

‘THE ONE WHO IS SPEAKING’ IN HEBREWS 12:25

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Summary

This treatment of whether the author refers to Jesus, or more generally to God, as ‘the one who is speaking’ (ὁ λαλῶν), in Hebrews 12:25 takes into account the possible relationship of the nearly identical participles λαλοῦντι in verse 24b and τὸν λαλοῦντα in verse 25a. The antecedent of λαλοῦντι in verse 24 is problematic; many translations refer to ‘the blood that speaks better than the blood of Abel’, but this interpolation may be misleading. The author’s argument in the near context suggests that the one now speaking from heaven is the same God who spoke from Sinai on earth. The added implication that he speaks through the author’s own written words is significant for understanding the hermeneutic of Hebrews.

1. Introduction

For centuries, indeed millennia, many readers of Scripture have shared in common an understanding of the Bible as a way – in fact, the principal means – by which the living God speaks to his people. The written Word of God is ‘listened to’ by earnest disciples of Jesus Christ in the expectation that God himself will address them therein. This attitude towards the written word is not a recent theological aberration invented by enthusiasts on the margins of orthodoxy (or neo-orthodoxy), or by post-modern reader response critics; it has been held widely by the community of the faithful down through the ages. However, it may legitimately be asked whether the Bible itself makes such claims. That is, did the writers of Scripture understand what they were writing to be a vehicle for (direct) divine communication? The New Testament book or letter (or sermon) called ‘To the Hebrews’

does in fact evidence such a view, perhaps to a greater degree than other biblical works.

The author of Hebrews regularly cites the OT as something God, or the Holy Spirit, or even Christ, 'is saying' to us his readers.¹ He also alludes to God's further speaking to us through the very treatise he is writing,² and three times tells his readers to expect to hear God's voice imminently.³ The author apparently considers his own proclamation to be inspired, much as Paul does when he writes, 'when you heard our message you received it not as the word of a man, but for what it really is, the Word of God, which is at work in you' (1 Thess. 2:13). He may have in mind his own writing, then, as well as the Hebrew scriptures, when he refers to the Word of God as 'living and active' in 4:12, an expression that follows shortly after the formula repeated in 3:7, 15, and 4:7, 'today if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.'

As the book wends towards its conclusion, after a series of didactic and paraenetic cycles, a final dramatic warning is launched at the reader in 12:25: Βλέπετε μὴ παραιτήσησθε τὸν λαλοῦντα ('Watch out that you do not refuse the one who is speaking'). In a treatise introduced by the affirmation in 1:1-2 that God has spoken to us, and repeatedly sprinkled with urgent exhortations to pay attention to the Word of God, the natural inclination of the reader is to understand the referent of τὸν λαλοῦντα here as God. If so the writer, who relays whatever is said by that 'one who is speaking', considers his own written words to be the Word of God, spoken and heard in the present moment.

Yet exegetes have repeatedly questioned the inference that God is the speaker, and suggested other possibilities. For example, the proximity of the parallel participle λαλοῦντι (also 'one speaking', in the dative case), only a few words earlier in verse 24, invites association with Jesus, who either himself or *his blood*, as it appears in many translations, apparently 'speaks better than Abel'. So,

¹ The 17 instances of this characteristic present tense 'he says' with reference to OT Scripture are 1:6, 7; 2:6, 12; 3:7, 15; 4:3, 4, 7; 5:6; 6:14; 7:13, 21; 8:8, 13; 9:20; 10:5; 12:26.

² E.g. 'The Holy Spirit witnesses to us, saying' (10:15-17), 'The Holy Spirit is signifying this:' (9:8), 'the exhortation speaks to you' (12:5). The author refers to his own authoritative proclamation seven times (2:5, 5:11, 6:9, 8:1, 9:5, 11:32, 13:6) with either λαλέω or λέγω ('of which we are speaking'), the same verbs that he (unique among NT writers, in the case of λαλέω) uses for citing the OT.

³ Citing Ps. 95 at 3:7, 15, and 4:7.

commentators are divided over whom the author refers to as the one speaking in verse 25.

2. Clues from the Context

Εἰ γάρ, the very next words after τὸν λαλοῦντα in the text, introduce an explanatory clause that draws a clear parallel between that accusative participle and another like it, τὸν χρηματίζοντα, later in the same verse. That person who ‘warned on earth’, and the person referred to simply by the article τὸν in the elliptical locution ‘who warns from heaven,’ in the final clause of verse 25, is in turn directly connected by the relative pronoun οὗ in verse 26 with the one ‘whose voice shook the earth then, and who now has promised, saying ...’⁴ So the surrounding context helps to identify who it is that is speaking.

But exegesis of the following context has often been more thorough than that of the immediately preceding verses, perhaps because many interpreters posit a break after 12:24. The abruptness of verse 25 has often been noticed,⁵ and most analyses of Hebrews’ structure mark 12:25 as beginning a rather new and independent section of Hebrews.⁶ Ellingworth calls 12:24 ‘the climax of verses 18-24, and thus rhetorically of the whole epistle.’⁷ Indeed the dense sequential parade in verse 24 of crucial terms like ‘covenant, new, mediator, Jesus, blood, sprinkling, better, speaking’ do form a sort of rhetorical climax by way of a recapitulation of the book’s major themes. In their analyses of Hebrews’ structure both Michel and Vanhoye divide the following paragraph, verses 25-29, from the previous argument, implying

⁴ William Lane, *Hebrews 9-13* (WBC 47B ; Dallas: Word, 1991): 474-78; R. McL. Wilson, *Hebrews* (NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987): 233.

⁵ Erich Grässer, *An die Hebräer* (vol. 3; EKK 17; Zurich: Benziger, 1997): 27; Ceslas Spicq, *L’Épître aux Hébreux* (vol. 1; 2nd edn; Paris: Librairie LeCoffre, 1952): 410; Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*: 474.

⁶ E.g. George H. Guthrie, *The Structure of Hebrews: A Test-Linguistic Analysis* (NovTSup 73; Leiden: Brill, 1994): 133; Hans F. Weiss, *Der Brief an die Hebräer* (KEK 13; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991): 683; Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989): 379; F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (rev. edn; NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990): 380.

