God, after He spoke, spoke. The artfully crafted beginning of this letter confirms for us that at least these two things about the Epistle to the Hebrews are certain: it has much to say about God because God has much to say and it is concerned with the art of speaking.\(^1\) In the ancient world, the persuasive power of a speech faltered if it rested on logic alone. The speech also had to convince the audience of the reliable and amenable character of the speaker and work to move them in a certain direction. The author of Hebrews, as has been consistently recognized, was no stranger to the conventions of ancient rhetoric. Consequently, Hebrews presents itself as an excellent specimen for a rhetorical study of its theology proper and does so in two ways. First, like other advocates in the Roman era, at times the author expounds upon the character of the one he represents, in this case, God. At other times, however, the author allows God to speak for himself through the scriptures of Israel. Hence, because God

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plays such an important role both as a speaker of this address and as one of the focal characters\textsuperscript{2}, we can analyze how the constructed *ethos* of God might have impacted the hearers. For the sake of time, we will only be able to investigate the presentation of one theological characteristic, God’s paternal nature. In so doing, we will show, with the aid of rhetorical handbooks and examples from ancient speeches, how the author presents the *ethos* of God – in his own words and those of God – so that his readers might see God as worthy of both trust and awe.

**ETHOS IN GRECO-ROMAN RHETORIC**

In order to articulate what we are looking for in the letter, we will attempt to construct a definition of *ethos*, drawn from the rhetorical handbooks. This is not to say that the author of Hebrews was a slave to the paradigms set out in these handbooks, but instead employed rhetorical tools for his own ends and with his own finesse. Consequently, by observing the comments in the major handbooks spread across different times and cultures, we gain a descriptive picture of the concept of *ethos* rather than a prescription for how authors must convey it.

Broadly, *ethos* can be defined as the portrayal of one’s character, but that simple definition belies its complex nature. Aristotle was not the first to note the importance of the projection of character,\textsuperscript{3} but his definitions provide a helpful point of departure. In *On Rhetoric* when Aristotle is discussing the invention or construction of a speech, he first mentions *ethos* as


one of the technical proofs (πίστεις ἑντεχνολ). Logos, ethos, and pathos are means of persuasion that the speaker fashions from the words of the speech itself (Rhet. 1.2.2-3). The goal of the speaker’s formation of ethos is the persuasion of the audience, specifically of the speaker believability (Rhet. 1.2.4). Appropriate to Aristotle’s detailed systems of classification, he breaks down the portrayal of character into three components: practical wisdom (φρονησις), virtue (ἀρετή), and goodwill (εὐνοία) (Rhet. 2.1.5-7). It is most important to note that, for Aristotle, ethos is the portrayal of one’s character in a speech that highlights the reasons why the audience should trust the speaker.

Cicero’s discussion of ethos also provides some helpful clues towards crafting a definition. Due to changes in the political situation, in which, unlike the Greek system, people no longer had to speak on their own behalf, but could find an orator to speak for them, Cicero is not only concerned with the ethos of the orator, but with his client, the one whom the speaker represents, as well. He seems to advocate similar virtues for each. For Cicero, the goal of ethos is to win the favor of his hearers (De or. 2.115), so his concept is closely related to pathos. In view of this, he recommends those aspects of ethos that he feels will be particularly appealing to the audience, primarily characteristics of a gentler nature (De or. 2.182-84).

Finally, in another important handbook from the Roman era, Institutio Oratoria (93-94 CE), Quintillian sets out the entire life of a student of oratory. His discussion of ethos comes under the title, “Necessity of studying how to work on the minds of the judges,” (Inst. 6.2.1 [Watson]). He notes that the projection of good character is just as important for a speaker as for his client (Inst. 6.2.18), and while he broadly defines ethos as moral character (Inst. 6.2.8, 18), he, too, highlights its gentler side.

