

# JESUS THE MEDIATOR OF A “BETTER COVENANT”: A STUDY OF COMPARATIVES IN THE BOOK OF HEBREWS

Andreas J. Köstenberger

The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews uses comparatives more frequently than any other writer in the New Testament.<sup>1</sup> Twenty-eight uses of comparative adjectives and seventeen uses of comparative adverbs combine for a total of forty-five occurrences of comparatives in Hebrews.

The frequent use of comparatives in Hebrews reflects the writer’s purpose. Most commentators agree that Hebrews represents a comparison between the systems of the old covenant and Christianity. The following outline may serve as a backdrop to the discussion of comparatives in Hebrews.<sup>2</sup>

## *Introduction*

1:1-4            God’s Final Word in His Son

## *Body*

1:5-2:18        I. Jesus’ Name Greater than Angels’

3:1-4:13        II. Jesus’ Ministry Greater than Moses’

4:14-5:10      III. Jesus’ Priesthood Greater than Aaron’s

5:11-6:20            Excursus: God’s Promise to Abraham

7:1-28            Jesus’ Priesthood Greater than Aaron’s (continued)

8:1-10:18        IV. Jesus—Mediator of a Better Covenant

10:19-13:17      V. The Need for Greater Faith and Endurance

## *Closing*

13:18-25        Final Words

Peter Cotterell and Max Turner help to place comparatives within the larger grammatical system:

*There are at least two word categories, the one used to denote objects, corresponding to our notion of nouns, and the other used to denote actions, corresponding to our notion of verbs. These two categories are often labeled nominals and verbals . . .*

*All languages have word classes which allow for the modification of the nominals and verbals: let us call them adjectivals and adverbials. These words introduce a kind of “fine tuning” into language, so that the precision of a communication is potentially increased . . .<sup>3</sup>*

Comparatives, used adjectivally and adverbially, are thus used to modify nominals and verbals to “fine tune” communication. More specifically, comparatives relate two referents to one another with regard to a certain quality and compare the referents’ degrees of possession of this quality.<sup>4</sup>

Both Turner and BDF point out that the system of degrees of comparison was simplified in the vernacular: the superlative disappeared, the comparative in many instances took the place of the superlative, and the positive the place of the comparative.<sup>5</sup>

In the following analysis of comparative adjectives and adverbs in Hebrews,<sup>6</sup> it will become apparent that the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews uses this grammatical feature consistently to carry out his literary purpose, i.e. a comparison of two systems, with the exhortation to his readers to fully embrace the superior system, Christianity.<sup>7</sup>

### *Analysis*

The twenty-eight occurrences of comparative adjectives include the following: κρείττων (“better”) is used thirteen times,<sup>8</sup> μείζων (“greater”) and πλείων (“more”) are used four times each, διαφορώτερον (“superior”) is used twice, and τομώτερος (“sharper”),

ὑψηλοτερος (“more exalted”), τελειότερος (“more perfect”), ἔλαττον (“lesser”) and χείρον (“worse”) are used once each.

The seventeen uses of comparative adverbs are: μᾶλλον (“more,” “rather”) occurs six times, περισσοτέρως (“all the more”) four times, πρότερον (“first”) is used three times, τάχιον (“sooner”) twice, and ἀνώτερον (“first”) and ὕστερον (“later”) once each.

### *Introduction (1:1-4) and I. Jesus’ Name Greater than Angels (1:5-2:18)*

In Heb. 1:4, the author uses κρείττων to modify the participle γενόμενος. The first referent is God’s Son, Jesus (v. 1 ἐν υἱῷ, v. 3 ὅς); the second referent is τῶν ἀγγέλων.<sup>9</sup> Jesus is greater *than* the angels. The pure genitive translated with “than” is customarily referred to as a “genitive of comparison.”<sup>10</sup>

The clause contains a comparison within a comparison: τοσοῦτω . . . ὅσω is used to link κρείττων with διαφορώτερον. Jesus’ being greater than the angels is further defined as his being heir of a greater name than they. The stative aspect of the verb κεκληρονόμηκεν with its high markedness emphasizes Jesus’ status as being greater than the angels’.<sup>11</sup> The preposition παρά is here used in a comparative function.<sup>12</sup>

The writer of Hebrews begins his letter with an assertion of Jesus’ superiority over the angels, spirit beings created by God. The following section (1:5-2:18) is devoted to a demonstration of this claim.

