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Creating Community: Rhetorical Vision and Symbolic Convergence in the Book of Hebrews

Abstract:

Since the introduction of social identity theory to the field of biblical studies, the Epistle to the Hebrews has become something of a proving ground for depicting the intergroup relations that are key to understanding relationally-oriented identity dynamics and community identification. However, while social identity theory is a valuable tool for describing how communities self-perceive as unique social entities through the use of in-group and out-group language, social identity theory does not describe the rhetorical process by which such language and communication develops or why this development is so key to creating a distinct community. Symbolic convergence theory, with its elements of fantasy themes, symbolic cues, and rhetorical vision, gives us the unique language we need to describe that process, and the epistle to the Hebrews demonstrates not only the characteristics of a collective identity, but the very birth of that identity as well.

Keywords: symbolic convergence, social identity, Hebrews, rhetoric, community, covenant, worldview.

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Introduction

Since the introduction of social identity theory to the field of biblical studies, the Epistle to the Hebrews has become something of a proving ground for depicting the intergroup relations that are key to understanding relationally-oriented identity dynamics and community identification.¹ However, while social identity theory is a valuable tool for describing how communities self-perceive as unique social entities through the use of in-group and out-group language, social identity theory does not describe the rhetorical process by which such language and communication develops or why this development is so key to essentially creating a distinct community. Social identity theory explains what makes a community distinct and how that distinction is maintained, but it does not adequately explain how an undefined group of individuals becomes a social entity, self-defined in opposition to other communities within the same geographic location.

So while the Epistle to the Hebrews stands as the example par excellence in the NT of identifying in-group, community-defining language, we find that a social identity approach falls short of fully appreciating the rhetorical strategy of the text as it moves the readers from an indistinct, uncertain group into a self-defined, distinct social community.² And this is the process we see in Hebrews: Hebrews 6:1-12 indicates that the readers were being tempted to abandon their faith in Christ; 10:1-4, 29-39 imply that these were at least considering a return to Judaism and the sacrificial system.³ Later, 10:32-35 reveals the reason for this rejection to be persecution, most probably severe social ostracism as well as economic and judicial oppression (12:4; 10:32-34) (Salevaio 2002: 126-127). The author's continued exhortations to unite together in mutual love and support (9:24-25; 13:1-17) suggest a fractured community that does not provide a sufficiently compelling and distinct identity to offset the alienation brought on by persecution.⁴ The in-group versus out-group language is centered on symbols—both people and rituals—that are central to Jewish identity, strongly suggesting that the writer's goal is to strengthen the community identity of these Christians so that their distinction is compelling and preferable to rejoining previous social groups, either Jewish or Gentile.⁵ So social identity theory describes what the problem is, and what solution is proposed by the writer of Hebrews. But it does not offer a mechanism by which to trace the rhetorical process by which language impacts the formation of group identity. Symbolic convergence theory, a framework developed to describe the formation of small group community identities

and frequently used to analyze political rhetoric, gives us unique tools to assess the rhetoric of the epistle to the Hebrews.

Symbolic Convergence Theory: Understanding the Process of Group Self-Identification

Symbolic Convergence as Shared Consciousness

Symbolic convergence theory describes how unconnected individuals come to share a common vision or interpretation of reality; how this shared view grows and is sustained; how it provides “meaning, emotion, and motive for action” for members of that community; and what specifically indicates that such a shared consciousness exists (Cragan 1998: 94). The theory is based on the premise that people interpret their world and experiences through stories that guide and reflect our understanding of how the world works (Littlejohn 2002: 157). As John Dominic Crossan picturesquely states, “we live in story like fish live in the sea” (Crossan 1975: 47). Regardless of language, society, technological development, or any other marker one could affix to a culture, story pervades all of human consciousness. In fact, “man’s very being is affective and imaginative, and his powers of survival and creation are nourished by dynamic impulses which mediate themselves to him through inherited and ever-renewed dramatizations which define his world” (Wilder 1971: 121).

Story is how humanity understands reality and how people cope with their experiences, establish their expectations, and guide their interactions with one another and the world around them. The stories people tell give meaning and purpose to their reality. As people share these stories with each other, various elements within the stories take on meaning larger than the story itself and become symbols pointing to a larger interpretive paradigm of reality (Cragan 1995: 33). Symbols move experiences beyond what the senses perceive into an orderly, logical realm where they can be understood and processed (Foss 1996: 122).

Symbolic convergence theory was born in the mind of Ernest Bormann in his studies of small group communication at the University of Minnesota through the 1950s and 1960s. As he and his fellows studied transcripts of group dialogue, they began to notice that groups did not cohere or self-identify as separate entities until stories had been shared, expanded, and validated by group members. These stories each manifested an aspect of how the group chose to collectively interpret past experiences

or common events. In this sense, these stories were not so much accurate reflections of facts but creative retelling and interpretations of events. Eventually, the stories had been told and retold so many times that the mere mention of a key phrase or theme was sufficient to draw the entire story into group discussion (Hirokawa 1996: 81-83).