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4Kennedy, New History, 103.
Without being able to give full due to the complexity of ethos in the handbooks and the development of it from Greek to Roman times, let us hazard a definition of ethos drawn from these rhetorical sources. Ethos is the portrayal of the speaker and/or the client in a speech, which is aimed at gaining the trust and favor of the audience. The speaker can highlight different aspects of ethos, including prudence, virtue, goodwill, and gentleness, through different means by observing the person actions, choices, habits, discourse, achievements, or emotions. Girded by this basic understanding of the concept of ethos we can turn to the Epistle to the Hebrews, asking, “How does the author of Hebrews portray the character or ethos of God so that he might convince those who hear this address of God’s trustworthy, benevolent, and majestic character and, consequently, win the compliance of the audience?”

ETHOS OF GOD IN HEBREWS

The Paternal Character of God

If the first thing that readers learn from Hebrews is that God speaks, then the first words that God speaks define him as a Father. In fact, scholars of Hebrews recognize that “Hebrews fundamentally depends on Father-Son complementarity to describe the relationship between God and Jesus.” Readers learn about the nature of God’s fatherhood not only through the author’s presentation of his relationship with the Son but also through the presentation of God’s relationship with his many παῖδες.

Father of the Son

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5 That complexity is not reflected in this short essay, but in the voluminous literature on this subject.

6 Aristotle, Rhet. 1.8.6; 2.1.5; 2.12.1-2; Cicero, De or. 2.182-84; Quintilian, Inst. 6.2.12-14.

God’s role as the Father of the Son is actually introduced even earlier than God’s first speech. In the second phrase of the complex period that begins this skillfully crafted letter, the author introduced an eschatological mode of speaking that came through a Son (1:2). Having quickly come to his focus subject for the chapter, the author proceeds to amass the qualifications of that υἱὸς through a series of relative clauses. Although these clauses show that Hebrews is an excellent example of exalted Christology in the New Testament,

they also tell the readers something about the Father of this Son. The Father is the understood subject of the verbs of the first two descriptions (1:2). He appointed the Son as heir of all things, and he made the world through Him. The father is also the understood antecedent whose glory is reflected by the Son and whose being is replicated by the Son (1:3). This reveals both the power of the Father and the willingness of the Father to allow the Son to share in his glory and majesty.

These qualities are also highlighted in the catena of scriptural citations that follow. The first, as stated, makes God’s role as Father explicit. By utilizing the oft-Christologically interpreted Psalm 2, the author makes explicit with the very words of God God’s membership in a familial relationship. To bolster his point, the author adds a citation from 2 Sam. The following citations not only allow the author to draw a comparison between Christ and the angels, but also to show the Father as one who shares his glory with Christ. God instructs his angels to worship the Son (1:6; Deut 32:43), offers praise for the just reign of the Son, anoints him, and addresses him as θεός (1:8,9). In addition, he articulates the Son’s role in creation and invites him to sit at his right hand until He subjects all things to the Son (1:13). The weight of these words of God are clearly meant to construct a high view of the Son, but we should not miss that they also portray the Father of this Son in a certain light. He has the power to call upon the

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angels to offer worship and to bestow a throne upon the Son. He is relational in becoming a Father to the Son and he is generous in sharing his power.

The author highlights the same aspects of the ethos of God in the third chapter. God is explicitly characterized as a builder (3:4), but his fatherly nature is not far from view. This is evident in the comparison of the stewards. Moses and Christ do not just differ in their degrees of faithfulness, but also in their roles. Moses is faithful as a servant, but Christ as a Son (3:5-6). It seems then that God is in view as not just the builder of a structure, but of a household, as a father. The picture is one of God tangibly involved in the household who shares the management of the household with the Son. The qualities of relational involvement as a Father and generosity in the delegation of his realm of authority emerge again.

The ancients recognized that power and authority held great possibility, for both good and ill. It was appropriate for someone to wield that power in certain situations. In his defense for Titus Annius Milo, Cicero states that all of Rome knew that Milo had “both the courage and the power to keep [Clodius] under control.”

