

Abraham's Family in the Epistle to the Hebrews

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1. Introduction

Who belongs to the family of Abraham in the Epistle to the Hebrews? The question is simple; the answer is not. The author of Hebrews utilises biblical history and biblical persons to produce his or her own sophisticated theology.¹ Biblical facts, among them persons, can be types or antitypes of other facts;² or they can be used for homilies and/or midra-

¹Many candidates for the authorship of Hebrews were and are mentioned, both male and female: Paul, Luke, Barnabas, Apollos, Aquila, Prisca, Jesus's mother Mary, etc. See the relevant introductions and the overview with BRYAN R. DYER, "The Epistle to the Hebrews in Recent Research: Studies on the Author's Identity, His Use of the Old Testament, and Theology," *JGRChJ* 9 (2013): 104–31, here 105–12. In my opinion, the author is deliberately anonymous just to strengthen the voice of God directly speaking in the so-called Old Testament and in Hebrews.

²See on typology still the classical work of LEONHARD GOPPELT, *Typos: Die typologische Deutung des Alten Testaments im Neuen* (BFCT 2/43; Gütersloh: Gütersloher, 1939 [1966]) (pages 193–215 deal with Hebrews). Goppelt's definition of typology is: "Gegenstand typologischer Deutung können nur geschichtliche Fakta, d. h. Personen, Handlungen, Ereignisse und Einrichtungen sein, Worte und Darstellungen nur insofern, als sie von solchen handeln. Eine typologische Deutung dieser Objekte liegt vor, wenn sie als von Gott gesetzte, vorbildliche Darstellungen, d. h. 'Typen' kommender, und zwar vollkommener und größerer Fakta aufgefaßt werden" (ibid., 18–19). KARL-HEINRICH OSTMEYER, however, denies that the antitypes must be greater and more perfect than the types. He even denies that there must be an antitype ("Typologie und Typos: Analyse eines schwierigen Verhältnisses," *NTS* 46 [2000]: 112–31 at 129): "τύπος bezeichnet gerade nicht einen Unterschied zwischen den in Beziehung gesetzten Größen, sondern steht für die Identität der Vergleichsaspekte. Was jeweils τύπος und was Abbild ist, ist eine Frage des Aspektes und der Intention: ein Mensch kann für einen Bildhauer τύπος einer zu verfertigen Statue sein. Eine Statue kann aber auch als τύπος eines Menschen gelten, wenn es ihre Funktion ist, diesen Menschen sichtbar werden zu lassen. Ein überbietender oder überbotener τύπος ist eine *contradictio in adjecto*." I do not find Ostmeyer convincing with respect to Hebrews. In Hebrews, facts from the Jewish Bible are used to exalt them. The antitype is better than the type and in many cases literally higher. The highest zeal according to the author of Hebrews is to be

shim.³ Therefore, we cannot simply describe the occurrences of Abraham and/or his family in Hebrews and determine at face value who they are. The Abraham depicted is not necessarily Abraham, and his family is not necessarily his family. We must deal with Abraham and his family in the argumentative function within the letter to determine who belongs to Abraham's family.

How far does membership of Abraham's family extend? From those who are kin to Abraham according to Gen 12–50, only Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Esau, and Joseph are mentioned; all of them in chapter 11. Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph function as examples of faith; Esau as the opposite.⁴ The first tentative conclusion is that merely the so-called Israelite and mainly the male line of Abraham receives attention in Hebrews. Women such as Hagar, Rebecca, and Leah do not occur.⁵ Beyond the protagonists of Gen 12–50, Levi and Judah enter the scene. However, explicit mention is made only of Levi's lineage from Abraham – which conversely seems to be inferior to not having any lineage as I will point out later.

Abraham himself occurs in three or four contexts. These contexts – chapters 2, 6 and 7, and 11⁶ – will structure this contribution as his family also appears there. I will deal with the function of Abraham in each of these texts and then with his family and its function; a family that might even be extended to all humankind. The Epistle to the Hebrews contains

near God in the heavenly city. This does not mean that the Jewish Bible is depreciated or superseded. On the contrary, many facts of the Jewish Bible are already good, and according to the author of Hebrews, the Jewish Bible has already spoken of and also been spoken by the Son of God; see J. CORNELIS DE VOS, "Past, Present, and Prophecy in Hebrews 1," in *Take Another Scroll and Write: Studies in the Interpretive Afterlife of Prophets and Prophecy in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (ed. PEKKA LINDQVIST and SVEN GREBENSTEIN; Studies in the Reception History of the Bible 6; Åbo: Åbo Akademi, 2016), 76–85.

³It is a matter of debate how the genre of Hebrews's use of the Jewish Bible must be labelled: e. g., midrash, sermon or homily, expository sermon, or homiletic midrash. See, for example, WILLIAM L. LANE, *Hebrews 1–8* (WBC 47A; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Nelson, 1991), cx–cxxxiv at cxxiv: homiletic midrash.

⁴See for Esau besides Heb 11:20 Heb 12:16–17, where Esau is portrayed in a very negative way.

⁵This does not mean that the author of Hebrews excludes women. The high esteem of Rahab while deliberately ignoring Joshua proves the opposite (Heb 11:31); cf. J. CORNELIS DE VOS, "Josua und Jesus im Neuen Testament," in *The Book of Joshua* (ed. ED NOORT; BETL 250; Leuven: Peeters, 2012), 523–40, here 529–30.