⁷ Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993): 681.

disjunction.⁸ The UBS Greek text also starts a new paragraph with verse 25, an editorial decision that effects the exegesis of thousands of interpreters.

Yet most of these commentators recognize that determination of who it is that is ‘speaking’ and ‘warning’ in verse 25 is intrinsically tied to verse 24 and its antecedents. In his exegesis of verse 25, for example, Michel explores the relationship of the expressions of ‘refusal’ (παραιτήσθαι) in the two texts verses 19 and 25 and the theological ramifications of refusal of God’s Word through unbelief and unwillingness throughout the earlier section of Hebrews.⁹ Bruce’s exposition of verses 25 and 26 is entirely with respect to the Sinai event and the OT texts that referenced it, the subject of Hebrews 12:18-24.¹⁰ Attridge, though he treats the warning separately, says it ‘neatly summarizes the movement of the whole pericope (12:18-29).’¹¹

While Grässer recognizes that the change in subject from verse 24 to 25 seems abrupt, he also shows from the transitions at 1:14 to 2:1-2, 2:18 to 3:1-2, 10:18 to 10:19-20; 11:40 to 12:1-2, etc., that such change is typical in Hebrews, and calls attention to how the relationship between λαλοῦντι and λαλοῦντα in verses 24b and 25a, and between the two accusatives λαλοῦντα (‘speaking’) and χρηματίζοντα (‘warning’) in verses 25a and 25b, effect a smooth and unbroken transition between 12:24-25.¹² Though Grässer does not say so, this also suggests a single speaker as the implied subject of all three participles, which would form an important block of the exegetical task of identifying who is speaking in verses 24-26. In any case, ‘the one speaking’ in verse 25 must be understood in the context of what precedes, as well as what follows, its immediate locus.

3. What, or Who, ‘Speaks Better than Abel’?

There is nevertheless some ambiguity as to the referent of λαλοῦντι in verse 24. Is the author really saying, as many translations and

⁸ Otto Michel, *Der Brief an die Hebräer* (13th edn; KEK; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1975): 469-70; Albert Vanhoye, *La Structure Littéraire de l'Épître aux Hébreux* (2nd edn; Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1976): 206-7.

⁹ Michel, *An die Hebräer*: 470-71.

¹⁰ Bruce, *Hebrews*: 381-82.

¹¹ Attridge, *Hebrews*: 379.

¹² Grässer, *An die Hebräer*, 3:327.

commentaries infer, that the *blood of sprinkling* speaks better than that of Abel?¹³ Or, is he simply saying that we have come to *one* who speaks better than Abel? The latter reading is the simplest and most direct translation. It necessitates no ellipsis, as does the other interpretation (there is no mention of Abel's blood in the original). It would simply be the last of eleven objects to which 'you have come', all listed in the dative: '... to Mount Zion ... to innumerable angels ... to God the judge of all, etc.' This rhetorical recitation, beginning in verse 22 and climaxing at the end of verse 24 with 'to one who speaks better than Abel', glides smoothly into the following line in verse 25: '[so] see that you do not refuse the one who speaks.'

But the majority of interpreters have not followed this simpler path. Delitzsch comments, '[T]he meaning of κρείττον λαλοῦντι is simply that the gracious-speaking blood of Jesus is more powerful, more penetrating, more prevailing, than the voice of martyred Abel's blood calling for vengeance on his slayer.'¹⁴ Akin to this traditional metaphorical interpretation of λαλοῦντι is Philip Hughes's extensive theological overview of all the good that Jesus' blood is said, in Hebrews, to do for us,¹⁵ generalities that may be summed up in the single term *redemption*. With reference, then, to τὸν λαλοῦντα in verse 25, Hughes says,

'Him who is speaking' takes up, in the first place, the assertion of the immediately preceding verse that the sprinkled blood of Jesus *speaks* to us, which is the same as saying that God speaks to us by virtue of the redemption he has freely provided in Christ our High Priest. And in the second place, it takes up what was said at the very beginning of the epistle, namely, that 'in these last days God has spoken to us by a Son'.¹⁶

Hughes rightly discerns that, as he puts it, ὁ λαλῶν in verse 25 'takes up' both the immediately preceding clause in verse 24 and the opening words of the book in 1:1-2. The locution 'God has spoken to us in a son' at 1:2 is not just a reference to the particular words uttered by the mouth of Jesus of Nazareth but expresses the full revelatory action of

¹³ Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*: 473, says, 'Christians have come ... "to sprinkled blood speaking more effectively than the blood of Abel,"' which he furthermore identifies as a personification of the blood.

¹⁴ Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (tr. Thomas Kingsbury; vol. 2; 3rd ed; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1883): 354.

¹⁵ Phillip Hughes, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977): 551-53; cf. Spicq, *Aux Hébreux*: 2:409-10.

¹⁶ Hughes, *Hebrews*: 555; emphasis his.

God accomplished in Jesus – the whole New Testament message. So Hughes' comment that 'the sprinkled blood of Jesus *speaks* to us ... is the same as saying that God speaks to us by virtue of the redemption he has freely provided in Christ our High Priest' might be valid, if it could be shown that the sprinkled blood is indeed the antecedent of λαλοῦντι in verse 24. But Hughes does not actually demonstrate that assertion.¹⁷ He is certainly not alone; this understanding of 12:24 is virtually universal.

However, there are several indications that the author may intend the subject referent of λαλοῦντι in 12:24 to be understood as either God or possibly Jesus, rather than 'the blood', as it is far more commonly interpreted. First and primarily, the locution 'one speaking better than Abel' in 12:24 is followed directly by the words, 'Watch out that you do not ignore the one speaking', in 12:25. It seems unlikely (though obviously not impossible) that the author would use the same present active masculine (or neuter) singular participial form λαλοῦντι – identical, other than its dative case, to λαλοῦντα in verse 25 – to refer to something or someone else completely different, only seven words apart in the text.