However, the ancients, particularly the democratic Greeks, were wary of someone who was power hungry. Aeschines, in his negative assessment of Demosthenes in Against Ctesiphon notes that Demosthenes seized control of the platform on one occasion and would not let anyone else speak (71). Aeschines knew that the audience would greatly dislike someone who would selfishly grab the power of the platform. Although God is surely in a different category than humans when it comes to power, it is interesting that although the author portrays God as all-powerful, he also notes how God shares his reign and his power with the Son.

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10 See also the concern about the dangers of the power of oligarchies, Aeschines, Against Ctesiphon 6.
In the author’s unique and prevalent distinction of the Son as the High Priest, he introduces another important aspect of God’s fatherly relationship with the Son. In order to prove that Christ does not seize this position for himself, but is appointed, the author quotes from another Christological hymn, Psalm 110, albeit from a different place than any other writer of the New Testament.\footnote{Matt 22:24; Mark 12:36; Luke 20:42; Acts 2:34; I Cor 15:25.} He tells his readers that God addressed Christ as a priest according to the order of Melchizedek (5:6; Psalm 110:4). However, before he quotes this Psalm, he tells his readers that the one who appointed Christ a priest was the same one who named him as a Son, quoting again from Psalm 2. The God of the high priest is also the Father of the Son. Hence, by aligning Christ’s roles of Son and High Priest, the author also aligns the roles of God as Holy Deity and Father. Moreover, this shows that God’s role as Father to Jesus also involves imparting his calling as High Priest. It is the Father who calls the Son to his vocation.

The following passage then articulates the excruciating difficulties of Christ’s vocation. He prayed and supplicated with tears and great cries the one who was able to save him from death (5:7). The author asserts that due to his reverence, he was heard. The Father was not absent but was listening to the cries of his Son. Nevertheless, seemingly anticipating the critique that the Father was not listening closely enough to rescue the Son from death,\footnote{Byzantine theologian Photius notes this difficulty, “How can he say, ‘He was heard,’ and yet he himself begged not to enter into death? He did not avoid death, for he was crucified and died,” \textit{Fragments on the Epistle to the Hebrews} 5.7 (\textit{ACCS} 10:73). Attridge rejects Harnack’s suggestion it should read that “he was not heard,” and suggests that “Jesus was heard, but his prayer for deliverance was answered only in his exaltation,” \textit{Hebrews}, 150.} the author asserts that even though Christ was a son, he still had to suffer. Even though God was his father he allowed his Son to go through suffering so that he would learn obedience. On one hand, the author is showing his audience that sonship does not result in a vocation without difficulty. On
the other, he is asserting that the nature of God’s fatherhood allows his children to suffer. God as
the Father attends to his children, but does not remove them from all difficulty. Instead, he
allows them to endure it so that they might become perfect and fulfill his plan for them.

By analyzing the Father’s relationship with the Son we have noted several things about
the character of God. First, it is clear that he is a powerful Father. He is the very same God to
whom the priests direct their service, the Creator and controller of all things, who will remain to
see the end of all things being subjected to his Son. Second, he has chosen to be in relationship
with another, a relationship of intimacy, naming Jesus as his son. Third, he has chosen to involve
his son in his reign and share his glory. Fourth, he appoints the son to his vocation as heir and
high priest. In so doing, God is portrayed as a father who listens to His children but at the same
time allows them to suffer. God’s fatherly ethos is powerful, relational, generous, appointing,
attentive, and disciplining. In many ways, this fatherly relationship will be similar with
humanity; for, although he is the firstborn, Christ too is a Son.

Father of the Children

In the catena of the first chapter, the discussion of God’s fatherly relationship with
humanity, particularly the readers, is subtly initiated. To introduce the third quotation the author
states, ὅταν δὲ πάλιν εἰσαγάγῃ τὸν πρωτότοκον εἰς τὴν οἰκουμένην. If this son is the first born,
that implies then that there must be other children of God. This subtlety is then made explicit
throughout the letter.