For example, stories quickly emerge within student groups of impossible deadlines, the heartless teacher, and the pushover professor. While the stories might not use these particular phrases, their themes were instantly recognized and built on by other students within the group, eventually building a common rhetorical vision of the eternal struggle between the power players (professors) and the powerless (hapless, hardworking undergraduates). Faculty groups, on the other hand, would build stories of the eternally lazy student, lowering standards within education, and high demands placed on overworked teachers. Their rhetorical vision would read somewhat the opposite of their students'! Thus, while the facts remain the same, each group may choose to interpret them differently, leading to different thematic stories that manifest very different perceptions of reality.

Symbolic convergence theory is so named "because it deals with the human tendency to interpret signs, signals, current experience, and human action and to invest those with meaning" (1996: 89). In this sense, an individual's perception of reality is created by the stories and symbols he or she adopts. The more the stories are told within the community, the more participants' perceptions of reality converge based on shared adoption and validation of these symbols of reality. As more people share these symbols, a distinct community emerges with a unique vision of how the world operates. The theory thus explains how people come to share belief systems, emotional responses to reality, and loyalty to symbols (1996: 90). This sharing of stories and symbols that indicates a common worldview is called symbolic convergence: a convergence of symbols within a group of people (Foss 1996: 122).

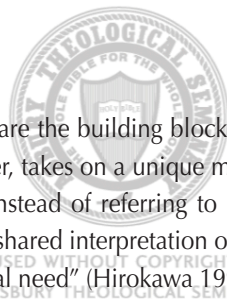
The key to symbolic convergence is the adoption of stories and meanings within a community. As these stories are adopted, they create the shared consciousness that defines a distinct rhetorical community. The stories told within the community first reflect how its members understand the world, and then determine how they interpret their experiences, how they respond to events, and what motivates their actions within the world. Also, since this shared consciousness only emerges when individuals share

their stories, reality—or, rather, their perception of reality—is co-created as they agree on and sustain their rhetorical vision of the world (Cragan 1995: 96). In other words, “a symbolic fact, initiated by one person, is picked up, embellished, and reconfigured by others and becomes the common consciousness (symbolic interpretation) for the community” (1995: 97).

Since Bormann’s original research, John Cragan and Donald Shields have joined him in spearheading a growing number of communications scholars and an avalanche of articles applying symbolic convergence theory to small group dynamics; studies of national, ethnic, or cultural self-identification;⁶ interpersonal, mass media, and organizational communication (Cragan 1999: 92-106) and even political manifestos (Bormann 1996: 1-28). It should be noted, however, that each of these studies is an analysis of communication patterns of currently existing rhetorical communities (e.g., small groups, cultural communities, and businesses). Little has been done to date to apply symbolic convergence theory to rhetorical communities that no longer exist, such as the original readers of the Gospels, of Paul’s letters, or of the Epistle to the Hebrews.⁷ The reason for this is simple: it is much more difficult to analyze the communication patterns and themes of a community when the only remaining records are written. It is comparable to reading a one-sided transcript of a discussion: the entire discussion must be recreated from the words of only one of the participants. This is not an impossible task, however. It merely requires that the groundwork be carefully laid to provide an adequate foundation from which to read the text. So, we turn next to the essential rhetorical elements of symbolic convergence: rhetorical vision, fantasy themes, and symbolic cues. The development of a distinct rhetorical community hinges on these concepts and how they are created and used (Littlejohn 2002: 158).

Fantasy Themes

Fantasy themes are the building blocks of symbolic convergence theory. “Fantasy,” however, takes on a unique meaning within the world of symbolic convergence. Instead of referring to daydreams, fantasy “is the creative and imaginative shared interpretation of events that fulfills a group psychological or rhetorical need” (Hirokawa 1996:88). So, a fantasy theme is a creatively designed narrative that strikes a chord in the experiences of the group. Fantasy themes often provide a creative interpretation of group experiences or a way to make sense of a type of experience common to



group member (Foss 1996: 124). This retelling of common experience is further expanded by community members and becomes “symbolic knowledge,” in that as the narrative develops, it becomes invested with more meaning than a simple statement of events warrants (Cragan 1995: 35).

As narratives, fantasy themes contain all of the major elements of story, including plot, setting, and characters. Because fantasy themes are the basic structural elements of a community's symbolic reality (their understanding of reality as represented by community-validated symbols), fantasy themes require one more element: a sanctioning agent (1995: 35). The sanctioning agent is the trustworthy source of the narrative. In many cultures, especially ancient ones, community members would ascribe the fantasy theme to the ultimate sanctioning agent: a deity. For example, Athena functions as a sanctioning agent in the *Odyssey* when she offers a cosmic interpretation to Odysseus of his wanderings (*Od.*, Book XIII). The same could be said of Exodus 19, where God speaks to Moses in a cloud and gives him the Law: God functions as the rhetorical sanctioning agent to legitimate the role and power of the Law in Jewish culture.