⁶Heb 2:16; 6:13; 7:1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 9; 11:8, 17.

no rewritten Bible proper.⁷ The approach is more argumentative than a rewriting of biblical narrative.⁸

2. Abraham and His Family in Hebrews

2.1 The Descendants of Abraham

The first occurrence of Abraham in Hebrews is in 2:16: οὐ γὰρ δήπου ἀγγέλων ἐπιλαμβάνεται ἀλλὰ σπέρματος Ἀβραὰμ ἐπιλαμβάνεται. This

⁷The concept of rewritten Bible was originally used as a designation of a certain form of ancient Jewish writings (GEZA VERMES, *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism: Haggadic Studies* [StPB 4; Leiden: Brill, 1961 (1973, 1983)]). Later, it became a designation of an approach, also adopted by the network "Rewritten Bible." For a workable definition of rewritten Bible, see ANDERS K. PETERSEN ("The Riverrun of Rewriting Scripture: From Textual Cannibalism to Scriptural Completion," *JSJ* 43 [2012]: 475–96 at 475): "Rewritten Scripture should be conceived of as an excessive form of intertextuality that signifies the relationship existing between scriptural predecessor and rewritten piece with respect to the question of authority." See further among the vast amount of publications dealing with the definition of rewritten Bible: ANTTI LAATO and JACQUES T. A. G. M. VAN RUITEN, eds., *Rewritten Bible Reconsidered: Proceedings of the Conference in Karkku, Finland, August 24–26 2006* (Studies in Rewritten Bible 1; Åbo: Åbo Akademi, 2008); DANIEL A. MACHIELA, "Once More, with Feeling: Rewritten Scripture in Ancient Judaism. A Review of Recent Developments," *JJS* 61 (2010), 308–20; HANNE VON WEISSENBERG, JUHA PAKKALA, and MARKO MARTTILA, eds., *Changes in Scripture: Rewriting and Interpreting Authoritative Traditions in the Second Temple Period* (BZAW 419; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011); MOLLY M. ZAHN, *Rethinking Rewritten Scripture: Composition and Exegesis in the 4QReworked Pentateuch Manuscripts* (STDJ 95; Leiden: Brill, 2011); JÓZSEF ZSENGELLÉR, ed., *Rewritten Bible after Fifty Years: Texts, Terms, or Techniques? A Last Dialogue with Geza Vermes* (JSJSup 166; Leiden: Brill, 2014). – For the subject "Abraham's family," the volume of ERKKI KOSKENNIEMI and PEKKA LINDQVIST, eds., *Rewritten Biblical Figures* (Studies in Rewritten Bible 3; Åbo: Åbo Akademi, 2010) is of importance.

⁸Heb 3:7–4:11 is the most extensive text in Hebrews that deals mainly with one pretext, Ps 94 LXX. See on this text SAMUEL BÉNÉTREAU, "Le repos du pèlerin (Hébreux 3,7–4,11)," *ETR* 78 (2003): 203–23; Randall C. Gleason, "The Old Testament Background of Rest in Hebrews 3:7–4:11," *BSac* 157 (2000): 90–107; WOLFGANG KRAUS, "Hebrews 3:7–4:11 as a Midrash on Psalm 94 LXX," in *Florilegium Lovaniense: Studies in Septuagint and Textual Criticism in Honour of Florentino García Martínez* (ed. HANS AUSLOOS, BENEDICT LEMMELIJN, and MARC VERVENNE; ETL 224; Leuven: Peeters, 2008), 275–90; PETER J. TOMSON, "Christ, Belial, and Women: 2 Cor 6:14–7:1 Compared with Ancient Judaism and with the Pauline Corpus," in *Second Corinthians in the Perspective of Late Second Temple Judaism* (ed. REIMUND BIERINGER ET AL.; CRINT 14; Leiden: Brill, 2014), 79–131; J. Cornelis de Vos, "Hebrews 3:7–4:11 and the Function of Mental Time-Space Landscapes," in *Constructions of Space III: Biblical Spatiality and the Sacred* (ed. JORUNN ØKLAND, J. CORNELIS DE VOS, and KAREN WENELL; Library of Hebrew Bible. Old Testament Studies 540; London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 169–83.

verse is a crux.⁹ It is highly debated what the verb ἐπιλαμβάνω means. Why is it in the present tense whereas the adjacent verbs are not? Does the verb have a positive or a negative meaning? Who is its subject? We must solve this riddle before we can speak about the function of the descendants of Abraham as opposed to the angels in this verse.

We begin with the question of the subject. Most commentaries and translations opt for Jesus. Jesus was last mentioned in 2:9 (and here mentioned for the first time in the Epistle to the Hebrews). Verse 9 is the climax of 2:5–9 dealing with Ps 8:5–7 LXX and its Christological-soteriological bearing. Verses 10–13 then describe Jesus's earthly life. Although the subject "Jesus" in 2:9 is far away from 2:16, and although the subject of verse 10 is a further crux,¹⁰ it is fully clear that the subject of 2:11–13, 14–15, and 17–18 is Jesus. But is he also the subject of verse 16? The answer depends on the meaning of ἐπιλαμβάνω.

The basic meaning of ἐπιλαμβάνω with the genitive is "to take hold of," "to grasp," or even "to seize."¹¹ This neutral or negative sense, however, does not fit the description of Jesus's saving incarnation. Would Jesus take

⁹MICHAEL E. GUDORF ("Through a Classical Lens: Hebrews 2:16," *JBL* 119 [2000]: 105–08 at 105) writes: "Few verses have presented more difficulty to translator and commentator alike than Heb 2:16."

¹⁰Heb 2:10 is widely recognised as a crux. Who is the subject of the verse, Jesus or God, both mentioned in the previous verse (it cannot be the grammatical subject of 2:9 as that is an inclusive "we")? If it is Jesus, who, then, is the ἀρχηγός τῆς σωτηρίας? The other occasion of ἀρχηγός in Hebrews, 12:2, points explicitly to Jesus. Would then Jesus as subject render himself perfect as ἀρχηγός τῆς σωτηρίας? This would favour reading God as the subject (see explicitly, for example, NIV, NJB, NRSV). Αὐτῷ in ἔπρεπεν γὰρ αὐτῷ (v. 10) then connects to θεοῦ in χάριτι θεοῦ (v. 9), which makes sense (see HANS-FRIEDRICH WEISS, *Der Brief an die Hebräer* [KEK 13, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991], 204). However, the content of verse 10 seems to point to Jesus. See the relevant commentaries for more arguments. I wonder why, among others, LANE (*Hebrews* 1, here 55) and GARETH L. COCKERILL (*The Epistle to the Hebrews* [NICNT; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2012], here 136 with note 53) simply presuppose with little by way of supporting argument that the subject of 2:10 is God. The only argument Lane presents is that "God" was last mentioned in 2:9. Probably, the phrase "for whom and through whom all things [exist]" in 2:10 leads the commentators uncritically to the assumption that it can only be referring to God as creator. However, chapter 1 presents the Son as a means of creation (1:2: δι' οὗ καὶ ἐποίησεν τοὺς αἰῶνας) and as a creator himself (1:10: καὶ σὺ κατ' ἀρχάς, κύριε, τὴν γῆν ἔθεμελίωσας, καὶ ἔργα τῶν χειρῶν σου εἶσιν οἱ οὐρανοί). I think that the author of Hebrews was deliberately vague in 2:10. His or her hearers could think, after having heard chapter 1, of both Jesus and God. This was intended in order to provoke a (very) high Christology.