In ch. 2, the author asserts that the process of perfecting Christ came about so that God
could lead many sons (υἱοὶ) into glory (2:10). For the first time in the letter, humans are
explicitly designated as God’s children. Like with his firstborn son, God allows these children to
share in his glory. In addition, this verse again highlights his paternal allowance for suffering,
albeit for Christ. Because the latter part of v. 11 highlights the sibling relationship that exists between Jesus and those whom he sanctifies, the ambiguous phrase ἐξ ἐνερζ seems to indicate not just that they are from the same divine source, but that they are from the same Father. This one father has ensured the sanctification of his earthly children through the death of his Son (2:9). Finally, in this pericope, the final citation placed upon the mouth of Jesus (Is 8:18) also highlights God as the father of humans. These παῖεια are God’s children, and Jesus has been entrusted with their care (2:10; 3:6). God shares the care of his children with his Son so that they might be redeemed.

A very similar idea appears in the third chapter. Because the author and his readers make up the household of God (3:6) over whom Christ has been set as a Son, they too are members in the household in which God is the father. His intimate involvement in building this house is at the same time his intimate involvement with the people who make up the house. The instances of God’s paternal ethos in chapter two and three reiterate his nature one who is intimately involved, one who allows suffering, and one who invites his children to participate in his glory, but they also introduce the important element of his concern for the salvation of his children.

When we turn to ancient speeches, we see that possibly the most important virtue often extolled is doing good for others, which is often achieved through self-sacrifice (Demosthenes On the Crown 197, 220). Cicero majors on this theme in his defense of Milo. In only his second sentence he asserts that Milo “shows more concern for our country’s salvation than for his own,” (Milo 1).13 Aeschines heralds his concern for the best interest of the city (Against Ctesiphon 17, 220), but spends the majority of his breath supporting his charge that Ctesiphon lied when he said that Demosthenes “consistently speaks and acts in the best interest of the people,” (Against

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13See also Cicero Milo (trans. Michael Grant), 254, 262, 269, 277.
Demosthenes argues the exact opposite. He frequently charges Aeschines with acting against the welfare of the city (On the Crown 131, 159, 265, 277). Although he recognizes that it is not a pleasant thing to hear (On the Crown 4), he continually notes his beneficial stance toward the city for the good of all (On the Crown 1, 8, 66, 101, 107, 109, 158, 173, 179, 206, 221, 228, 265, 286, 307, 321). This is well summarized in his statement, “...with an honest, just and incorruptible soul I resided over the greatest issues affecting the people of my day and directed the city’s affairs throughout reliably and honorably,” (On the Crown 298). One of the most powerful ways to convey a favorable ethos is to show that one is highly concerned to benefit the group. In a similar way, the author of Hebrews is careful to show the Father’s concern for the salvation of his children. The goal of his plan for the Son is to draw humanity to his salvific rest.

Because we have seen that the author has established God as the father of the many children early on in the letter, it is possible to see God’s fatherly nature in certain parallels between God’s relationship with the Son and his relationship with humanity. In noting these two parallels between the Sonship positions of Christ and humanity we can see what they reveal about the paternal nature of God.

In ch. 8, in an effort to explain the passing away of the old covenant (8:13) and the replacement of it with a better covenant founded upon better promises (8:6), the author inserts the longest citation in the letter, a quote from Jer 31. Included in this quote is God’s statement “I will be to them as God, and they will be to me as (my) people.” While this expresses the close relationship between God and God’s people under the new covenant, another implication arises when it is put side by side with the citation of 2 Sam 7:14 in chapter 1.
Hebrews 8:10

ἐσομαι αὐτοῖς εἰς θεόν, καὶ αὐτοὶ ἐσονταὶ μοι εἰς λαόν
ἐγὼ ἐσομαι αὐτῷ εἰς πατέρα, καὶ αὐτὸς ἔσται μοι εἰς γιον

Hebrews 1:5

These covenantal formulas allow the author to set up a parallel between God’s relationship with Christ and God’s relationship with the new covenant people. God puts himself into a certain relationship with Christ and with the new covenant people, but because it so closely follows the same form as the quotation from 2 Sam 7 it seems possible that the Fatherhood of God is also in view here in ch. 8. If that is the case, then God’s words here show the intimacy of God’s relationship with his children. This is especially true with the statement that precedes this one in which God describes himself giving his laws to the house of Israel by placing them into their minds and writing them upon their hearts. In addition, God’s fatherly relationship with his people is not prone to favoritism. All from the least to the greatest will be able to know him (8:11). If the parallel allows us to see God’s fatherly nature in ch. 8, then the quote adds to it qualities of intimacy and fairness.