As stories such as these are told over and over within a community, participants pick up on the themes and elaborate on them, corporately investing their various elements with symbolic meaning and creating fantasy themes that demonstrate and sustain how the community understands and interprets reality (Foss 1996: 123). Sometimes the basic events or skeletal structure of a fantasy theme will be repeated through several similar themes (e.g., God intervening on his people's behalf). This fantasy type expresses more deeply felt “truths” about reality and experience and actually communicates the “meaning, emotion, and motive” inherent within the original fantasy theme more powerfully than did the theme itself. Recasting a recognized fantasy type in a new fantasy theme, then, immediately elicits the emotional response and loyalty previously linked with the original fantasy theme, even though the context is entirely new (Cragan 1995: 38). This phenomenon proves especially valuable in the New Testament as evangelists seek to recast familiar and accepted stories into a gospel call that will draw the acceptance and loyalty of the old theme; Peter's Pentecost speech (Acts 2) is one such example.

A single rhetorical community may adopt several such fantasy types, the most powerful of which is the saga. A saga is a fantasy type that retells the triumphs and experiences of the community or of an individual

significant to the community's existence (1995: 38). Usually, sagas retell the genesis of the community and the challenges it has overcome to exist and succeed. Beyond any other stories, sagas contain the heart and allegiance of the community because they define participants' heritage and express their deepest hopes for the future.

The essential attribute of all fantasy themes is that they are shared across the community. As they are elaborated on and become more and more familiar to community members, eventually certain key phrases, word plays, or even gestures become so intrinsically intertwined with the narratives that mere mention of these phrases or gestures will bring the entire narrative to the audience's mind. For example, *Seinfeld* fans will all recognize the phrase "No soup for you!" as referring to the "Soup Nazi" episode, in which petty tyranny is the revenge of the small-minded (Season 7, Ep. 6). Or, for a more contemporary example, "I can do this all day!" immediately cues the Captain America story, in which sheer perseverance—or indomitable stubbornness!—win over much stronger, smarter, seemingly unbeatable foes. In much the same way, the author of the Gospel of Matthew draws upon the much larger fantasy theme of the victorious Messiah when he quotes Zechariah 9:9 to describe Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on a donkey (Matthew 21:4-9).

These types of phrases and word plays are known as symbolic cues. As Hirokawa and Poole observe, "when participants have shared a fantasy theme, they have charged their emotional and memory banks with meanings and emotions that can be set off by a commonly agreed-upon cryptic symbolic cue" (Hirokawa 1996: 96). So symbolic cues can be slogans and in-group jokes as well as word plays, gestures, or key phrases that identify and tap into entire fantasy themes. In this way, symbolic cues epitomize the symbolic aspect of symbolic convergence theory: the rhetorical community corporately shares specific symbols and symbol referents whose meanings are larger than their semantic weight and that point to stories that reveal a way of interpreting reality that sets the community apart from other groups.

Creating Fantasy Themes

Given the degree of symbolism inherent in fantasy themes, it would seem that creating a fantasy theme would be both complex and time-consuming. However, because fantasy themes are co-created by the community itself, the latent creativity of the entire community is

available to invest new narratives with symbolic meaning. As mentioned above, it is human tendency to perceive and interpret reality in stories, dramatizing events in order to experience them corporately (1996: 92). This dramatization inevitably leads to investing the stories with symbolic meaning, moving the narrative beyond experience toward understanding and interpretation.

Fantasy themes originate with skilled and creative fantasizers whose personal interpretation of events is so convincing and powerful that other members of the group adopt and adapt it. The success of the fantasizer's message is dependent on his rhetorical skill as well as on its novelty, persuasive ability, explanatory power, and consistent fit with other fantasy themes already accepted by the community (Cragan 1995: 48). If the message is successful, "a chain is triggered by the first dramatizing message and is then picked up and elaborated by the other members" (Hirokawa 1996: 104). As this group- or public-chaining takes place (always swiftly, and sometimes within minutes in a group setting), a fantasy theme emerges with its attendant symbolic cues (Cragan 1998: 108). Creating a fantasy theme, then, is a simple and often surprisingly quick process within a community as long as the theme itself is accepted as viable and consistent with the community's overarching view of reality.

Rhetorical Visions

This overarching view of reality is known as a rhetorical vision. It is a deep-seated interpretive paradigm shared by the members of a specific community that encompasses the values, beliefs, and expectations of the participants. As Stephen Littlejohn notes, "rhetorical visions structure our sense of reality in areas we cannot experience directly but can only know by symbolic reproduction... in large measure these visions form the assumptions on which a group's knowledge is based" (Littlejohn 2002: 157). In other words, rhetorical visions work to explain events outside of an individual's personal experience by linking symbols (specific meaning) to those events and thus bringing them symbolically within one's experience and thus subject to interpretation and explanation.

