16-17; C. Spicq, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Vol. 1 (Paris: J. Gabalda, 1952); George H. Guthrie, *Hebrews* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 26; “The Case for Apollos as the Author of Hebrews,” in *Faith and Mission* 18:2 (2001): 41-56.

⁹ This suggestion has early and late advocates that include Tertullian, Gregory of Elvira, Filaster, J. Caméron, C. F. Keil, G. Salmon, B. Weiss, F. Dibelius, G. Edmundson, J. A. T. Robinson, B. Pixner, et al.

¹⁰ Phillips, 7.

¹¹ Origen was correct, “Who wrote the epistle is known to God alone” (Eusebius, *The History of the Church*, trans. G. A. Williamson [New York: Penguin, 1965], 6.25). Perhaps then the conclusion of R. Albert Mohler Jr. is most appropriate: “Ultimately, we need to limit our imaginations and trust that the Holy Spirit has given us all that we need. God, in his providence, did not reveal to us the human author or the original recipients. Evidently we are not meant to know these things and can still understand the book. Perhaps God did not reveal that data because with it we might read the book differently from the way the Holy Spirit has intended for us to read it. What is clear is that the Holy Spirit desires for us to read this book—along with all of Scripture—as written to ‘the church.’ Therefore, we must approach the book of Hebrews understanding that it is God’s word to all Christians, and we must allow the book to shape how we read the Old Testament after the reality of Christ’s sacrificial work on the cross.” Mohler, 6.

¹² Some have even suggested, as Al Mohler points out, “the letter may have been intended for converts who were formerly Jewish priests, since Hebrews assumes a great deal of knowledge about the Old Testament Scriptures and the Levitical priesthood.” Beyond this though there is no evidence that the audience should be so narrowly defined. *Ibid.*, 4.

¹³ Once again, Phillips does a good job representing in an abbreviated way the best evidence for both suggestions: Those who argue for a Palestinian audience point out that Christians are known to have suffered at the hands of their fellow Jews, and also point to the detailed references to the Jewish temple ritual. Since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, some have tried to show similarities to the writings of the Essene community in the Judean desert. Opposing this theory is the fact that all of the Old Testament citations in Hebrews are from the Septuagint, the Greek version common in that time, which was not

used in Palestine as much as elsewhere. Also opposing a Palestinian background is the statement that the recipients of the letter had only heard of Jesus secondhand (see Heb. 2:3). Furthermore, Hebrews 12:4 states that earlier persecutions did not involve the shedding of blood, whereas those in Palestine certainly did from the very beginning. Scholarly consensus has recently shifted in the direction of Rome. Clement of Rome, writing around A.D. 95, shows close familiarity with Hebrews, and the books of Acts and Romans speak of a large Jewish church in Rome from early on. The Jewish Christians there were persecuted in A.D. 49 under the emperor Claudius, and then again in the 60s under Nero. What we know of the former of these persecutions seems to fit the description of 10:32–34 and 12:4 (in that Claudius’s persecution involved loss of property and imprisonment, but not bloodshed), and the anticipation of violence fits the latter, with Nero’s notorious violence against Christians. Finally, there is the statement of Hebrews 13:24, ‘Those who come from Italy send you greetings.’ It could be that a pastor now in Rome was writing to Jewish believers in Palestine. But the more natural reason for Italian Christians to send their greetings is that the readers were themselves from Italy. If Rome was the location of the audience, then the letter would have been written shortly before A.D. 64, when Nero’s persecution broke out. Under almost all theories, Hebrews was written prior to A.D. 70, when Jerusalem and its temple were destroyed by the Romans. Not only does Hebrews speak of the temple rituals as a present reality, but it is hard to imagine its writer passing up such an opportunity as the fall of Jerusalem to prove the passing away of the old covenant religion.” Phillips, 7-8.

¹⁴ “Fundamental to the author’s argument is the conviction that God has not remained silent but has taken the initiative and revealed himself.” Peter O’Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 47.

¹⁵ “This initial affirmation is basic to the whole argument of this epistle, as indeed it is basic to Christian faith. Had God remained silent, enshrouded in thick darkness, the plight of mankind would have been desperate indeed; but now he has spoken his revealing, redeeming, and life-giving word, and his light we see light.” F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 45.

¹⁶ John Piper, “In These Last Days, God Has Spoken By A Son,” a sermon preached to Bethlehem Baptist Church on March 31, 1996, and accessed as of November 22, 2017, at the following website: <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/in-these-last-days-god-has-spoken-by-a-son>.

¹⁷ Phillips, 10.