¹¹In the Septuagint and the New Testament, only the middle voice of ἐπιλαμβάνω occurs. However, there is probably no significant difference in meaning between the active and the middle voice of the verb as there is a tendency in Koine to use the medium voice for that which would be expressed by the active voice in classical Greek; see KARL G. E. DOLFE, "Hebrews 2,16 under the Magnifying Glass," *ZNW* 84 (1993): 289–94 at 291.

hold of, grasp, or seize the descendants of Abraham? "Take hold" could be interpreted positively as "laying hands on." This is the case in the only other occurrence of ἐπιλαμβάνεσθαι in Heb 8:9. There, however, "arm/hand" (χεῖρ), explicitly occurs whereas it is lacking in 2:16.¹² There are only two occurrences of the verb, which cannot be considered sufficient to determine whether its meaning in Hebrews is positive or neutral/negative or neutral/negative and positive. In the whole Greek Bible, the verb ἐπιλαμβάνεσθαι without χεῖρ has a neutral or negative connotation.¹³ Nevertheless, some translations and commentaries render "prefer" or "to help,"¹⁴ but this is not consistent with the translation spectrum of ἐπιλαμβάνω¹⁵ and might have been influenced by the verb ἀντιλαμβάνεσθαι in Isa 41:8–9 LXX, regarded by some scholars as the pretext of Heb 2:16.¹⁶ Ἀντιλαμβάνεσθαι has a similar spectrum of meanings as ἐπιλαμβάνεσθαι but can mean additionally "help, take part with, assist."¹⁷ The question is then, why the author did not use ἀντιλαμβάνεσθαι instead of ἐπιλαμβάνεσθαι when "to help" was meant. Be it as it is, I do not see any

¹²See also Mark 8:23 for a combination of ἐπιλαμβάνεσθαι and χεῖρ.

¹³WALTER BAUER (*Griechisch-deutsches Wörterbuch zu den Schriften des Neuen Testaments und der frühchristlichen Literatur* [ed. KURT ALAND; 6th ed.; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1988], at 598) translates ἐπιλαμβάνομαι with "1. eigtl. sich halten an, ergreifen, auch gewalttätig anpacken [...] 2. übertr. – a. fassen [...] – b. erfassen." It only renders "sich annehmen" as a third meaning, with only two matches from the Greek Bible: Sir 4:11 and Heb 2:16. See also GERHARD DELLING, "λαμβάνω κτλ.," *ThWAT* 4:5–16 at 9: "Hb 2, 16 jemand (helfend) fest an sich ziehen und dadurch in die Schicksalsgemeinschaft aufnehmen" with recourse to 2:17.

¹⁴"To prefer": GEORGE W. BUCHANAN, *To the Hebrews: Translation, Comment and Conclusions* (2d ed.; AB 36; New York: Doubleday, 1972), 13, 35–36; "to help": NRSV, NAB, NIV, cf. also ERICH GRÄSSER, *An die Hebräer: 1. Teilband: Hebr 1–6* (EKKNT 17/1; Zürich: Benziger, 1990), 150 note 289; "to give help": ASV; "to give aid": NKJV; "to take to himself": NJB; "to take hold to help": LANE, *Hebrews* 1, 51 with 52 note f; "sich annehmen": WEISS, *Hebräer*, 203, 221. Not many translate "to take hold of": HAROLD W. ATTRIDGE, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis, Mich.: Fortress, 1989 [1999]), 94; COCKERILL, *Hebrews*, 124 – although Cockerill interprets ἐπιλαμβάνεσθαι in a positive sense by a connection with the exodus motive [cf. Heb 8:9] and by assuming χεῖρ as object of the verb (*ibid.*, 148–49).

¹⁵See for the meaning of the verb LSJ, s.v. ἐπιλαμβάνω.

¹⁶Isa 41:8–9 reads: "But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the offspring of Abraam (σπέρμα Αβρααμ), whom I have loved, You whom I took hold of (οὗ ἀντελαβόμην) from the ends of the earth, and I called you from its mountain peaks, and I said to you, You are my servant; I have chosen you and not forsaken you"; trans. ALBERT PIETERSMA and BENJAMIN G. WRIGHT, eds., *A New English Translation of the Septuagint and the Other Greek Translations Traditionally Included under That Title* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) (abbreviated: NETS). See ATTRIDGE, *Hebrews*, 94 note 175, for some proponents of this assumption. WILLIAM L. LANE (*Hebrews* 1, 64) even states that the author substituted ἀντιλαμβάνεσθαι in Isa 48:9 by ἐπιλαμβάνεσθαι because of Jer 38:31–32 LXX that he or she quotes in Heb 8:9.

¹⁷LSJ, s.v. ἀντιλαμβάνω.

necessity to consider Isa 48:8–9 to be pretext of Heb 2:16. Therefore, I adhere to the basic translation “to take hold of” or “seize.”¹⁸

If we leave the assumption that Jesus is the subject of the verse, then this translation does not pose a problem. Michael E. Gudorf convincingly argues that the “fear of death” (φόβος θανάτου) of the previous verse is the subject of both occurrences of ἐπιλαμβάνεται.¹⁹ Heb 2:15 says that he (Jesus) frees “those, who by fear of death through all [their] life were held in slavery.” The subsequent γὰρ δὴπου introduces a fully self-evident statement:²⁰ for the fear of death does not take hold of angels – since angels do not die – but it is indeed relevant for the descendants of Abraham.²¹ This also explains why the author uses a present tense. Even if this statement is a parenthetical truism,²² it is necessary for the argument. Although Jesus is higher than and superior to the angels, he must become human and temporarily lower to overcome death by his own death.