However, just because a rhetorical vision explains events that occur beyond personal experience does not mean that it has no ties to existential reality: the vision "spurs people to action, but the need for a link to reality helps squelch totally fantastic fantasies" (2002: 111). On the contrary, rhetorical visions must have reality-links in order to be considered

viable. A reality-link is simply the observable evidence that a rhetorical vision actually does account for sensory experience and current events (Cragan 1995: 46). In other words, a rhetorical vision must have explanatory and predictive power. It must be able to explain not only events beyond community experience but also those occurring within the community. One must also be able to adequately predict cause and effect within the interpretive boundaries of the vision. Simply put, a rhetorical vision is not viable unless the community is able to create reasonable expectations of reality and see those fulfilled.

Furthermore, because rhetorical visions often reflect a view of reality that is outside of one's experience—frequently describing cosmic- or semi-cosmic conflicts—they may never be fully described within the community. They are instead “built up piecemeal” by sharing fantasy themes within the community that support and sustain the vision (1995: 158). A rhetorical community will share many fantasy themes, each of which manifest a particular aspect of its rhetorical vision. This seeming haphazard construction allows a rhetorical vision the flexibility it needs to adapt to new ideas and events: instead of splintering apart when new information or experiences are introduced, it can be creatively reinvented to encompass and reinterpret events, even leading to a new understanding of the world. In fact, a rhetorical vision is under constant reinvention by community members as they seek to assimilate new experiences into their interpretive paradigm and integrate into their experience and understanding events beyond their immediate reality. Cragan and Shields attribute this process to the novelty principle, which “requires that for fantasies to chain-out, and continue to convey meaning, emotion, and motive for action, they must remain fresh and creative” (Cragan 1998: 109). The annual Passover ritual and recitation (Exodus 12:24-27) is perhaps the most powerful biblical example of this type of consistent rhetorical reinvention, strongly linked to a story—a fantasy theme—core to the Jewish sense of identity.

Because it influences one's interpretation of experiences in such a fundamental way, a rhetorical vision “is a social bonding agent, a way in which we create narrative structures that give meaning to our lives and a sense of community” (Littlejohn 2002: 158). The very presence of an identifiable rhetorical vision signals that a rhetorical community has been born of those individuals who have helped chain out the fantasy themes and now participate by sharing and sustaining them (Foss 1996: 125). In this way, rhetorical visions perform a vital role in how a group self-defines

as a distinct community: new groups sense a need to create a common identity based on their unique way of viewing the world (Hirokawa 1996: 104). At this stage, rhetorical visions function to “attract attention and build consciousness because they imitate former ways of seeing things that look familiar” (Littlejohn 2002: 158).

As the rhetorical community grows and strengthens, these new rhetorical communities begin to establish boundaries to distinguish between the “us” who adhere to the rhetorical vision and the “them” who do not. We see the in-group heterogeneity and out-group homogeneity familiar from social identity at work at this point of the identity-building process.⁸ Community members begin to use the rhetorical vision to proselytize and gather new members as well as to excommunicate disbelievers, tacitly demonstrating a belief that those who do not adhere to the vision have no part in the community and its destiny: “once the sharing of fantasies identifies the group and distinguishes between the insiders and outsiders, the members have clear rhetorical and symbolic boundaries to serve as guidelines for terminating rituals to force members out and for initiation and acceptance rituals for recruits” (Hirokawa 1996: 105). In the final stages of the process, when the community is firmly established, its rhetorical vision functions to maintain its members’ commitment to the values, vision, and group (Littlejohn 2002: 158).

Given the role rhetorical vision plays in defining new communities and the snowballing process that is the creation of rhetorical vision (as various fantasy themes collide, meld, and begin to manifest an overarching view of the world), recasting a vision can completely change how a community self-defines. In skilled hands, using the novelty principle to retell old stories in new ways generates a flood of creative adoption, reinterpretation, and refocusing within the community that signals the birth of a new social identity. This, then, is the challenge facing the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews: how to recast what is accepted as true in order to transfer the emotions, motives, and loyalty of a group over to a new vision of reality that will affirm and establish a compelling identity and a distinctly unique community.

New Eyes on Old Themes: A New Vision for a New People

The author of Hebrews recognized that the fundamental issue facing his community was not context but collective identity. Persecution, a lack of intra-group loyalty, guilt, and uncertainty were the pressures

facing his audience. And as the pressures mounted, some Christians were apparently leaving the new, liminal church community to return to the safety of the established synagogue (Littlejohn 2002: 133, 140, 144). The threat this posed to the health and strength of the church is apparent; the author of Hebrews discerned that the key issue was not persecution, or comfort, or certainty, but that the community responses were merely symptoms of a deeper problem: the Christians were struggling with an identity crisis based on a misunderstanding of their current reality.

For this reason, he seeks to persuade them that self-defining as a new community, distinct from their previous community, is not betrayal but rather greater fulfillment (Salevao 2002: 171). In order to accomplish his mission he must recast the old rhetorical vision, in effect presenting a new rhetorical vision sufficiently like the old one that it will sustain what his readers have accepted as true and yet will offer a new interpretation of familiar events: in this vision, faith in Jesus is the core of a new definition of God's people, and those who believe in Jesus rightfully self-define as the children of God, heirs to the ancient Abrahamic and Mosaic promises, and witnesses of their full fulfillment within the new christological community.