Second, if the author meant the comparison to be with Abel's blood, he might have written παρὰ τὸ τοῦ Ἰαβελ αἷμα. But he did not. His original text is simply παρὰ τὸν Ἰαβελ.¹⁸ In all his (many) other comparisons, the author of Hebrews is very careful to spell out what is being compared with what, and to what degree.¹⁹ The kind of elliptical syntax assumed by translators who supply '*the blood of*' to Hebrews' text is rare for our writer.

¹⁷ Moreover, in his explanation both the comparative and Abel drop out of the equation.

¹⁸ David deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle "to the Hebrews"* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000): 468 n. 58, claims that 'the author employs a brachyology ... the hearers of the phrase "than Abel" (π. τ. Ἰ. Α.) will be able to fill this out as "than the blood of Abel" from the mention of "blood speaking" (αἵματι λαλοῦντι) in the previous phrase.' However, if, as we are suggesting, αἵματι and λαλοῦντι in v. 24 do not necessarily go together, the inference would be doubly misleading. (The two words are moreover separated by two other words that intervene between them, ῥαντισμοῦ and κρεῖττον.)

¹⁹ A computer search for Hebrews' use of comparatives (adjectives or substantives with the -ότερος [-v] ending, and superlatives, particles and other deictic discourse markers like μάλλον, μὲν, τε, ἄλλα, etc. that show contrasts), reveals a total of 171 different grammatical instances of comparisons in the short span of Hebrews' treatise (Gene R. Smillie, "*The Word of God*" in *the Book of Hebrews*, [Ph.D. dissertation, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 2000]: 106-17).

Moreover, the fact that κρείττον ('better') follows αἵματι ῥαντισμοῦ ('sprinkled blood') in verse 24 does not make necessary that what the author is comparing is the relative efficaciousness of the blood of sprinkling (Jesus' blood) with that of Abel, particularly as regarding which of the two bloods 'speaks better'. Of the 19 instances of the comparative κρείττον (or κρείσσον) in the NT, 13 occur in Hebrews. In the 10 out of 13 of these that modify a noun (or a participle), each is *followed* by that substantive, a consistent pattern from which the author does not deviate.²⁰ So it is far more likely that 'better' goes with 'the one speaking', the participle λαλοῦντι, which follows it, than that it goes with αἵματι ῥαντισμοῦ, which precedes it. Our writer, notwithstanding, is sophisticated enough to get double duty out of κρείττον by astutely placing this key term 'better' between αἵματι ῥαντισμοῦ and λαλοῦντι, thus associating κρείττον with both capital themes developed throughout the book: the better sacrifice and the greater revelation.²¹

It is the assumption of adjectival force, coupled with an assumption of two bloods being compared as nouns, that gives rise to the translation 'the blood that speaks better than Abel[']s blood].'²² By associating 'better' primarily with 'the blood of sprinkling', rather than with 'speaking', the interpreter proceeds as though it were the quality of bloods that is being compared with κρείττον (i.e. an adjectival comparison) and launches the whole theological construct of 'the blood that is better than Abel's blood' repeated even in many of the most recent commentaries.²³ On the other hand, κρείττον functions here more adverbially than adjectivally, so translators universally translate the locution 'speaks better', which is correct.

The question remains: what, or who, speaks better? Is it 'the blood that speaks better', or 'the one who speaks better'? Michel finds the

²⁰ 7:19, 22; 8:6 (2 times); 9:23; 10:34; 11:16, 35, 40; 12:24.

²¹ Ellingworth, *Hebrews*: 682.

²² Bruce, *Hebrews*: 379 n. 177, raises the intriguing possibility that the author was aware of the Jewish tradition (*Targum Jonathan* on Gen. 4:3) that the offering of Cain and Abel took place on the 14th of Nisan, the same day on which the blood of Jesus was offered. In that case, the comparison might be with the blood of the πλείονα θυσίαν παρὰ Κάιν ('better sacrifice than Cain's') that Abel offered by faith (11:4), rather than with his own blood that 'cried out from the ground'.

²³ Craig R. Koester, *Hebrews* (AB 36; New York: Doubleday, 2001): 546, summarizes the ways in which Christ's blood is seen to be superior to that of Abel, while deSilva, *Perseverance*: 468, reiterates the venerable interpretation that Jesus' blood speaks 'pardon' while Abel's called out for 'vengeance' or 'justice'.

superlative value of Jesus' blood to be at issue by itself, as at 10:29, rather than in comparison with that of Abel.²⁴ But the thorough explanations of the manifold properties of the blood of Jesus already undertaken in chapters 9 and 10 of Hebrews never once allude to the blood as 'speaking', or anything remotely related. Nothing in the theology of the book, or in the syntax of the verse at hand, demands that the expression αἷματι ῥαντισμοῦ ('sprinkled blood') be understood as the antecedent of the implied subject of the participle λαλοῦντι in 12:24. The resulting strangeness when it is understood that way is incongruous with the lucidity of this writer elsewhere, and begs for a better solution.

It is better grammar, better theology, and an instance of employing Occam's razor, simply to understand 'one speaking better than Abel' to be an integral phrase. From this last in the series of 11 (universally anarthous) datives begun at verse 22 ('But you have come to Mount Zion ... to spirits of righteous men made perfect ... to Jesus, mediator of a new covenant, and to blood of sprinkling, to one who speaks better than Abel') the syntax flows smoothly and directly into the consequent 'Watch out that you don't refuse the one who is speaking' in verse 25, and makes perfect sense. Conversely, the idea of comparing the respective values of Abel's and of Jesus' blood here simply does not fit into the flow of the discourse.²⁵

We have suggested elsewhere that when Hebrews 11:4 says concerning Abel, 'though dead yet he speaks', it may mean simply that the message about him continues to be told, or that God still speaks of him as his story is recounted in Scripture.²⁶ In that case, the abrupt re-appearance of Abel here at the end of 12:24 may be a similar allusion to 'the story of Abel' that is told in Scripture, in comparison with which the Word of God spoken about or through Jesus is better.