The angels play a prominent role in chapters 1 and 2. Here, in 2:16, we have the last occurrence of the angels before they reappear in chapter 12.²³ From now on, the attention is on “the seed of Abraham.” As opposed to angels, and thereby mortal beings, the seed of Abraham seems to designate human beings as such, not limited to Jews or believing Jews and Christians. The following arguments may substantiate my hypothesis:

(1) Heb 2:9 states that by the grace of God Jesus tasting death (γεύσῃται) inures to the benefit of all (ὑπὲρ πάντος).²⁴ “All” in this general use most probably means “all human beings.”

¹⁸Thus, DOLFE, “Hebrews 2,16,” and GUDORF, “Classical Lens.”

¹⁹GUDORF, “Hebrews 2,16,” esp. 106. COCKERILL’s critique (*Hebrews*, 146 note 94) of Gudorf is unconvincing. He postulates a parallel structure of Heb 2:14–18 (*ibid.*, 146: 14a//16, 14b//17a, 14c//17c) and states that Gudorf’s interpretation cuts through this structure. Cockerill, however, does not include verse 18 in this parallel structure, and it is to be questioned whether the structure is fully parallel.

²⁰In classical Greek, the particle δὴ (combined here with που), typically follows closely on the heels of the word or clause with which it is interacting” (GUDORF, “Hebrews 2,16,” 105).

²¹Cf. the Peshitta that renders “death” instead of “fear of death” as the logical subject of the verse; see ALBERT BONUS, “Heb. ii. 16 in the Peshitta Syriac Version,” *ExpTim* 33 (1921–1922), 234–36. If either interpretation of 2:16 is correct, the proposal of OTTO MICHEL (*Der Brief an die Hebräer* [12th ed.; KEK 13; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966], 162) becomes obsolete. He argues that ἐπιλαμβάνεται points already to the high priest in 2:17–18.

²²The designation “truism” stems from HAROLD W. ATTRIDGE (*Hebrews*, 94).

²³RANDALL C. GLEASON, “Angels and Eschatology of Heb 1–2,” *NTS* 49 (2003), 90–107.

²⁴It is a matter of debate whether χάριτι θεοῦ, “by the grace of God,” or χωρίς θεοῦ, “without God,” should be read in 2:9. However, the reading χάριτι θεοῦ has the most witnesses whereas χωρίς θεοῦ might be a result of theological considerations: is it theologically acceptable that Jesus had to die by the grace of God? See the excursus χάρις/χωρίς with WEISS, *Hebräer*, 200–2; MICHEL, *Hebräer*, 139–40; GRÄSSER, *Hebräer* 1, 124–26; LANE, *Hebrews* 1,

(2) Such interpretation fits the statement of the whole text 2:5–9, in which Ps 8:5–7 is used to declare that Jesus became human for a while and should die just like all humans. That death is inherent to humans – including Jesus – connects the two parts 2:5–9 and 10–18 by 2:9 and 14–15.²⁵

(3) The meaning of ὑπὲρ πάντος as “for all human beings,” is reinforced by the general statements referring to the whole cosmos ([τὰ] πάντα: vv. 8 [3 ×], 10 [2 ×]; cf. already 1:2–3) or at least to the inhabited world (v. 5: ἡ οἰκουμένη) including human beings (explicitly: v. 11) supports the meaning “all humans.”²⁶

(4) Jesus became human and therewith one with all (v. 11: πάντες), who all stem from one (v. 11: ἓξ ἑνός).²⁷ This “one” is indefinite. The word ἑνός can be grammatically neutral or male. If it is neutral, it could refer to the *state* of being human. If it is male, the most obvious interpretation is that it refers to God. The following statement in v. 11b in which Jesus calls all brothers and sisters, is best understandable if we suppose that the underlying thought is that all together, with Jesus, are children of God, thus humans.²⁸

(5) The phrase αἵματος καὶ σαρκός, “blood and flesh,” in 2:14 is a clear designation of human beings in general.²⁹

(6) The reference to fear of and enslavement by death applies to all humans.

Why does the author use “seed of Abraham” which means the people of Israel for Jewish ears? The designation λαός, “people,” in the singular (2:17) also points in this direction. In the Septuagint, λαός is in most cases

43 n. g. See on the whole verse JAMES SWETNAM, “The Crux at Hebrews 2,9 in Its Context,” *Bib* 91 (2010): 103–11.

²⁵Heb 2:5–18 is usually seen as a text unity with the subunits 5–9, 10–18. Heb 2:1–4 is a transitory paraenetic text between 1:1–15 and 2:5–18; see ALBERT VANHOYE, *La structure littéraire de l'Épître aux Hébreux* (2d ed.; Paris: Desclée De Brouwer, 1976, 77–85).

²⁶Cf. Heb 2:15, 17.

²⁷See on Heb 2:11 JAMES SWETNAM, “ἓξ ἑνός in Hebrews 2,11,” *Bib* 88 (2007): 517–25.

²⁸Nevertheless, Jesus remains more important than other humans in that he is the pioneer of their salvation (ἀρχηγὸν τὴν σωτηρίας; v. 10) and the one who sanctifies others (v. 11). See on ἀρχηγός GERHARD DELLING, “ἀρχηγός,” *ThWNT* 1:485–86; T. L. DYCK, “Jesus Our Pioneer: ἈΡΧΗΓΟΣ in Heb. 2:5–18; 12:1–3, and Its Relation in the Epistle to Such Designations As ΠΡΟΤΟΚΟΣ ΑΙΤΙΟΣ, ΠΡΟΔΡΟΜΟΣ, ΑΡΧΙΕΡΕΥΣ, ΕΓΓΥΟΣ, ΜΕΣΙΘΗΣ, ΠΟΙΜΗΝ and to the Recurring Theme of Pilgrimage in Faith along the Path of Suffering Which Leads to Glory” (Northwest Baptist Theological Seminary, 1980); GEORGE JOHNSTON, “Christ as Archegos,” *NTS* 27 (1981): 381–85; ERIC F. MASON, “*You Are a Priest Forever*”: *Second Temple Jewish Messianism and the Priestly Christology of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (STDJ 74; Leiden: Brill, 2008), 10–12, 20–21; DE VOS, “Josua,” 528–29.