Old Forms Invested with New Content: Building a New Rhetorical Vision

The first step, then, is to draw out the fantasy themes and types that are at the heart of the Jewish concept of self, heritage, and one's relationship with God. By drawing on these themes, the author deliberately evokes the powerful emotions and loyalty inherent within them, hoping to transfer these to the new vision he casts and the new community to which he calls his Christian brothers and sisters. In other words, the author will use old forms—fantasy themes familiar to his readers—and inject them with new or expanded content, leaving behind a new rhetorical vision through which to interpret the world and define a new community experiencing the fulfillment of God's redemptive plan.

Evoking Established Community Fantasy Themes

The themes the author chooses are by no means accidental: he unerringly and skillfully draws out the narratives closest to the heart of Israel: the stories of the exodus, the wandering, the giving of the Law and the tabernacle, and entering the promised land. These are genesis sagas for Israel, portraying their birth as a people and the birth of their unique relationship with God. The rhetorical vision they sustain describes God

intervening in history on behalf of his people, desiring to be in community with his people, and offering them redemptive reconciliation and a return to his presence.

The author of Hebrews uses the figure of Moses to point toward the exodus, wanderings, and covenant (Hebrews 3:2-5). In chapter 2, he references Meribah to cue the fantasy theme of the wanderings—a fantasy theme that was so well-recognized it became a fantasy type describing Israel’s rebellion and God’s faithfulness (Hebrews 3:7-11). He subtly moves from the wandering theme to the promised land theme by quoting a well-known retelling of the story (3:11; 4:3) and briefly mentioning Joshua (4:8). Each of these—Moses, Meribah or “wilderness,” “rest,” and Joshua—serves as a symbolic cue to his readers, bringing to the forefront of their minds the saga of Israel’s birth and God’s choice of them as his people.

Later cues the author uses include the priesthood (chapter 7), the Mosaic Law (7:11-18; 8:7; 10:1), the tabernacle (8:5; 9:1-10), and the sacrificial system (9:12-13; 10:2-11). Each of these cues brings up its own fantasy theme: God’s choice of Levi and of Aaron to serve as the people’s voice to himself; God establishing the Law as his covenant with Israel and dictating the standards by which his people would behave in order to remain righteous before him; God giving the tabernacle as a sign of his presence and a place to worship him; God granting his people a way to be reconciled to himself and escape his wrath at sin. While each theme is its own unique story, all of the stories display similar plots: God creating a way for his people to actively enjoy reconciled relationship with him. This fantasy type, along with the sagas mentioned above, will be the focus of the author’s efforts as he seeks to recast the familiar within a new gospel context.

Recasting and Reinterpreting Established Themes

One of the fascinating aspects of fantasy themes is that they are constantly subject to the novelty principle, constantly being reinvented by the community to account for new experiences and to bring events outside of corporate experience into a manageable symbolic world where they can be vicariously experienced and understood. The more fantasy themes grow and change, the greater their potential to influence and expand the overarching rhetorical vision. This principle is what drives the author of Hebrews as he crafts his famous “greater than” arguments. Due to the limitations of the format, this study will extend only to examining certain

covenant aspects of his arguments. We will focus primarily on the land and the sacrifices: the land because it manifests the promise fulfilled, and the sacrifices because they are the means by which the promise is fulfilled. The promise is complete reconciliation with God, and the themes build on each other to demonstrate that Jesus is the promise fulfilled.

The Land

According to Joshua 21:44-45, the land was to be a rest from wandering and from war for the Israelites. For this reason, the fantasy theme describing entering the promised land and the conquest became tied to political peace, and “rest” then became a symbolic cue calling up this sense of safety and security in God’s promises. Rest from war was seen as the physical manifestation of God’s covenant promise fulfilled, as can be seen in 2 Samuel 7:1-2, where almost the same wording is used to describe David’s reign once his enemies were defeated; Psalm 95:11 also uses “rest” to cue an archetypal sense of peace and fulfillment.

However, even in Psalm 95 one can trace the beginnings of a more spiritual echo. As Israel continued in her history, she began to reinvent this theme and the meaning attached to “rest” as a symbol of God’s fulfilled promises. The full voice of this reinvention can be found in the prophets, beginning with Isaiah, where the concept of “rest” becomes tied with spiritual peace and the reconciliation and fellowship of one’s heart with God (Isaiah 63:11-19). Jeremiah finishes this reinvention in Jeremiah 31:2, tying rest in with the promise of a new covenant that would redefine and surpass the old covenant and offer full fellowship and knowledge of God resulting from a complete and eternal atonement (Jeremiah 31:29-34; see also Hebrews 8:8-12).

It is no stretch, then, to understand how the land and its promised rest became, for first-century Jews, a messianic theme describing an idyllic paradise in which God rules as potentate, protecting Israel from her enemies and offering this new covenant to the true children of Abraham. “Rest” was the expected proof that God’s new covenant had come and all of his promises and blessings would be fulfilled.