The otherwise-surprising appearance of Abel's name here may also be a clue the writer gives his reader, by *inclusio*, that he is now concluding his line of thought begun at 10:39, 'We are of those who are of faith unto the preserving of the soul', the long illustrative list of whom begins shortly thereafter at 11:4 with Abel, and reaches its climax at 12:2 with Jesus, 'the initiator and finisher of the faith'. It was

²⁴ Michel, *An die Hebräer*: 469.

²⁵ Abel's sudden appearance in v. 24b is, as Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*: 474, acknowledges, 'unexpected' and, as Ellingworth, *Hebrews*: 682, admits, 'initially puzzling'.

²⁶ Smillie, *Word of God in Hebrews*: 72-76.

said concerning Abel at 11:4 that though dead he still speaks, or, as we have suggested, that his story still speaks, or even that *God* still speaks of him, i.e. in the reading and explanation of Scripture. Then, at 12:24, it is said that we have come to one who speaks *better* than Abel.²⁷ The *inclusio* appears to be formed not only by the name Abel but by the allusion in both verses to his ‘speaking.’

With τὸν λαλοῦντα (‘the one speaking’) in 12:25, the writer resumes use of the articular noun for the first time since verse 22 (as a personal name, τὸν Ἀβελ in v. 24 is exceptional). The effect of this striking change of style, after a series of more than 20 anarthous nouns and participles in the three previous verses, is that the article serves in this case almost like a demonstrative adjective, accentuating the relationship between this participle in verse 25 and its ostensible antecedent λαλοῦντι in verse 24. Thus, perhaps the text should be understood to read, ‘... to one who speaks better than Abel: watch out [then] that you do not resist that one who speaks!’

4. One Speaking from Heaven

Who is that one who speaks better? The comparison in the following verse is with another revelational event associated with Moses at Mount Sinai. Though some maintain that Moses is being contrasted with Jesus in verse 25,²⁸ Delitzsch argues that God, not Moses, is referred to both here and in the antecedent reference at verse 19, where God, not Moses, is the object of παραιτήσθαι.²⁹ It was God, not

²⁷ The best choice for the referent for τὸν λαλοῦντα in 12:25 is actually not Jesus, but God, as we shall see below (Attridge, *Hebrews*: 379-80, *pace* Moffatt, Montefiore, etc.). If λαλοῦντι in v. 24b and λαλοῦντα only seven words later in v. 25a have the same referent, Jesus is not the referent for λαλοῦντι. Since his name had already appeared in the previous clause, (‘and you have come to the mediator of a new covenant, Jesus’), just *before* ‘the sprinkled blood’, it would be redundant for him to appear again as both the ninth and the eleventh element in the list of things ‘to which you have come’ (vv. 22-24).

²⁸ Hugh Montefiore, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1964): 234, avers, ‘It is not God who is speaking by his Son (i. 2), but Jesus who speaks from heaven ... the context and the plain meaning of the Greek require a contrast between Moses and Jesus.’ Moses has also been identified as the speaker ‘from earth’ (v. 25b) by Chrysostom, Luther, Moffatt, Manson, Vanhoye, Sowers, Buchanan, while they, along with Hanson and Feuillet, have proposed Jesus as the speaker in the present (τὸν λαλοῦντα, v. 25a and ‘from heaven’, v. 25d; see Spicq, *Aux Hébreux*: 2:410, and Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*: 476).

²⁹ Delitzsch, *Commentary*: 2:355.

Moses, who was the one speaking at Sinai, the one to whom they refused (albeit through fear) to listen.

A further anomaly complicating exegesis of Hebrews 12:25 is that in Exodus 20:22 the Lord says to Moses, ‘You have seen for yourselves that I spoke to you from heaven’, while Hebrews’ point is made from contrasting the present warning ‘from heaven’ with the Sinaitic revelation that was ostensibly ‘on earth’.³⁰ Weiss notices the LXX language that says ‘I spoke to you from heaven’ at Exodus 20:22, but for him the *πολὺ μᾶλλον* comparison of Hebrews 12:25c (‘how much more’) is an indication of the inherent coherence the author recognizes between the two events; they differ not because the origin of one speech is earthly and the other heavenly but because, as 1:2 had characterized the new eschatological era, God has now spoken to us ‘in the son’.³¹ Hegermann, on the other hand, emphasizes that God is speaking ‘in the son’ from heaven, and that it is this heavenly nature of revelation that now makes salvation possible by the power of that word of the son that is responsible for both creation and salvation (cf. 1:1-4).³²

Delitzsch shows that it would be anachronistic for Jesus to be the one warning at the time when the mountain shook at the delivery of the OT revelation of Torah, and theologically inconsistent for Jesus’ speech to be contrasted or placed in opposition to God’s speaking.³³ He summarizes the multi-faceted dilemma, and his own proposed solution (following Grotius), in these terms:

If ὁ ἐπὶ γῆς χρηματίζων [‘the one warning upon earth’] cannot be Moses, and also ὁ λαλῶν and consequently ὁ ἀπ’ οὐρανῶν χρηματίζων

³⁰ Joseph Bonsirven, *Saint Paul – Epître aux Hébreux* (2d. ed.; VS 12; Paris: Beauchesne et ses Fils, 1943): 512-13 acknowledges that at first sight Hebrews 12 seems to have reversed the actual contrast; God has spoken in the Sinai event from heaven, but in Christ and his apostles through earthly organs. But, he concludes, on the contrary Christ is essentially (in Hebrews) a celestial being, exercising a celestial priesthood, providing for believers to ‘draw near’ to God in heaven, as the author has just particularly emphasized in vv. 18-24.

³¹ Weiss, *An die Hebräer*: 686.

³² Harald Hegermann, *Der Brief an die Hebräer* (THKNT 16; Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1988): 18-19.

³³ Spicq, *Aux Hébreux*: 2:410-11, contends that interpreting Jesus as the *λαλῶν* in v. 25 is ‘completely inadmissible’, whether it concerns a supposed pre-existent Christ in the Sinai desert or a resurrected Christ speaking from heaven to Christians. Rather, he insists, the context demands that one understand God himself as the speaker on both the occasions alluded to in Hebrews 12, the difference obtaining between two ‘spheres’ of revelation, not between two different mediators.