²⁹Animals also have flesh and blood but are not the focus here.

a self-designation for the Israelite people in contrast to the ἔθνοι, the non-Israelite peoples. Nevertheless, it is very unlikely that the author restricts “people” and “seed of Abraham” to the Israelite people. In general, the author of Hebrews is not interested in a contrast between Israel and non-Israel, and “never distinguishes between an old and new people of God.”³⁰ “Seed of Abraham” could refer to all believers or those who have heard the gospel.³¹ However, the author was sophisticated enough to have written this had it been meant. “Seed of Abraham” in 2:16 is not conditioned, it is only characterised as people who fear and are enslaved by death (2:15), have sins and temptations (2:17–18), and should be helped (2:18). This likewise applies to Israel as the family of Abraham as to all humans.

In my opinion, the figure of Abraham is used to extend the offspring to all humankind. This is remarkable as Abraham is an important identity symbol for the people of Israel in early Jewish literature.³² The author could, of course, have used the generic designation ἀνθρώποι, but this would (1) have destroyed the rhythm of the *parallelismus membrorum* in 2:16³³ and (2) it had already been used for Jesus in 2:6.

In short, the author of Hebrews redefines the seed of Abraham as all human beings. This means that Jesus died for all. However, it does not mean that all humans will reach “the future world” (2:5) and thus salvation, as the word “many” instead of “all” in 2:10 indicates and as the rest of Hebrews will elucidate.

³⁰COCKERILL, *Hebrews*, 148 note 115: see also the valuable remarks on pages 20–21 and 43–44 on this subject.

³¹WEISS, *Hebräer*, 221: Christian community; MICHEL, *Hebräer*, 163: the believers; JAMES SWETNAM, *Jesus and Isaac: A Study of the Epistle to the Hebrews in the Light of the Aqedah* (AnBib 94; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1981), 136: “spiritual children of Abraham.” ATTRIDGE (*Hebrews*, 94) interprets the “seed of Abraham” too easily with “heirs of the promise [to Abraham]” in Heb 6:17 and writes that “the promise is principally embodied in the new Covenant (8:6) that has nothing to do with fleshly externals (9:10).” Thus, the seed of Abraham would restrict the reference to Christian believers only to those who are on their way to the heavenly city and are leaving the fleshly life behind them. Although this is possible on the text pragmatic level within the interaction of author and addressees, on the content level, Heb 2:16 presents salvation as a possibility for all (see below on 6:17). The occurrence of “blood and flesh” in 2:14 makes Attridge’s assumption very unlikely.

³²See, among others, MARTIN GOODMAN, GEORGE H. VAN KOOTEN and JACQUES T. A. G. M. VAN RUITEN, eds., *Abraham, the Nations, and the Hagarites: Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Perspectives on Kinship with Abraham* (Themes in Biblical Narrative 13; Leiden, Boston, Mass.: Brill, 2010), 77–199.

³³οὐ γὰρ | δήπου ἀγγέλων | ἐπιλαμβάνεται
ἀλλὰ | σπέρματος Ἀβραάμ | ἐπιλαμβάνεται

2.2 The Heirs of Abraham

Heb 6:13–7:10 contains a long piece in which Abraham and some members of the family of Abraham occur. The text consists of two pieces, 6:13–20 and 7:1–10 that most scholars assign to two different units within the macro-context of Hebrews. They join Heb 6:13–20 with the paraenetic text 5:11–6:12 in which the author addresses the indulgence of the hearers and warns against possible threats. Heb 7:1–10 is argumentative in character regarding the superiority of Melchizedek and introduces the theme of high priesthood. However, both texts share the occurrences of Abraham and Melchizedek.

Heb 6:13–20 details that God swore in his own name as he made the promise to Abraham since God could not swear by anyone greater than himself (6:13). The author alludes to Gen 22:16 that says “By myself I have sworn (κατ’ ἑμαυτοῦ ὤμοσα), says the Lord: Inasmuch as you have carried out this matter and for my sake have not spared your beloved son” (trans. NETS). By using the verb ὀμνῶμι the author might also allude to Ps 109:4 LXX (= 110:4 MT), in which the Lord swears to Melchizedek and he or she might thus anticipate the mention of Melchizedek in 6:20 and 7:1–10. In verse 14, then, the author quotes the first part of Gen 22:17 almost verbatim: “I will indeed bless you with blessings” (trans. NETS).³⁴ However, the reference to the descendants of Abraham in the remaining part of Gen 22:17 is left out in Heb 6:14. Heb 6:14 only renders “and multiply you” instead of “and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is by the seashore” etc. (trans. NETS). The focus in Heb 6:13–15 is entirely on Abraham, not on his family. Because Abraham persevered, he obtained the promise (6:15; cf. 6:12). Nothing is explicitly said about the binding of Isaac (Gen 22); that is reserved for chapter 11.³⁵ The author takes up the divine swearing (ὀμνῶμι) and shifts to human oaths: “Human beings, of course, swear by someone greater than themselves” (6:16; trans. NRSV). If human swearing is already effective; how much more then is the divine swearing (6:16–17)? This all means that the heirs of the promise can be fully confident – with strong encouragement and hope (6:18) – of this promise, as God himself made this promise steadfast and unchangeable by his own oath (ὄρκος, 6:17).

³⁴Εἰ μὴν is the text favoured by NA²⁸. The other readings – ἢ μὴν, εἰ μὴ, ὄντως δὴ – are less probable. See also ATTRIDGE, *Hebrews*, 178 note 1.

³⁵Only the verb μακροθυμεῖν connected with the promise might allude to the perseverance of Abraham in Gen 22 in that he remained faithful to God although God demanded the sacrifice of his son Isaac; cf. ATTRIDGE, *Hebrews*, 179–80.