The author of Hebrews picks up on this fantasy type and reinvents it in light of Old Testament prophecies and the person of Jesus. As will become standard *modus operandi* for him, he accepts the form of the fantasy type but invests it with new content and new meaning. In a very real sense, he separates the traditional physical or political interpretation

and the spiritual interpretation of two very significant words, “rest” and its antonym, “work.” He presents physical rest and physical work as the prototypes of what he might call true rest and true work: the first was a poor imitation of what the second would be.⁹ According to his argument, Joshua may have brought Israel into the promised land and led them through the conquest, but the rest he offered did not fulfill all of the covenant promises (Hebrews 4:8-9). Since the covenant promises (in the prophecies) included eternal forgiveness and removing the need for the sacrificial system, it stands to reason that the “work” he has in mind refers to the never-ending work of the average Jew to keep the Law in order to remain righteous before God.

Oddly enough, the author does not finish his argument with the expected description of real rest from work. Instead, he leaves the ending unspoken in the minds of his readers: Jesus offers real rest from work because those who accept him in faith no longer re-ensure their status before God by their own efforts (Guthrie 1998:164). Thus “land” and “rest” become new spiritual metaphors describing the New Testament spiritual manifestation (forgiveness) of the full covenant promises fulfilled (atonement and knowledge of God). This recast fantasy theme, the story of God’s new covenant, is the focus of the author’s remaining arguments.

The Sacrifices

The author moves forward in his quest to prove the superiority of the new covenant by addressing the core of the Mosaic Law: the sacrificial system. For every sacrifice, there must be—at the very least—both the sacrifice and the sacrificer (the priest). In both of these arenas the author recasts the fantasy themes evoked by these cues and offers a new option compatible with a Jewish heritage yet superior to the Mosaic covenant. The final role, that of the worshipper seeking forgiveness, remains unspoken but imminently present in both the writer and his audience: the worshipper awaits a reconciliation that is true, full, and eternally effective.

The author’s argument regarding the Law and its prescribed sacrifices is best understood in light of Plato’s world of forms, describing the Mosaic Law as “a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves” (Hebrews 10:1) (Royster 2003: 151). According to Plato’s cosmology, there is an unseen world that contains the true being of which the physical world contains only representations, so that all visible objects are copies of the real entity in the world of forms (*Rep.* Book VII).

For example, every species of tree or dog is a variable representation of the single “quintessential” tree or dog in the world of forms.¹⁰ Transferring the allegory over to the Law is then a simple matter: the Mosaic Law is the imitation or model of the new covenant,¹¹ which is inaugurated by Jesus in his death and resurrection.

This fantasy theme was first hinted at in Hebrews 3:2-5, where the author very briefly mentioned Moses to evoke the saga of Sinai, the giving of the Law, and the establishment of Israel as God’s covenant people. In these few verses, the author seemingly haphazardly brushes Moses aside as the lesser servant who, by inference, introduced a lesser covenant. The brief foreshadowing means that when the author reintroduces the Law in Hebrews 10, he has already begun to undermine its authority and recast the establishment of God’s people within a christological context.

Having brought Sinai to the forefront of his readers’ minds, the author of Hebrews expands his symbolic cue to the priesthood, sacrifice officiants and representatives of God’s covenant people to God himself, ensuring their continued fellowship with him: “since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God,... Let us approach God’s throne of grace with confidence” (Hebrews 4:14, 16). With this language, the author infers the Old Testament theme of the high priest who constantly intercedes for the people before God with incense and offerings. At the same time, he begins to recast this drama, portraying Jesus as the quintessential high priest. Again, the author uses forms or cues shared by his readers yet redefines them to offer a new priesthood fantasy theme. He redefines the priesthood itself, moving the institution outside of genetic lineage. The story of Aaron’s calling becomes proof that priesthood is not a matter of parentage but of calling (Hebrews 5:4), while the story of Melchizedek provides a forerunner in a priesthood that takes precedence over Levi’s calling (7:1-10). So when Jesus’ priesthood is authenticated by God via his resurrection,¹² that priesthood is presented as consistent with preexisting Jewish fantasy themes, and yet by redefining the central priesthood theme, the author proves that Jesus is the great high priest, superior to all other priests and, by implication, the story he enacts is superior in meaning to that enacted by the Aaronic high priests.

The second fantasy theme drawn out by the author is that of the sacrifice itself. Here the cue is a phrase redolent of daily business at the Temple: “the blood of goats and calves” (Hebrews 9:12). The story would be a familiar one to every Jew: every day, all day long, the priests were

busy offering up the sacrifices that would ensure the daily reconciliation of Israel to God. Sacrifice offered the consistent guarantee that God forgave sins and counted the repentant as righteous members of his chosen people. The author plays heavily on the daily aspect of the sacrifices, noting that “day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins” (Hebrews 10:11). In this way he underscores the eternal inefficacy of the entire system, intimating that it served only as a sort of placeholder for a new covenant that would not share such weaknesses.