['the one warning from heaven'] cannot be Jesus; and if, on the other hand, τὸν λαλοῦντα must stand in connection with αἵματι ῥαντ. κρ. λαλοῦντι παρὰ τὸν Ἄ. – what are the antitheses intended by the author? ... 'He that spake on earth' is God on Sinai, and He that speaketh from heaven is God in Christ.³⁴

He further specifies that what is contrasted is the Sinaitic manifestation of God of past times and the ongoing revelation that God speaks to the Christian church (to *us*, Delitzsch emphasizes) through Christ – or, as he expresses it in another paragraph, in the gospel.³⁵ Michel similarly underscores Hebrews' contrast of the heavenly nature of the Word of God spoken now with the earthly nature of the Sinaitic revelation,³⁶ and Westcott, too, says, 'νῦν δέ ["but now"] in relation to the Christian order as distinguished from that of Sinai (τότε ["then"]) He hath promised', underlines the same contrast in verse 26.³⁷

The question of whether two different persons are intended in verse 25,³⁸ or rather one single speaker, God,³⁹ is settled, according to Hughes, by verse 26: '[h]is voice then shook the earth, but now he has promised.' 'From which', he explains, 'it plainly follows that God is the sole speaker; for it was the voice of Yahweh, certainly not of Moses or an angel, that shook the earth at Sinai, and it is Yahweh again who promises yet one further shaking in Haggai 2:6-7.'⁴⁰ Lane concurs that 'only a single speaker is in view.'⁴¹ The difference is not between persons but between different covenant contexts in which the Word of the one God is spoken.

The antithesis in v. 25^{bc} between the spatial categories of earth ('warned on earth') and heaven ('warned from heaven') is complemented by the temporal perspective of 'then' and 'now' in v26^a ... The expressions 'on earth' and 'from heaven' are used in a local sense to indicate the sphere of the old covenant and the new covenant, respectively (so Spicq, 2:411; Michel, 471-72; F. F. Bruce, 381; P. E. Hughes, 536).⁴²

³⁴ Delitzsch, *Commentary*: 2:356.

³⁵ Delitzsch, *Commentary*: 2:357-58.

³⁶ Michel, *An die Hebräer*: 471-72.

³⁷ Brooke F. Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (London: Macmillan, 1903; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970): 419.

³⁸ Either Moses or God. So Aquinas, Luther, Moffat (see Hughes, *Hebrews*: 556). Cf. the differentiated capitalization in the NASB: '... him who warned them on earth, much less shall we escape who turn away from Him who warns from heaven.'

³⁹ As maintained by Westcott, Spicq, Bruce (relayed by Hughes, *Hebrews*: 556).

⁴⁰ Hughes, *Hebrews*: 557.

⁴¹ Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*: 474-80.

⁴² Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*: 476.

Grässer concludes that *tôte* ('then') and *vôv* ('now') in verse 26a evoke a coherence between two moments of time being compared, not between two different speakers being contrasted. Because the speaker in verse 25 (according to Grässer) is not Moses, nor Jesus, but God himself, the dangers of not listening are extremely grave. As the author has already warned on several occasions (2:1-4; 4:1-13; 10:38), unbelief with regard to the Word of God is fraught with the danger of irreversible apostasy.⁴³ The metaphysical superiority of the NT revelation over the Old Covenant is here linked, says Grässer (following Weiss), with 1:1-3. There the concepts of earthly and heavenly were also in play, God speaking to the fathers through the prophets on earth, and the son elevated in 1:3 to a place 'in the heavens'. But the radical seriousness of the situation is portrayed more starkly in 12:25-29: the OT revelation, characterized as 'earthly', is now compared with the NT 'heavenly' voice of revelation, with the implication that the consequences of ignoring it are all the more severe.⁴⁴ The respective outcomes of belief or unbelief with regard to the Word of God originating 'from heaven' (i.e. in this context, the NT message) are, respectively, the winning or losing of salvation, as verse 25 makes clear.⁴⁵ Yet, '[t]he contrast between the old dispensation and the new is not primarily that between terror and joy (though that is a consequence); it is that between a lesser and a greater revelation. The hearers will reject the greater revelation at their greater peril.'⁴⁶

Attridge also concludes that what is being compared is not two speakers (e.g. Moses and God) but two periods in revelation history, and two cosmic-spatial categories. 'The speaker in both parts of the verse [25] is God. The contrast is not between speakers but between the modes of revelation, and Hebrews' characteristic dualism distinguishing the old and earthly versus the new and heavenly is again operative.'⁴⁷

That God is the referent of 'the one speaking' in this pericope is suggested as well by its parallels with earlier *qal wa'homer* or *a fortiori*

⁴³ Grässer, *An die Hebräer*: 3:328.

⁴⁴ Hegermann, *An die Hebräer*: 262, characterizes judgment under the OT as having 'only a provisional or preliminary rank', as compared with judgment concerning response to the NT message.

⁴⁵ Grässer, *An die Hebräer*: 3:329-30.

⁴⁶ Ellingworth, *Hebrews*: 682.

⁴⁷ Attridge, *Hebrews*: 379-80.

argumentation in the book (i.e. ‘if such-and-such is the case with the OT, how much more so with the gospel message’). Auffret and Lane each demonstrate extensive syntactic and vocabulary parallels here with the language of 2:1-4, where the earlier revelation at Sinai and its hearers’ response is compared with present NT revelation, to much the same effect.⁴⁸ In both the admonition at chapters 3 and 4 and the warning in the last half of chapter 12 the unwillingness of the Exodus generation to listen to the Word of God is presented in deliberate contrast with the belief and attention to that Word called for in the present generation.