The content of the promise is being near God, beyond the curtain in the inner shrine (6:19). From other texts in Hebrews we know that this means a being in the heavenly realm (4:1–11; 9:15; 11:13; 12:22; 13:14) which Jesus has already entered (6:20).³⁶

The descendants of Abraham are “heirs of the promise” (κληρονόμοι τῆς ἐπαγγελίας, 6:17). They partake in the promise given by God to Abraham. The author of Hebrews does not describe how one can become an heir of the promise and what “heirs of the promise” refers to; he or she simply mentions them. The reason why the author is not quite explicit could be a lack of interest, a result of the fact that it is fully evident for the author and the addressees who “heirs of Abraham” means, or the author left it deliberately blank. We shall leave the question for now and try to solve the problem with a look at the immediate context.

Does “heirs of the promise” apply again – as does “seed of Abraham” – to all human beings indiscriminately? Verse 16 begins with the word ἄνθρωποι, “human beings,” for the general statement that human beings swear by someone greater than themselves. The verb ὄμνυμι, “swearing,” is, therefore, in the present tense whereas the next verse about God’s swearing is in the aorist tense. The question is whether “human beings” is restricted to the comparison between human and divine swearing or that it is the underlying meaning of “heirs of the promise.” In verse 18b, the focus shifts again to “we.” “We” have a “strong encouragement,” we who flee in order to grasp the hope that lies before us (v. 18); this hope (ἐλπίς, v. 18) is like an “anchor of the soul, safe and steadfast [...]” These lines pertain to being in the inner shrine (v. 19), which Jesus as forerunner (πρόδρομος) has already entered “for us” (v. 20).³⁷ Thus it seems to point to Christian believers as the reference of “heirs of the promise.”

Yet, I surmise that the author left “heirs of the promise” deliberately unspecified.³⁸ The promise might be an offer to all human beings. It must only be grasped. In other words, the promise which is so firm and steadfast – that is what Heb 6:13–20 wants to make clear – should be accepted and the hope grasped. Then everyone can flee the earthly world (οἱ καταφυγόντες, v. 18) and strive for the heavenly city. Those who are already on this path, the “we,” those who know the gospel (4:2, 6), are encouraged to stay on this path. “Heirs of the promise” might therefore refer to two

³⁶Εἰσερχομαι implies in Hebrews with two exceptions a “pénétration décisive dans un domaine véritablement nouveau” (BÉNÉTREAU, “repos,” 213).

³⁷Ὁν πρόδρομος see note 28.

³⁸See ATTRIDGE, *Hebrews*, 181: “As he has frequently done earlier, the author dramatically delays explication of an ambiguous term.”

stages: (1) the offer of salvation to all human beings; and (2) the people who have heard the gospel and should persevere in maintaining hope and striving for the heavenly realm.³⁹ On the surface level, the text is about Abraham and his descendants; but the author of Hebrews extends facts from the Jewish Bible to the present and the future and applies them more or less directly to the addressees. They receive two out of three promises by God to Abraham, being numerous and being near God. The promised land, however, has been replaced with the heavenly "land."⁴⁰

The last verse, verse 20, is a transitional verse. It quotes Ps 109:4 LXX (= 110:4 MT) and thus introduces Melchizedek, "the high priest for eternity." Compared to Ps 109:4 LXX there are two relevant differences: Melchizedek is referred to as *priest* in Psalm 109 LXX whereas he is *high priest* in Hebrews. This alteration is necessary for the author of Hebrews because of the Yom Kippur imagery (ch. 9). The second difference is that the author placed εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα at the very end of the quotation. That means that the stress lies on the eternity of Melchizedek's being a high priest.⁴¹ Melchizedek appears as a type for Jesus who had entered the inner shrine (vv. 19b–20a) "according to the order of Melchizedek" (20b).⁴² This last half verse prepares for the section about Melchizedek in chapter 7, where eternity is also an important topic.

2.3 Abraham and Melchizedek Compared

Heb 7:1–10 compares Abraham with Melchizedek. The author had used Ps 109:4 LXX in 6:20, now he or she turns to Gen 14 again, the only text in the Jewish Bible besides Ps 110:4 where "Melchizedek" occurs (Gen 14:18). Chapter 7 begins with a deictic "For this Melchizedek" followed by a long eulogy to Melchizedek borrowed from Gen 14:17–20 (Heb 7:1–2), as well as explanations of the attribute "king of Salem" and the name Melchizedek itself (7:2). This all belongs to one sentence that is concluded by "[This Melchizedek ...] remains priest forever" (7:3). The present tense "remains" (μένει) and "forever" (διηνεκές) in verse 1 em-

³⁹Maybe there is also a third stage, that of the people that have fallen from the path. This is, however, not very likely as Hebrews rejects a second chance (Heb 6:4–8; 12:25).

⁴⁰KNUT BACKHAUS, "Das Land der Verheißung: Die Heimat der Glaubenden im Hebräerbrief," *NTS* 47 (2001), 171–88; DE VOS, *Heiliges Land*, 185–96.

⁴¹The third difference is that the author replaced the second person verb εἶ with the participle γινόμενος due to the new context.

⁴²MASON, *A Priest Forever*.

phasise the everlasting priestly office (ἱερατεία, v. 5) of “this Melchizedek” right at the beginning of chapter 7.⁴³

One of the aims of 7:1–10 is to highlight the superiority of Melchizedek over Abraham. Therefore, the author makes small alterations to his pre-text Gen 14:17–20. He or she starts the eulogy to Melchizedek not with Gen 14:17 but with verse 18 and so with the designations “King of Salem, priest of the highest God.” The author does not mention Abraham before this label, Abraham whom Melchizedek “meets as he returns from the slaughter of the kings” (Heb 7:1; see Gen 14:17). It is Melchizedek who blesses Abraham, and it is Abraham who apportions tithes to Melchizedek. For the author of Hebrews, it is absolutely clear that Melchizedek is superior to Abraham.⁴⁴ He or she uses a deictic οὗτος again: “See how great this one is (πηλίκος οὗτος)” (v. 4); even greater than Abraham, “the patriarch.” This “the patriarch,” also designating a very high prominence at the end of the comparison dramatically heightens the purport of the comparison.