Having thoroughly undermined the efficacy of the sacrificial system, the author proceeds to reinvent the theme by recasting the characters. Instead of an animal sacrifice temporarily turning away God’s wrath, Jesus offers himself as the ultimate sacrifice, effectively offering eternal atonement for all humanity (Hebrews 9:14). Jesus the high priest offers himself as a perfect sacrifice directly to God. Thus, the author retains the fantasy theme of sacrifice but recasts it to offer a christological interpretation that nonetheless remains faithful to his readers’ heritage and understanding of how God works, in effect transferring their loyalty to the sacrificial system over to Christ as the ultimate sacrifice (Hebrews 9:14, 22).

By recasting these two fantasy themes—priest and sacrifice—the author points to a larger view of the Law as utterly superseded by Jesus’ work on our behalf (Salevaio 2002: 197). Jesus takes the place of Moses, the Law-bringer; he stands as a high priest superior to Aaron; and he offers a sacrifice more effective than any possible under the Mosaic Law. It is important to note here that the author has so far couched every argument within fantasy themes shared by all first-century Jews, and not only shared, but themes so profound that they defined what it meant to be Jewish.

A New Vision, a New Community

So, what is this new vision the author of Hebrews seeks to create? He has thus far painstakingly assembled a grouping of fantasy themes that evoke intensely powerful responses from his audience. Is his purpose simply to invent a new rhetorical vision that proves how inferior Judaism is to Christianity? Or does the author have more in mind here? The rhetorical processes observed and described by symbolic convergence theory suggest a more subtle option.

Throughout his arguments the author has been careful to use symbols that cue intrinsically Jewish stories and concepts. He further used

the forms of these stories, affirming their validity to his audience and thus affirming to them his own faithfulness to their heritage and history with God. He has so far done everything he can to present himself sympathetically and elicit loyalty to his message. None of this suggests that his goal is simply to convince his readers to abandon an inferior religious heritage. If anything, this approach suggests that his goal is, in fact, to validate their heritage.

However, this is not the complete picture, because the author continues by recasting each theme, keeping the storylines but investing each one with new content and, as a result, new meaning. New content and new meaning snowball together with accepted truths into a new yet believable rhetorical vision that does not perceive itself so much as opposition to Judaism as it considers itself the true fulfillment that makes the old forms obsolete. It is believable precisely because it has retained so much already accepted by the community as true in the original vision, and yet it is completely new because it offers an interpretation of reality so different that cannot coexist contemporaneously with the old vision.

According to the old rhetorical vision, God chose Israel and established a covenant with her based on the Law and the sacrifices. The purpose and the promise of the covenant was to offer reconciliation to and fellowship with God. Those who would abide by the Law and offer sacrifices in compliance with it were granted the promises of righteousness—reconciliation and fellowship. The rhetorical vision the author casts offers fulfillment of the purposes and promises of the old covenant: a new covenant is inaugurated in which God's people are chosen on the basis of faith, and this chosen people are reconciled eternally to God by the eternal sacrifice of Jesus and therefore have no need to abide by an obsolete system that could not offer eternal effectiveness. The old motifs are still in play, but their new content forces a radically different interpretation of reality that is based on faith in Jesus, not on one's own efforts to retain one's righteousness before God (Pursiful 1993: 115). So, in this sense, the new vision is not a competing vision *per se*, but seeks to be understood as the fulfillment of or ultimate expression of the purpose of the old covenant.¹³

And as the readers begin to accept and assimilate this new vision, they inevitably will change not only how they interpret their experiences but also what they do because of their new understanding of reality. Returning to Judaism and the practice of the Law would be a betrayal of God's eternal plan in favor of his temporary model (2002: 196). Therefore, as the Christian community reinterprets their individual experiences and

their corporate reality, they begin to self-identify as distinct in both belief and practice from a first-century Jewish community (2002: 193). This radical redefinition allows Christians to affirm their faith heritage while at the same time forcing them to abandon Jewish sacrificial practices that have been made obsolete with the inauguration of the new covenant.

The inevitable results of this self-separation include the development of orthodox beliefs (which would be guided by the content of the Epistle to the Hebrews), intra-community bonding (which would strengthen participants against the pressures of persecution), and loyalty within the group to one another and to the rhetorical vision (which would ensure the success of the vision as well as the establishment of the community). The result is that the author births a new community with new meaning, purpose, and motivation for action based on a common interpretation of reality. In short, he has resolved all of his problems by skillfully recasting a vision in new terms and drawing out its implications on community life.

Conclusion

In the epistle to the Hebrews we are privileged to watch the formation of a collective identity as it happens. Each step of the author's rhetoric draws on symbols and themes that have historically defined the Jewish people and their worldview but injects new christological content and meaning into them: in this way he extends the core fantasy themes and sagas, creating a new rhetorical vision that drives the creation of a new community of Christians that defines itself as a continuation of, yet utterly distinct from, the Law-observant Jewish community (2002: 171). Symbolic convergence theory, with its elements of fantasy themes, symbolic cues, and rhetorical vision, gives us the unique language we need to describe what we find in Hebrews: rhetoric powerful enough to create a community.