¹⁸ Raymond Brown, *The Message of Hebrews* (BST; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1984), 27.

¹⁹ “The last days (Gen 49:1; Num 24:14; Isa 2:2; Jer 23:20; 25:19; Dan 10:14; Hos 3:5; Mic 4:1) represent the days in which God’s saving promises are fulfilled, and they have now commenced with the coming of the Son. Believers no longer live in the days when they await the fulfillment of what God has promised. They live in the eschaton: ‘the end of the ages have come’ (1 Cor 10:11). It is inconceivable that the readers would embrace the old era with its sacrifices and rituals now that the new has come in Jesus Christ.” Schreiner, 54. Similarly O’Brien, 50; Donald A. Hagner, *Hebrews* (Understanding the Bible; Nashville: Baker Books, 2011), 22; cf. Hebrews 9:6-10; 10:25.

²⁰ “This common expression [‘to the fathers’] is not restricted here to the biblical patriarchs, but designates all the people of God under the old covenant.” O’Brien, 48.

²¹ Mohler, 13.

²² “The author of Hebrews develops the theme that because God has spoken to us, it is necessary to respond to God’s word in obedience and faith. He holds up examples from ancient Israel where God spoke but the people did not obey because they lacked faith (e.g., 3:16–19; 4:6–11). It is a great privilege to be among those people to whom God has revealed himself, first through the prophets and now through the Son, but it also demands a response. It calls those who hear God speak to respond with faith through obedience, realizing that even no response is a response. This response of faith and obedience is not a simple one-time event; rather, the author of Hebrews wants his readers to continue to respond to what God has said in Christ by a continuous, lifelong obedience, and even when doing so will cause trouble and hardship. And so a major theme of Hebrews is the call to perseverance because of the fact that God has spoken.” Karen H. Jobes, *Letters to the Church: A Survey of Hebrews and the General Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 61.

²³ “The Book of Hebrews gives the Bible’s own slant on the process of revelation. Whenever the writer cites Scripture, it is never the human author whom he credits but the divine Author. In Hebrews 2:12 he cites Psalm 22:22 and ascribes it to Jesus Christ speaking in the Old Testament. Hebrews 3:7–11 cites Psalm 95, but prefaces it not by saying ‘as David said,’ but ‘as the Holy Spirit says.’ So it goes all through Hebrews. The point is not to deny the significance of the Bible’s human authors, but to show that our emphasis, following the Bible’s own emphasis, must always be on God speaking in his Word. This has several important implications. First, if God speaks in the Bible, then the Bible carries divine *authority*. . . . Second, if God wrote the Bible, then it is enduringly *relevant*. . . . Third, since God has spoken in the Bible, even though he did so with great diversity—‘at many times and in many ways’—we also hold to the *unity* of the Bible.” Phillips, 11-12.

²⁴ Raymond Brown remarks, “Without him [i.e., Christ] the Old Testament revelation is partial, fragmentary, preparatory and incomplete.” Brown, 28.

²⁵ He continues, “. . . as is made abundantly clear in the course of this epistle: the men and women of faith in Old Testament days did not in their lifetime experience the fulfillment of the divine promise in which they had trusted, ‘because, with us in mind, God had made a better plan, that only in company with us should they reach their perfection’ (11:40; NEB).”

Bruce, 45. Ben Witherington makes the same essential point when he writes, “Our author is not suggesting that what came before was bad. His comparison is between a good that was partial and piecemeal that came little by little and something better that came all at once in the Son. The comparison is between good and better, partial and definitive, ongoing and final, for our author, using the Septuagint phrase *the last days* to refer to the end times (Mic 4:1; Num 24:14), suggests that God has now offered his ‘last word’—the final revelation. The point he will be driving toward is that one dare not hand back God’s final and definitive offer or neglect it. Now that one has received it, there is no turning back.” Ben Witherington III, *Letters and Homilies for Jewish Christians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on Hebrews, James, and Jude* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2016), 100-101.

²⁶ Mohler, 9.

²⁷ Phillips, 12.

²⁸ Similarly, Ben Witherington makes the general observation that “what happens at the end of the story is decisive for interpreting all that has come before.” Witherington, 97.

²⁹ Mohler, 14. I really appreciate the way Richard Phillips expanded this point. After quoting various messianic texts from Isaiah, he remarked, “The way to be a true follower of Isaiah and the other prophets was and is to believe their message, to receive in faith the One for whom they prayed, who is the head of their order and the fulfillment of their age-old longings.” Phillips, 21.

³⁰ Piper also emphasizes this same truth in his sermon, “In These Last Days...”