The second parallel occurs in the encomium to faith. The retelling of Abraham’s story takes up a great portion of the chapter, extending from v. 8 to v. 19. In the middle, the author asserts that those who confessed themselves as strangers and exiles desired a better place that was heavenly. For this reason, God was not ashamed to be called their God. This language is very similar to the author’s assertion in ch. 2 that Christ was not ashamed to be the brother of humanity.
The structural parallel is not as close in this instance, but the ideas are very similar. Neither God nor his Son is ashamed to be associated with humanity. The correspondence suggests that because the Son is not ashamed to stand in a familial relationship with humanity as a brother, neither is God ashamed to stand in a familial relationship as Father. If we allow this, then this verse in ch. 11 suggests that God as father embraces children who set their eyes upon heavenly things and rewards this desire by preparing a city for them.\(^{14}\) God is a father that honors children who have the right priorities.

God’s fatherly relationship with humanity is not always characterized by such compassionate traits. God is also a serious father that is willing to discipline his children. In the citation from Jeremiah 31, God describes the way in which he interacted with the ancestors of the old covenant in a very parental way. In that day he took hold (ἐπιλαμβάνομαι) of their hands and led (ἐξαγαγεῖν) them. The picture is of a father gently taking the hand of a child and leading him or her out of a terrible situation. This brings a picture of the caring nature of God to the forefront, but it is quickly removed from before the eyes of the hearers by the following statements. Like a rebellious child, the ancestors did not abide in the hand of the father and keep the covenant (8:9). Therefore, God’s gentle leading turned to disdain (ἀμελέω). Children cannot rebel against this father without consequences.

\(^{14}\)This idea appears again in ch. 12 when the readers are allowed to approach the city of God and join the celebration of the firstborn (12:22-23).
This story depicts an event in the past, but the author has similar warnings for the children of God to whom he is writing. The stringent warning passages are one of the most daunting features of this letter. In two instances, God’s fatherly nature adds gravity to the seriousness of falling away from the faith. In the warning in ch. 6, the author proclaims that those who fall away crucify (ἀνασταυρόω) and shame publicly (παραδείγματιζω) the Son of God. The author is highlighting the extreme damage they do to their savior and brother, but by using this epitaph, he is also highlighting the damage they do to God. It is only conceivable that the Father would be greatly pained and angered by the shaming and killing of his Son. It is however, not only a physical and emotional assault upon his child, but it also asserts that the plan of God was not adequate. The warning in chapter 10 functions in a similar way. The author’s first description highlights action taken against God’s son, in this case, trampling him underfoot (καταπατώ). The reaction of the Father would surely be pain for his son, but this section brings to the fore the punishment (10:29) and vengeance (10:30) of the Father. God is a Father who will punish when wrong is committed. Although the warning passages function to show the gravity of falling away by highlighting what those sins would do to the Son, the powerful language would also cause the audience to reflect upon the pain and anger of God the Father for a humiliated and rejected child. We see also in speeches that one of the most important qualities is that of justice. Fairness in judgment and the ability to reward when it is deserved and to punish when it is deserved is highly prized. This is held up as a virtue to which all, particularly the judges, should attain (Cicero Milo 22, 234, 62, 254, 269; Aeschines Against Ctesiphon 231; Lysias Against Simon 13).

The clearest and most sustained exposition of God’s fatherly relationship with humanity comes toward the end of the letter in the twelfth chapter. In this instance it is not a direct address
from God, but a word taken from Proverbs addressing the readers as ὑιὸς μου. Addressed in this way, the listeners are commanded not to think lightly of the παιδεία of the Lord. The Lord both educates and reproves them, and this is done precisely to those who belong to the Lord.