5. No Subjunctives, No Conditionals

As the author comes to the conclusion of his treatise he issues this final warning in chapter 12 to heed the Word of God, with one significant grammatical difference from the earlier admonitions. In the exhortations in chapters 3 and 4 each of the three repetitions of the key expression ‘hear his voice’ is expressed with the subjunctive, implying possibility.⁴⁹ What is posed is, minimally, a hypothetical case. Conditional possibilities are posed, and consequent conduct proposed, should such potential but as-yet unrealized eventualities be produced: ‘If you should hear his voice, do not [in such a case] harden your hearts’ (σήμερον ἐὰν τῆς φωνῆς αὐτοῦ ἀκούσητε ... μὴ σκληρύνητε τὰς καρδίας ὑμῶν).⁵⁰

In contrast with those, 12:25 begins with βλέπετε (‘watch’), an imperative that is identical in form with the indicative. This lends the command more of an immediate urgency than the double subjunctive syntax of 3:7-8, 15, and 4:7, where it could be understood as open-ended instruction, to be enacted should the (hypothetical) occasion arise. At 12:25, only the secondary verb μὴ παραιτήσησθε (‘do not refuse to heed’) is in the subjunctive, as is syntactically necessary from

⁴⁸ Pierre Auffret, ‘Note sur la structure littéraire d’Hab. II. 1-4’, *NTS* 25 (1978-79): 178-79; Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*: 477.

⁴⁹ Φωνή in v. 26 is referred by many commentators back to the locution φωνῆ ῥημάτων in v. 19, where it is often translated ‘the sound of words’ rather than ‘voice’ as here. But one should also note that of the five times φωνή is used in Hebrews, the first three are that repeated expression, ‘Today if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts’, in Heb. 3:7, 3:15, and 4:7.

⁵⁰ In French, the subjunctive is known as the mood of the ‘*irréel*’, meaning ‘the unrealized’, which gives an accurate sense of the use of the subjunctive here.

its following the imperative. With the present participle τὸν λαλοῦντα, ‘the one who is speaking’, the author has left the hypothetical behind. He no longer alludes to the *possibility* of hearing God’s voice, but openly avows that God indeed is now speaking to his readers.

The use of the present participle ἀποστρέφόμενοι in 12:25 also contributes to this far more substantive situation in chapter 12.⁵¹ The latter verbal form is particularly significant since the syntax of the *a fortiori* argumentation of 12:25 would lead us to expect another ‘if’ clause: ‘if those did not escape’, he begins (εἰ γὰρ ἐκεῖνοι οὐκ ἐξέφυγον), then follows, logically, ‘how much less we who turn away from the one [warning] from heaven’ (πολὺ μᾶλλον ἡμεῖς οἱ τὸν ἀπ’ οὐρανῶν ἀποστρέφόμενοι). The natural assumption is that the latter conclusion must be conditional: ‘if we turn away’. Many interpreters in fact supply the assumed conditional nature of the statement in their translations.⁵² The author has not, however, employed a conditional syntax, as he did at 3:7, 15, and 4:7.⁵³ Rather, he uses the present middle participle οἱ ἀποστρέφόμενοι (‘those who turn away’). Granted that the turning away to which he refers is only a possibility, and one that he certainly hopes will be avoided, his posing the prospect with this particular language set nevertheless makes the possibility more imminent and more urgent than if he had employed a subjunctive verb form or posed a classic conditional possibility with ἐάν or ἐάνπερ or εἰ clauses here.⁵⁴ He certainly could have done so if he wished, since the author does use those conditional formulas on 23 other occasions.⁵⁵ Instead he has chosen here, at the culmination of his long argument, to

⁵¹ Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*: 478, stresses that the author’s moving from παραιτήσθαι, ‘disregard’, to the much stronger ἀποστρέφειν, ‘reject’, implies ‘a catastrophic turning away from God and a rejection of his salvation’.

⁵² *Wenn* (German for ‘if’) is introduced into the translation of v. 25c by Michel, *An die Hebräer*: 469, Weiss, *An die Hebräer*: 683, and Grässer, *An die Hebräer*: 3:326. The Segond translation adds ‘si’ (French for ‘if’), and AV, Phillips, RSV, NEB, NIV, TEV add ‘if.’ Spicq, *Aux Hébreux*: 2:410, Vanhoye, *Structure littéraire*: 207, Bruce, *Hebrews*: 380, and the NASB do not add the qualifying ‘if.’

⁵³ Ellingworth, *Hebrews*: 685, does claim that παραιτησάμενοι and ἀποστρέφόμενοι are probably best taken as conditional in meaning: “if they (then) rejected” ... “if we (now) reject”.

⁵⁴ Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*: 478, says, ‘The present tense in the participle implies a real and pressing danger. The writer does not say that the rejection of God is an accomplished fact (as argued by Westcott: 419) but that it is a possibility that threatens the existence of the community.’

⁵⁵ Heb. 2:2, 3; 3:6, 7, 14, 15; 4:7, 8; 6:3, 8; 7:11, 15; 8:4, 7; 9:13; 10:26, 38; 11:15, 32; 12:8, 12:20, 25; 13:23.

use three simple present participles: the one who speaks, the one who warns, and those who turn away.

The rhetorical effect of this language is to confront the reader with a compelling choice, demanding a decision.⁵⁶ ‘See that you do not refuse him who is speaking, for if those refusing the one warning on earth did not escape, how much less we who turn away from the one [warning] from heaven.’⁵⁷ Had he employed so stark a declaration earlier in the λόγος τῆς παρακλήσεως, as he calls his message in 13:22, it may not have had the effect that it does here. But the author has artfully and patiently developed his argument, which he now brings, in both senses of the term, to conclusion.