Verse 3 plays a significant role in the argument of 7:1–10. Melchizedek is “without father, without mother, and without genealogy”; besides, “he has no beginning of days and no end of [the days of] life.” The second range of attributes matches the description of Melchizedek as being a priest forever. Beyond that, the pre- and post-existence of Melchizedek is marked (see also v. 8), as something that is reserved for divine beings such as the Son in Heb 1. And indeed, the author draws a comparison between Melchizedek and the Son of God: “having been made like (ἁφωμοιωμένος) the Son of God” (7:3); a comparison that had been prepared by the designation of Jesus as forerunner “after the order of Melchizedek” (6:20).

With the first range of attributes of Melchizedek, the author of Hebrews comments on the fact that Melchizedek appears “out of the nothing” in Gen 14. It is only this king of Salem and priest of the highest God who seems to have no family at all. This is a further argument for the superiority of Melchizedek to Abraham and now also to members of the family of Abraham, the Levites (7:5–10). The Levites receive tithes from their fellow

⁴³For the translation “priestly office” for ἱερατεία as the more concrete designation see COCKERILL, *Hebrews*, 308–9, who distinguishes it from the institutional ἱερωσύνη for which he reserves the translation “priesthood.”

⁴⁴That is the reason why the author does not relate that Melchizedek brought out bread and wine (Gen 14:18). Pseudo-Eupolemos, on the contrary, only writes about this in his record of the meeting between Melchizedek and Abraham: “He [Abraham] received gifts from Melchizedek, its ruler and priest of God” (frgm. 1 § 6, see R. DORAN, “Pseudo-Eupolemos,” *OTP* 2:873–82 at 880).

Israelites (Num 18:21–32). The Levites stem from Abraham (7:5, 10),⁴⁵ but Abraham was the one who gave tithes to Melchizedek. This means “so to say (ὡς ἔπος), that through Abraham Levi, the one who received tithes, has paid tithes” (7:9). Melchizedek, the one who is higher than Abraham and Levi, has no genealogy. This paves the way for the comparison with Jesus as high priest in the heavenly shrine. The Yom Kippur imagery in Hebrews demands a priest like Aaron. Only descendants from Aaron could be high priests, Jesus was not. By means of the comparison with Melchizedek, the (so-to-speak) higher high priest, there was no need for Jesus to have priestly ancestors.⁴⁶

What does this mean for the matter of Abraham and his family? The author holds Abraham in high esteem, but Melchizedek is greater than this patriarch.⁴⁷ Levi is only mentioned in connection with Abraham. Levi as a descendant of Abraham seems to be inferior to Abraham who, in turn, is inferior to Melchizedek. It would appear then that the question of who belongs to Abraham's family does not suit the focus of the text. The text does not deal with Abraham in the first instance but with Melchizedek. The focus is on his not having family. Only Levi occurs as a member of Abraham's family in 7:1–10. However, this being related to Abraham is considered of less value compared to Melchizedek's being without family. Thus, Heb 7:1–10 does not invite us to speculate about possible members of Abraham's family.

2.4 The Faith of Abraham and His Family

We find the last occurrences of Abraham and his family in Hebrews in the well-known chapter 11 about the examples of faith. Events in the life of Abraham and those of his descendants are qualified as being motivated by or according to faith (πίστει, κατὰ πίστιν).⁴⁸ Much can and has been said about Heb 11.⁴⁹ I will skip all the introductory items and focus on

⁴⁵See also 4QAramaic Levi^b (4Q213a) frgm. 1 11 6 (although the text is very fragmentary): “my father Abram.”

⁴⁶There are limits to the comparison between Jesus and Melchizedek. Jesus is introduced and continually labelled Son or Son of God in Hebrews. This does not match the “without father” or “without mother” of Melchizedek.

⁴⁷See also the great importance of Melchizedek in 11QMelchizedek (11Q13).

⁴⁸Κατὰ πίστιν occurs only in verse 13, “according to faith all of these died” because dying “by faith” would be awkward.

⁴⁹See, for example, CHRISTIAN ROSE, *Die Wolke der Zeugen: Eine exegetisch-traditions-geschichtliche Untersuchung zu Hebräer 10,32–12,3* (WUNT 2/60; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1994) and recently, COCKERILL, *Hebrews*, 514–600.

the verses about Abraham and those members of his family who appear in Gen 12–50, that is, Heb 11:8–22. Verses 8–10 deal with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; 11–12 with Sarah; 13–16 with all of them; 17–19 again with Abraham; and 20–22 with Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. This part exemplifies not only faith but also who the heirs of Abraham are (see above 2.2) and how they become heirs.

In the first part, in verses 8–10, the word “heirs” appears again. Isaac and Jacob are “fellow heirs” (συγκληρονόμοι) with Abraham. The content of the inheritance is the promise that God made to Abraham (v. 9). As we already know, the content of the promise according to Hebrews is living in the heavenly city. In verse 10, this becomes more or less clear: “for he (Abraham) looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (11:10, trans. NRSV). That is why it is an act of faith that Abraham lived as a sojourner (παροικεῖν) in the land of the promise as in a strange land (ἄλλοτρίαν) (v. 9). And that is why it is an act of faith that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob live in tents instead of building steady houses. They are all three on their way to the heavenly city. The promised *land* (v. 9) is not the promised *home*. God does not prompt Abraham to go to the promised land but to a place (εἰς τόπον) that Abraham will receive as inheritance (v. 8).⁵⁰ Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob share the faith of Abraham in that they strive for the heavenly city.

By faith, Sarah – the only woman mentioned in verses 8–22 – becomes the mother of a multitude of descendants (v. 12) because she considered the one who had given the promise (i. e., God) faithful (v. 11). The promise consisted of offspring for Abraham and Sarah, and this although Sarah was barren and beyond the age of child bearing.⁵¹ Thus, Sarah also shared in the faith and the promise of Abraham.

Verses 13–15 form a central part that deals with the problem that although Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, and Jacob (οὔτοι πάντες, v. 13) are heirs of the promise, they did not receive the promises. This refers to parts of the promise by God to Abraham: receiving a “land,” and being with God. Nevertheless, they keep confessing that they are strangers and sojourners on earth (v. 13) and that they are looking for their home (πατρίδα,⁵² v. 14). This home, the city prepared by God (ἡτοιμάσεν γὰρ αὐτοῖς πόλιν)

⁵⁰Καλούμενος is a *passivum divinum* referring to God as the logical subject.