Difficulties, then, are actually the discipline of the Lord and the proof of his Fatherhood over them. The author goes so far to assert that if they are without this type of education, then they are not really children of God (12:8). In drawing a parallel between earthly fathers and God, he asserts that earthly fathers disciplined according to what was seemly (τὸ δοκοῖν) to them, but God’s aim was at what was beneficial (τὸ συμφέρον). Patristic interpreter John Chrysostom noted the rhetorical force of this comparison. In his commentary on Hebrews, he states:

“For it is not on the same grounds that He and they inflict chastisement: …. Seest thou that this also brings consolation? For we are most closely attached to those, when we see that not for any interests of their own they either command or advise us: but their earnestness is, wholly and solely, on our account….”¹⁵

If proof of sonship was not enough motivation to endure these trials, the author also explicates the nature and goal of God’s discipline. It is for their benefit that they might be allowed to share (μεταλαβεῖν) in the holiness of God. It will result in the fruit of peace, righteousness (12:11), and life (12:9). God is a father who disciplines his children. If the firstborn son did not escape the lessons (5:8), neither will the mortal children. However, even in his discipline the care and the concern for the salvation of his children is ever present.

One final speech provides a very interesting model for comparison. Lysias’ On the Death of Eratosthenes is a speech written for Euphiletus, who was charged with killing a man whom he found in the act of adultery with his wife. Lysias has crafted this speech so that Euphiletus comes across as a caring, yet appropriately in control father, who is greatly pained at the loss of honor to his children and household and in reaction to this pain upholds the laws of the city. It is clear

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¹⁵Homilies on Hebrews 19.3 (NPNF 14:500).
that several of these elements are reiterated by the author of Hebrews. We saw that God cares and attends to his children, consequently acting in such a sacrificial way to send his own Son to rescue humanity from its plight. We saw the way in which the author highlights the atrocities against the Son to illumine the pain and outrage of the Father. God, too, is a father who is in control of his household, not allowing his children free reign, but prescribing models for their behavior and discipline when appropriate.

The final verse in which the fatherhood of God over humanity emerges is in the poetic climax of ch. 12. Unlike those who approached a fearful mountain (12:18-21), the readers have approached Mount Zion, a joyful mountain of celebration. Amid his descriptions of this place, the author notes that it is an assembly of the first born (ἐκκλησία πρωτοτόκων). In the beginning of the book the readers were subtly introduced into the family of God with this term, and now they are in some sense members of this gathering. Even though here God is described as judge of all (12:23), it is clear that this mountain is also the residence of a Father.

CONCLUSION

In Hebrews, God is the Father of Jesus and of the readers themselves. How, then, does the author portray their Father? He is powerful, intimately involved with his children, and generous. He is one who calls, one who listens, one who rewards, and one who disciplines. He allows suffering and labors for salvation. His abode is one of joy. He is capable of pain, anger, and compassion.

The author of Hebrews is at home in his Greco-Roman milieu through his use of ethos as he portrays God in such a way that appeals to sentiments of what is favorable and trustworthy. His purpose, however, is not to adapt the picture of God to the whims of the members of his audience but to woo them, through his portrayal of God, to hold fast to the claim that this God is
their own and that they should align their lives to his image portrayed by the Son. By portraying
God as father he reminds his audience of both the benefits and the responsibilities they have as
his children. His compassion and consistency give them needed confidence, and his wrath
provokes them out of their dullness. If he is compassionate, just, and faithful, so too should they
be (10:34-35;13:1-13). The author of Hebrews hopes that the audience will see that by holding
fast to the unchanging hand of the gracious father, it is at the same time an awesome thing to fall
into the hands of the living God. By consistently, forcefully, and poetically conveying these
elements of the *ethos* of God, the author would have been able to elicit a sense of love, fear, and
overarching awe for the God his audience could call father.
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