6. The Argument of Hebrews Culminated in 12:25

Beginning in 1:1-2 with the avowal that God, having spoken in the past through various means, has now spoken in a son, the author then moves through a comparison of that son with angels to the argument of 2:1-4: if those were punished who set to one side the revelation that came through angels, those who neglect the revelation that comes through the son, who is superior to angels, are surely in danger. From there he moves in chapters 3 and 4 to a comparison of Jesus’ ministry with that of Moses, exhorting his readers that they must not imitate the unbelief of the wilderness generation, who disregarded God’s Word that came through Moses. Rather, they must be prepared to obey his voice, should they hear it. There can be no dissimulation, for the Word of God is living and active, he says in 4:12-13, penetrating the heart of the one hearing it, discerning its thoughts and intentions. In chapters 5 and 6 he assesses their preparedness for hearing further revelation and finds it inadequate, chiefly because they are ‘slow to hear’ (5:11, 6:12). They

⁵⁶ Graham Hughes, *Hebrews and Hermeneutics: the Epistle to the Hebrews as a New Testament Example of Biblical Interpretation* (SNTSMS 36; Cambridge: CUP, 1979): 66-74, shows that, consistent with the paradoxical alternation of ‘realized’ and ‘futurist’ eschatologies in Hebrews, the writer may say ‘you have come’ in 12:22, on the basis of the finished work of Christ, and still exhort the readers to ‘watch out that you do not refuse him who is speaking’, v. 25, for ‘Christians are warned again that they do *not* yet stand securely within the *basileia* and indeed may yet fail to do so: “See to it that you do not reject him who speaks” (verse 25)’ [67, emphasis his].

⁵⁷ Ellingworth, *Hebrews*: 684, notes, re: ἡμεῖς, ‘in v. 25c, as in vv. 28-29, the author softens his warning by identifying himself with his hearers or readers. This assumes that the participles are conditional.’

must show more diligence to press on to deeper understanding of the Word of God, to more complete appropriation of ‘the promise’ spoken earlier (6:11-20).

The author then pushes into uncharted territory by revealing in chapters 7, 8, 9, and 10 what is seldom alluded to elsewhere in the New Testament, the high priestly ministry of Jesus in behalf of his brethren. That sacerdotal ministry qualifies them to ‘draw near to God’ (προσέρχομαι) so they can better hear his Word to them, and it both inaugurates and perpetuates the new covenant state, described in 8:10 and 10:16 as having ‘the laws of God written upon believers’ minds and hearts’, yet another expression of the intimacy of the divine Word. Recognizing the greater danger implicit in falling away from greater revelation, he warns at the end of chapter 10 that apostasy from this profound truth revealed to them in the gospel and in his own letter would be disastrous. But he encourages them by showing in chapter 11 that they are but the most recent in a long line of people who have been addressed by the Word of God, and who have responded to it in belief.⁵⁸ Chapter 12 then brings the discourse to its climax, urging the readers to respond to the message being addressed to them.

One last time the author sets present revelation of the Word of God in profile against the background of the earlier Sinai revelation. ‘You have not come’, he intones, ‘to a terrifying site of revelation, fraught with gloom and fire and frightful sounds, but rather to the celestial site where myriads of angels and perfected righteous men celebrate Jesus, mediator of the new covenant, and to sprinkled blood, to one who speaks better than Abel. [Therefore, seeing you have come to this heavenly source of revelation,] do not refuse the one who is speaking.’

The earlier diverse ways by which God spoke to the fathers – by angels, prophets, Moses, sacerdotal ceremonies, etc. – have given way to the direct and personal ministry of the Word of God they were destined to prefigure, which Hebrews has introduced and presented the

⁵⁸ In English, πίστις, the key word in Hebrews 11, may be translated either ‘belief’ or ‘faith.’ Faith is usually thought of (to appropriate the AV rendering of Heb. 11:1) as a ‘substance.’ Thus, faith is frequently conceived of as an attitude, like optimism, that one either has or does not have. ‘Belief’, on the other hand, is a semantic arrow pointing outside itself to its object; it carries the inherent nuance of reference to a prior, exterior, word expressed by someone else. Whether one reads either one or the other of these quite different nuances back into any of the 42 occurrences of πίστις, πίστος, or πιστεύω in Hebrews results in quite different interpretations of the text. Our own judgment (Smillie, *Word of God in Hebrews: 274-92*) is that in Hebrews 11, *belief* in God’s Word better transmits the burden of the author.

length of his treatise. ‘Attention is concentrated throughout this passage on God as the source of the message, to the exclusion of secondary agents.’⁵⁹ The direct nature of the speech of God is emphasized here, as contrasted with the terrifying accompanying signs of ‘transcendence’ at Mount Sinai. Throughout the book the author has shown that by the ministry of Jesus the readers may ‘draw near’ to the throne of God in intimate confidence.⁶⁰ Now at the conclusion of his argument he uses the same verb προσέρχομαι twice again: in verse 18, ‘For you have not come to the fiery mountain, gloom, and whirlwind’, and in verse 22, for the contrast: ‘but you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, etc.’ Now they may draw near (10:22; 12:22-24); they may hear from God directly because Jesus, the new covenant mediator (8:6, 9:15, 12:24) has made a way through his own flesh for believers to enter directly into God’s presence (10:19-21).

7. One Speaking in Both Testaments

Hebrews 12:18-25 is one of the author’s series of *a fortiori* explanations, like those in 1:1-2; 2:2-4; 3:12-4:11, etc., built upon tacit respect for the Word of God spoken on the earlier occasions (i.e. in the OT period of revelation), with which the present situations are compared.⁶¹ This bears directly on one of the perennial questions of Hebrews interpretation. Is the message of Hebrews – and by implication other NT writers – to be understood as replacing and rendering obsolete the message revealed long ago to the OT fathers ... or as completing it? Perhaps a better expression of Hebrews’ concept than either of those would be to say that the author understands the Word of God to include and make ample use of the words of OT revelation to express the message of the Christian gospel to the contemporary community.

Often, from their understanding of the author’s series of ‘better’ comparisons elsewhere in the book, commentators read into Hebrews’ view of Old Testament revelation strong contrast with the New Testament. But this may be inaccurate. The earlier stages of revelation

⁵⁹ Ellingworth, *Hebrews*: 685.

⁶⁰ The author uses προσέρχομαι in this way at Heb. 4:16, 7:25, 10:22, and 11:6, in addition to the special uses we are discussing at 12:18 and 12:22, and one usage at 10:1 for levitical sacrifices that ‘are *not* able to make perfect those who draw near.’

