Polytrophic Identity: Hebrews Under a Form-critical Lens

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Intro
The proposed suggestions regarding the literary form of Hebrews are manifold: the oldest avenue of form-critical determination sees Hebrews as epistle. This heavy weight of tradition is responsible that most translations in modern languages entitle the text as “Epistle to the Hebrews.” This as most might know roots in the fact that the text was handed down as Paul’s writing and was placed right after Romans in the first codex that collected Pauline texts, namely in the Chester Beatty-papyrus P46. Yet after overcoming the traditional view of Pauline authorship in the 19th century the epistolary determination of Hebrews once again became a debated matter.

Since then the proposal to determine Hebrews as treatise is well established, most recently done so by Pamela Eisenbaum. Rather infrequently Hebrews has been classified as “book,” suggested so by Erich Grässer, or as homiletic midrasch as proposed by George Wesely Buchanan. Rarely one may encounter an explicit avoidance to determine Hebrew’s literary form too, as just done so by Martin Karrer. But the major avenue of approach to determine Hebrews literary form in the last 120 years was and is the one, to classify the text as speech, many claimed that it is an ancient oration, but even more so that it is a sermon or homily.

Of course one could differentiate here regarding these posed options, for example Hebrews as a fictitious epistle (de Wette, Wrede, Dibelius), or Hebrews that was first produced as a speech and later transformed to an epistle by a secondary
adding of its epistolary postscript, or Hebrews as a sermon-treatise, or as a diatribe
(Hagner, Grässer; Mischung aus Abhandlung und Predigt). But since my time is
strictly limited, I wish to point out to the one fact that regardless of the diverse
proposals regarding Hebrew’s literary form, all schools of Hebrews scholarship in
the last 120, the francophone, the German and the Anglo-Saxon have emphasized
Hebrews’ rhetorical character. Yet nevertheless, the literary riddle seems to remain
tenaciously in Hebrews scholarship. This polytrophic identity may recall the way
Hebrews itself characterizes God’s word in chapter one, verse one, namely as
*polutrópws*.

*Sitz im Leben*
I mentioned the importance of to the rhetorical character of Hebrews. A text that
has a strong rhetorical imprint obviously aims to communicate to a audience. This
insight must evoke Hermann Gunkel’s quest of the *Sitz im Leben* of such a text.
Such a *Sitz im Leben* could of course be a ficticious one too. Where could the
delivery of such a teaching as found in Hebrews have taken place? Theoretically
one may think of five locations: 1) at the temple in Jerusalem, 2) in a synagogue,
3) in a school, 4) in a private house, or 5) on the market place.

Option one, at the temple, has to my knowledge never been posted, one would
hope in this instance that the temple rather then the tent would have been
mentioned at least once – it is not. Option three, the school, is an intriguing
suggestion, but unfortunately the first epigraphical evidence of a school dates into
Byzantine time. Option five, the market place I would exclude, it seems that
market places where used in liturgical context but mostly in times of crises. It
remains option four, the private house, as suggested by my colleague George
Guthrie and others and option two, the synagogue. The possibility that the *Sitz im
Leben* of Hebrews might have been the private house, I can not exclude. But I must
admit, as some might have heard me talk about this before, I favor the synagogue
the most, and by doing so I out myself as standing on the shoulders of great
German Hebrew scholars such as Otto Michel. I have various good reasons – I believe – that support my personal preference.

The genre of Hebrew’s vocabulary is except for one verse at the end completely cultic of kind. It can’t be excluded of course that within private houses such texts were in use. But such a transferal seems more difficult to undertake, if one looks at expressions such as “approach the throne” as in Heb 4:16 or “you have come to Mount Zion” as in Heb 12:22. These phrases seem only to make sense in the context of sacred geography and sacred space. Revealing is also Hebrew’s formal self reference which styles it as word of exhortation, which we find only one other time in the New Testament, namely in Acts 13:15, and there explicitly in the context of a synagogue homily. But most important seem to me, the large amount of citations and allusions to verses of the Hebrew Bible. The function of the ancient synagogue homily is to explain the two readings of the lectionary cycle and apply it to the audience. Isn’t the auctor ad Hebraeos doing lots that? And lastly, the fact that most of the proposed structures in the last 120 years favor a division of Hebrews in three parts, appears to support the hypotheses of Hebrews as a synagogue homily. Because these oldest homilies of the type petichta are usually structured in the three parts: the introduction (petichta), the main part, and the comforting ending (chatima).

**Fazit**  
By posing this thesis I must be prepared to be confronted with the a counterargument “What about the epistolary ending?” I do not believe it is secondary – as Grässer suggests. I understand that synagogue homilies of the type petichta, where well written and not oral pieces. Written by synagogue preacher-scribe, most likely itinerant preachers. It is not too difficult for me to imagine, that such an itinerant preacher could have written his homily and not been able for some reason to read it himself rather sending it to his well known community.
In respect to the question posed for this podium, *Hebrews scholarship – Quo Vadis?* and my specific form-critical viewpoint, I would hope for the following: Rhetorical criticism has widely been applied to Hebrews, but scholarship – as it appears has gone in circles: there exists no consensus regarding the demarcation of the rhetorical parts, the *exordium* (Einleitung), *narratio* (Thema, Erläuterung der Umstände), *propositio* (Hauptpunkte), *argumentatio* (Beweise) and *peroratio* (Zusammenfassung). The same is true for the determination of the *genus orationis*. Scholars at the beginning of the 20th century went without specifying (Th. Haering). Later on some classified it as a deliberate speech (Walter G. Übelacker, Einfluss hinsichtlich Handlung), others as an epideictic oration (Harold W. Attridge, Einfluss hinsichtlich Tugend), others as a mix of the two, and recently scholars again went without specific classification. I’m not saying that rhetorical criticism has worn down in this respect – the connections of our author to Hellenistic education and culture are obvious – but I would wish that in addition to that method, form-critical research of oldest rabbinic material, especially homiletical material, may be compared in systematic manner to our text, despite the disputed dating of early rabbinic material; this not the least, because most form-critical proposals in the last 120 years have determined Hebrews as a synagogue homily as was said. Books and theories as presented by Daniel Boyarin, such as *Border Lines*, might have helped to bring down some of the ideologically motivated barriers, which all to rigorously claim for our text to be purely “Christian” in strict opposition to proto- or early “Jewish” homiletical material. I believe that a great deal of dissertation topics await ahead for future studies.