⁵¹I shall skip the discussion about the meaning of Σάρρα στείρα δύναμιν εἰς καταβολὴν σπέρματος ἔλαβεν and the question whether εἰς καταβολὴν σπέρματος refers to the male or to the female part. See the relevant commentaries for this question.

⁵²Πατρίς does not mean “homeland” here as they are not looking for a land but for a place (τόπος, v. 8), a “city”; see COCKERILL, *Hebrews*, 551–52: who translates: “a place where they

is better – sc. than an earthly home – and is in heaven (κρείττονος ... ἐπουρανίου, v. 16). God is not ashamed to call himself their God. Although not yet fulfilled, the missing two parts of the promise to Abraham, a “land” and being with God remain the prospective future.

After this part, the author of Hebrews turns again to Abraham. By faith he offered his son Isaac. According to the author, Abraham did this because “he reckoned that God was able to raise from the dead” (v. 19). The logic behind Abraham’s faithfulness is that God having promised offspring through Isaac (Gen 21:12 quoted in Heb 11:18) must also be able to raise Isaac from the dead after Isaac has been offered. If God can raise Isaac from the dead, he can also raise other human beings from the dead. This conclusion is important because all the examples of faith had died – except for Henoah (v. 5) – before the entrance to the heavenly city had been opened by the entry of Jesus into the inner shrine of the heavenly temple and by his atonement of the sins of human beings. These people are awaiting a better resurrection (κρείττονος ἀναστάσεως, v. 35; cf. 39). Isaac is portrayed as a type (ἐν παραβολῇ ἐκομίσατο) in verse 19. Παραβολή must here be understood as type, and the most probable reference for this type are those living by faith. This implies that all who live by faith in general can presume resurrection.⁵³

The next and last section of the “Abraham-part,” verses 20–22, describes the reliance on the future and the fulfilment of the promises which is furthered by the descendants of Abraham. Isaac blesses Jacob and Esau concerning things to come (v. 20; see Gen 27:27–29); Jacob blesses the sons of Joseph (v. 21; see Gen 48);⁵⁴ and Joseph is so confident of his future resurrection that he prompts his sons to take his bones when they leave Egypt on their exodus (v. 22; Gen 50:24–26). There is a direct line of blessings. After Abraham is blessed by God (not mentioned here), Isaac blesses Jacob and Esau, and Jacob blesses the sons of Joseph.⁵⁵ Jacob is described as one who “worships (leaning) on the top of his staff” (v. 21). This is a quotation of Gen 47:31 LXX. The Septuagint has erroneously understood the Hebrew הַטֵּף, “bed,” the bed on which Jacob lay as he was dying, as הַטֵּף, “staff” and translated ῥάβδος. This enables the author of

are citizens.” See on the transformation of the land promise in Hebrews BACKHAUS, “Land,” and DE VOS, *Heiliges Land*, 185–93.

⁵³I agree with COCKERILL, *Hebrews*, 557–8, for this interpretation; Isaac is not a type of Christ; pace SWETNAM, *Jesus and Isaac*.

⁵⁴Esau is portrayed as a negative example in Heb 12:16–17.

⁵⁵Jacob might stand for Israel and this might be the reason why Jacob does not bless his sons (representing the tribes of Israel) but the sons of Joseph.

Hebrews to interpret “staff” as a walking-staff and as a symbol of wandering, sc. to the heavenly city. This also allows the author to transition from the Abraham-section to the subsequent Moses-section.

Are those who belong to the family of Abraham only those who are as faithful and confident as the examples in Heb 11, or all human beings? Or can we again, as in Heb 2 and 6, postulate a two-stage model: (1) an offer for humankind; (2) acceptance by the steadfast believers? The question cannot be answered definitively, but as the examples in chapter 11 are rather concrete, I tend to favour the second possibility. Chapter 12 is also quite concrete in its paraenesis and its description of the heavenly city. This makes it likely that in the application to his or her own time the author considers only those persons who are as faithful and as confident as those exemplified in Heb 11 to be members of the extended family of Abraham.

3. Conclusions

Who belongs to the family of Abraham according to the Epistle to the Hebrews? And what are the functions of Abraham and those of his family members in Hebrews? To begin with the first question: We should distinguish between the text at the surface level and the text’s pragmatic function of the occurrences of Abraham and his family. “Abraham” appears in chapters 2, 6, 7, and 11. In chapter 2, his family is labelled “seed of Abraham” (2:16) without further specification. In chapter 6, the designation “heirs of the promise” appears, and is indirectly connected with the promise to Abraham. In chapter 7, only Levi is mentioned as a member of the family of Abraham. Finally, in chapter 11, many members of Abraham’s family enter the scene: Abraham himself, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Esau, and Joseph. Thereby, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob appear as “fellow heirs” with Abraham (11:9).

The author of Hebrews speaks to his or her addressees and utilises the figures of Abraham and his family as types for the present and the future. The hearers can or rather must apply this all to their own faith and confidence. Are they also members of the family of Abraham? Or could it be that the family extends even to all humankind? In my view, there are multiple answers in Hebrews. Everything in Heb 2:5–18 prompts us to understand “seed of Abraham” (2:16) as all humankind. However, “heirs of Abraham” in 6:17 seems to point to two modes of descent, (1) an offer for all humankind and (2) an acceptance of the faith and confidence into

the promise just like Abraham. The family of Abraham according to Heb 11 seems to consist of only the second mode of descent. Heb 7:1–10 is of a different kind and can be neglected here.

If my interpretation is correct, the author utilises Abraham and his family in a sophisticated paedagogical way. He or she initially opens the entrance into the family of Abraham to all; afterwards the author narrows the membership over the course of the letter in order to urge the addressees to remain steadfast on their way to the heavenly city.⁵⁶ Only thus they can continue to belong to Abraham's family.

⁵⁶This pedagogical programme has nothing to do with supersession, as has nothing else in the Epistle to the Hebrews. As already quoted, the author "never distinguishes between an old and new people of God" (COCKERILL, *Hebrews*, 148 note 115). That the antitypes in Hebrews are better and higher does not mean that the types are bad or obsolete.