End Notes

¹ For example, see Kissi and Van Eck's study of ethnic language and its rhetorical implications on social identity (S. Kissi and E. Van Eck, "Ethnic reasoning in Social Identity of Hebrews: A Social-Scientific Study," *HTS Theological Studies* 73(3), as well as Steven Muir, "Social Identity in the Epistle to the Hebrews" (*T&T Clark Handbook to Social Identity in the New Testament*, ed. by J. Brian Tucker and Coleman A. Baker, New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014).

² Social identity theory does address the process of group formation, but primarily as a function of intergroup dynamics; that is, group formation is observed through the development of intergroup comparisons defining out-group as opposed to in-group. The rhetorical process of creating the group identity is something different, and frequently occurs before intergroup comparisons come into play for the purposes of boundary-making and maintenance. See, e.g., Matthew J. Marohl, *Faithfulness and the Purpose of Hebrews: A Social Identity Approach* (Princeton Theological Monograph Series 82; Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2008), 61-2.

³ Although the themes of Hebrews are distinctly Jewish, the Greek philosophical arguments suggest at the least a Hellenistically educated audience. Given that the earliest Christians considered the OT their primary scripture, a solid foundation in core Jewish stories and theology would not be surprising, even among Gentile Christians; see David de Silva, *Perseverance in Gratitude: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle "to the Hebrews"* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000), 2-5, 9, 12. However, other authors read the same evidence and conclude that the audience was primarily Christian Jews, struggling with the social separation from the Jewish community; see Martin Wessbrandt, "Covenant, Conflict and Collective Identity: The Relationship between Hebrews and 1 Clement" (pp. 257-273 in *Social Memory and Social Identity in the Study of Early Judaism and Early Christianity*, ed. by Samuel Byrskog, Raimo Hakola, and Jutta Jokiranta, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2016), 267.

⁴ Salevao, 163-168. See also Nicholas J. Moore, "'In' or 'Near'? Heavenly Access and Christian Identity in Hebrews," pp. 185-98 in *Muted Voices of the New Testament: Readings in the Catholic Epistles and Hebrews*. *LNTS* 565, pp. 185-86.

⁵ deSilva, David A. *Perseverance in Gratitude: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle "to the Hebrews."* Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000, 5-6.

⁶ Most recently, SCT has been applied to the rhetoric of various terrorist factions in an attempt to identify how these communities are born and what draws them together into unified, functioning militant organizations; see, e.g., Jonathan Matusitz, "Understanding Hezbollah Symbolism through Symbolic Convergence Theory," *Journal of Visual Political Communication* 7:1 (June 2021), pp. 43-60.

⁷ With the exception of James Hester's analysis of 1 Thessalonians: "A Fantasy Theme Analysis of 1 Thessalonians," in *Rhetorical Criticism and the Bible*, ed. by Stanley Porter and Dennis Stamps (New York: Sheffield Academic, 2002), 504-525.

⁸ E.g., Marohl, *Faithfulness and the Purpose of Hebrews*, 61.

⁹ See below for a discussion of his use of Platonic forms; in the discussion of rest he foreshadows this by implying the duality of a false or unfulfilled rest and a true spiritual rest in light of the later duality he

explores between the never-ending Temple sacrifices and the single, eternally effective of Jesus.

¹⁰ See Plato's *Republic* vii. 514A–517A, as well as Philo's *On the Creation* 24, also C.K. Barrett's brief commentary on Philo's Platonism, as a good introductory overview of the relationship of thought between Philo and Plato: Barrett, C. K. *The New Testament Background: Selected Documents*. Revised. London: SPCK, 1987, 262-263.

¹¹ As seen in part by Simon J. Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1984.), 272.

¹² For more on this see Raymond Brown, *The Message of Hebrews: Christ above All* (The Bible Speaks Today. Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988).

¹³ Most studies of the imagery in Hebrews focuses on an implied conflict in the comparison between the old and the new covenant and symbols. The claim then is that the new covenant "wins" the conflict and emerges as the better, superior option (e.g., Kiwoong Son, *Zion Symbolism in Hebrews: Hebrews 12:18-24 as a Hermeneutical Key to the Epistle* [Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005], 202). This conclusion is certainly encouraged by the language of superiority within Hebrews. However, the actual rhetorical strategy is that the "old" fantasy themes and symbols are reused and thus reaffirmed. The new, christological content is what creates new meaning and a new interpretation of the community's current reality. This, then, is what drives the process of creating a new rhetorical vision and thus the creation of a new community, distinct from the familiar Jewish community with its adherence to the Mosaic Law. And it means that to adopt the new rhetorical vision is to fully embrace the old themes, to affirm the old symbols while simultaneously recognizing that they have been reinvested with something new that demands a complete rethinking of what it means to be the community of God's chosen people. There is continuity with the old first, then conflict generated by the implications of the new.

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