⁶¹ Weiss, *An die Hebräer*: 684-86.

are not portrayed as a foil for the later stage, but as the established platform upon which revelation through the son is performed. The author builds his case for the greater ‘heavenly’ present Word of God upon, not against, the ‘earthly’ Word of God expressed and recorded in the past. Chapter 12 culminates Hebrews’ message with the reasoning that if the readers pay attention to the word that came through the prior earth-shaking event at Sinai, as well they should, how much more ought they to listen to the voice of the one who is speaking now, who has promised that he will once more shake both earth and heaven (vv. 25-27).

The author’s concept of the relationship between the two eras of revelation is aptly signified by his use of the expressions κρεῖττον λαλοῦντι in 12:24 and πολὺ μᾶλλον in 12:25. As comparatives, the locutions ‘speaking better’ and ‘how much more’ tacitly affirm the authority of *both* testaments. The author sees an advancement that has taken place in the NT era, whereby the Word spoken in the son, and about the son, makes clear that what the OT revelation had been pointing to is, precisely, the ministry of that son.⁶² So, the NT message does not denigrate but elevate the OT message, revealing its prophetic truthfulness and the full glory of its christological meaning. Conversely, the OT provides the indispensable form into which the NT content is poured; Hebrews would have no message, were there not an ‘Old Testament’. The divine quality of the earlier written revelation forms the basis – the actual wording – of the present revelation about Jesus conveyed by the author.

When the author refers in 12:25 to one who is speaking to the reader now, he apparently means through the medium of his own written words.⁶³ If the author understands his work to be a λόγος παρακλήσεως like the OT-based Christian sermon summarized in Acts 13:15-41,⁶⁴ as 13:22 indicates that perhaps he does, then his concept of

⁶² Already a generation ago G. B. Caird, ‘The Exegetical Method of the Epistle to the Hebrews’, *CJT* 5, (1959): 44-51, demonstrated in a brief but revolutionary article that the OT is witness to its own obsolescence and that Hebrews’ hermeneutic is consistent with that perspective.

⁶³ Koester, *Hebrews*: 552, suggests that the ambiguity produced by not naming the speaker allows the author to associate the warning about God’s voice with his own (now long) speech, like rhetorical conventions of the day in which speakers ‘appealed for attentiveness when their listeners became tired.’

⁶⁴ In the aftermath of that λόγος παρακλήσεως preached in Acts 13, Paul’s messages are referred to four times immediately afterwards in vv. 44-49 as either ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ (‘the Word of God’) or ὁ λόγος τοῦ κυριοῦ (‘the Word of the Lord’).

the Word of God probably includes his own Christian interpretation of the Old Testament texts, ordinances, and personages. This may be seen in the confidence with which he proclaims NT explanations for OT texts like Psalm 8 (Heb. 2:6-10) or Psalm 40 (Heb. 10:5-9). The author's prefacing his explanation or interpretation of OT ceremonies in 9:8-9 with the words, 'the Holy Spirit is indicating this', suggests the same thing: that he believes his interpretation of the OT *is* the Word of God.⁶⁵

One simple factor, as much as anything else we might discern about Hebrews' theological or hermeneutical assumptions, argues for continuity rather than contrast between the OT and the NT revelational spheres of which the Book of Hebrews is a part. That is that both the OT records of the Word of God and the 'present' NT speech of God that Hebrews claims to be mediating are in written form. We, along with many other students of this treatise, recognize the oral speech-like qualities of the author's rhetorical style. We note that, congruent with that ambiance, he programmatically presents OT texts as something God 'says' in the present, rather than as records of his speaking in the past.⁶⁶ But in the final analysis his work comes to us, like the OT platform on which he builds, in written form. Whether he refers to OT or to NT proclamation, the Word of God as understood by Hebrews is God's speaking in the present through his word uttered and written in the past.

8. One Speaking 'to us'

At the outset of his treatise, and continuously thereafter, the author insists that God has spoken in his son 'to us' (1:2). 'Drawing near to God', the believer may, through the written words of either the Old or New Testament scriptures, intimately 'hear his voice' (3:7, 15; 4:7). In the words of promise from Jeremiah 31:31-33, said by the author of Hebrews to be fulfilled in Jesus, the New Covenant believer has God's laws 'written upon his heart' (8:10 and 10:16). He or she may – and in

⁶⁵ The author's avowal that through his own written words *God* is speaking should not be problematic. If orthodox Christians across the ages have universally attributed not only canonicity but indeed divinity to the books of the NT, it would be strange to presume that of all the readers of Hebrews only the very first reader – the writer himself – did not recognize it as such.

⁶⁶ Cf. note 1 above.

fact should – experience a heightened conviction of these words as the Word of God ‘addressed to you’ (12:5).

Hebrews’ hermeneutic does not, however, justify a libertarian use of Scripture for whatever personal purposes to which one may choose to apply it. On the contrary, the author argues carefully (in 4:1-9, for example) for why the specific conditions that obtained in the original setting of the Scriptures being referenced are still pertinent to the generation(s) that read his treatise – why they (we) may still expect to ‘hear his voice today’. This hermeneutical alignment is important, not least because it lessens the corollary danger of an open-ended concept of revelation where admission that the voice of God is to be heard today can, and sometimes does, lead to the content of such experiences being cut off from the original locus of the revelation and thus rendered vulnerable to arbitrariness and subjectivity.

Yet Hebrews’ avowals that the Word of God is living and active (4:12) and that God is speaking through the author’s own written words (12:25), and his studied application of those tenets throughout his ‘sermon’, also deter a stale scholasticism. Commentators on Hebrews from the earliest generations of the church to the present have recognized the affinity that this writing, more than others in the New Testament, has with preaching. As an exegetically-based homily, the book of Hebrews suggests a model for the relationship between the objective Word of God in Scripture and explanation and proclamation of that Word by a human preacher. It demonstrates what interpretation of the Bible can be: not only human intellectual opinion about what a text means, but also a vehicle through which the living God,⁶⁷ ‘the one who is speaking’, personally addresses those who hear it.

⁶⁷ In addition to the reference to ‘the living and active Word of God’ at 4:12, Hebrews also uses the expression ‘the living God’ at 3:12, 9:14, 10:31, and 12:22.