³¹ R. Kent Hughes, *Hebrews: An Anchor for the Soul* (PW; Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), 21-22.

³² C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1955), 227.

³³ Mohler, 10. Karen Jobes makes a similar point: “In the Greek of Hebrews 1:2, the word translated “Son” is not preceded by the definite article (“the”), though English idiom requires it. Literally, the Greek reads, “God has spoken to us by Son.” This signals that the author of Hebrews is concerned with the *quality* or *kind* of revelation brought by the Son and not just the identity of *the* Son. The revelation of God brought by the Son is *qualitatively* different than that previously brought by the prophets. Son-revelation is of a qualitatively different kind than prophet-revelation. The nature of that profound difference is laid out in Hebrews 3–10....although the four gospels are full of Jesus’ words, there is not one of them in the book of Hebrews. This seems rather strange for a book that so confidently states that God has spoken to us by the Son. Wouldn’t this mean that Jesus’ words are God’s words? And if so, shouldn’t the author of Hebrews be quoting Jesus right and left to make his case? The fact that the book of Hebrews doesn’t *once* quote words from Jesus’ teaching is a big clue about another qualitative difference between the revelation given by many prophets of the past and the revelation given by the Son. Where the words of the prophets were the message from God in the past, the Son *himself* is God’s final revelation. This is not to say that what Jesus said isn’t important. It is to say that the *identity* of Jesus as the divine Son of God is what makes him the perfect and final revelation of God. And so no matter how many other people may come along claiming to be prophets with a word from God, if their message doesn’t point to Jesus Christ as God’s clearest revelation, their message is worthless for understanding God. If you want to know God, look at Jesus, who is the “exact representation” of God’s nature (Heb. 1:3). In other words, Jesus doesn’t just speak God’s words (that is what the prophets did), he *is* God’s word (as John’s gospel makes so beautifully clear).” Jobes, 62-63, 75-76.

³⁴ “This supremacy does not in any way malign the Old Testament faith. Unlike pagan religions, it was a legitimate revelation and a true faith. In the Old Testament ‘God spoke,’ and it was God-given religion. Nonetheless, Christ is superior and with his coming there is now no excuse for reverting back to Judaism.” Phillips, 13.

³⁵ Piper, “In These Last Days...” Similarly, Karen Jobes, one of the translators for the NIV, writes, “For the author of Hebrews, the final age of time, referred to as “these last days,” is defined by the appearance of the Son. In other words, there is no further communication from God to be expected that will supersede the Son. Note the perfect tense of the verb: God *has spoken* (not present, which would mean he currently is speaking), reinforcing the idea of finality....The author of Hebrews gives no room for the idea that another prophet sent from God will come into the world bringing news of a new way of salvation and relationship to God. Such is the claim of the prophet Mohammed and of the religion he founded, Islam, which honors Jesus as just one of the many prophets who spoke at many times and various ways in the past. The powerful message of Hebrews also speaks against forms of spirituality that reject God’s revelation in Jesus Christ, whether they are ancient pagan practices or New Age ideas. In other words, the opening verses of Hebrews make a bold claim that Jesus Christ, Son of God, is the full and final way in which God has spoken to humankind. The rest of the book of Hebrews through chapter 10 supports and argues for this claim.” Jobes, 59-60.

³⁶ O’Brien, 50.

³⁷ Martin Luther, cited in Phillips, 14, and Philip E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 37. Similarly, Martyn Lloyd-Jones stated: “A servant may be able to say everything that is right about his lord and master, he may know him well and intimately, but he can never represent him in the way that the son can. The son is a manifestation of the father by being what he is. Thus our Lord himself, while here on earth, represented and manifested the name of God in a way that is incomparable and greater than all others, because he is the Son of God.” D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Safe in the World* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1988), 60-61; also cited in Phillips, 20.

³⁸ Similarly John 1:14, 18: “*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth...No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known.*”

³⁹ “Some translations and interpreters understand the first adverb in a temporal sense (e.g., *at many times*, TNIV), but *polymerōs*, in fact, means ‘in many parts or pieces’, indicating that God spoke to the ancestors in a piecemeal or fragmentary fashion.” O’Brien, 49.

⁴⁰ David Platt, “The Life of Christ,” a sermon preached on April 5, 2009, and accessed in *David Platt Sermon Archive* (Birmingham, AL: David Platt), 1978.

⁴¹ Piper, “In These Last Days...”

⁴² Bruce, 46.

⁴³ Piper, “In These Last Days...”

⁴⁴ Todd Wagner, *Come and See: Everything You Ever Wanted in One Place You Would Never Look* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2017), 92-94.