Within this first section there is an exhortation in 2:1 using the comparative adverb περισσοτέρως. The author ties his argument in the preceding verses in with the claim that greater revelation (cf. 1:1-4) brings about greater responsibility to receive this revelation. The corollary of this claim is that also one’s culpability for rejecting God’s

greater revelation in his Son Jesus will be greater. The comparative adverb *περισσότερως* modifies *δεῖ* and adds to the urgency of the writer's exhortation.<sup>13</sup> Similar uses of *περισσοτέτως* are found in 6:17, 7:15 (both have *περισσότερον*), and 13:19.<sup>14</sup>

## *II. Jesus' Ministry Greater than Moses' (3:1-4:12)*

The second major section, similarly to the first (cf. 1:1-4), starts with a comparison. After asserting Jesus' superiority over angelic spirit beings, the writer proceeds to compare Moses' and Jesus' stewardships. Moses, the mediator of the Old Covenant, is contrasted with Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant. As in 1:4, the preposition *παρά* is used in a comparative function. The comparative adjective *πλείονος* modifies the noun *δόξης*, an attribute that Jesus is shown to possess in a greater degree than Moses.<sup>15</sup> As in 1:4, the first comparison is further qualified by a second, introduced by *καθ' ὅσον*. Jesus' superior glory is presented as analogous to the greater honor the builder of a house has over the house itself. The genitive of comparison is used with *τοῦ οἴκου*. As in 1:4, there seems to be Semitic style, i.e. a parallel structure of one comparison being further qualified by another (synthetic parallelism). In this comparison, Jesus' ministry is shown to be more glorious because of his ontological preeminence over Moses. Jesus himself is presented as using similar arguments in Mt 12:6 (*λέγω δὲ ὑμῖν ὅτι τοῦ ἱεροῦ μείζον ἐστὶν ᾧδε*) and Mt 12:42 = Lk 11:31 (*καὶ ἰδοὺ πλεῖον Σολομῶνος ᾧδε*). The Fourth Gospel includes assertions concerning Jesus' preeminence that are similar in substance, though the form is different (Jn 1:15: *Ἰωάννης μαρτυρεῖ περὶ αὐτοῦ καὶ κέκραγεν λέγων, Οὗτος ἦν ὃν εἶπον, Ὁ ὀπίσω*

μου ἐρχόμενος ἔμπροσθέν μου γέγονεν, ὅτι πρῶτός μου ἦν, and 8:58:

εἶπεν αὐτοῖς Ἰησοῦς, Ἀμὴν ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν, πρὶν Ἀβραὰμ γενέσθαι ἐγὼ εἰμί).

The next comparison is found in 4:6. The recipients of the Epistle to the Hebrews are compared with the unbelieving generation in Moses' day which "formerly had good news preached to them" (οἱ πρότερον εὐαγγελισθέντες).<sup>16</sup> The comparative adverb πρότερον<sup>17</sup> modifies the participle εὐαγγελισθέντες and is contrasted with σήμερον in the same clause, a word which occurs frequently in the context. The analogy between those who failed to enter the Promised Land after an unprecedented display of God's power at Israel's exodus and the contemporary Hebrews, who were recipients of an even greater revelation (cf. 1:1-4), is powerful indeed and reiterates the earlier exhortation of 2:1-4. Πρότερον also occurs in 7:27 and 10:32.

Still in the context of this exhortation, the writer compares the Word of God with a sword (4:12).<sup>18</sup> The comparative adjective τομώτερος is used in conjunction with the preposition ὑπέρ.<sup>19</sup> God's Word<sup>20</sup> spiritually cuts through human rationalizations so that unbelief remains without excuse.

### *III. Jesus' Priesthood Greater than Aaron's (4:14-7:28) with an Excursus about God's*

#### *Promise to Abraham (5:11-6:20)*

Hebrews 6:9 resumes the writer's argument after a somber digression on the horrors of apostasy. The comparative adjective κρείσσονα is used as a neuter plural noun with the definite article. Τὰ κρείσσονα is modified by περὶ ὑμῶν and parallel to ἐχόμενα σωτηρίας. Again, the second referent is not explicitly mentioned. In context,

the comparison is with the apostates of verses 1-8, and especially with their end as described in verse 8.

Rather than falling away from God, the Hebrews are exhorted to inherit God's promises made to Abraham through faith and patience. Hebrews 6:13 and 16 are similar in construction. The practice of swearing by one greater than oneself is expressed as κατ' οὐδενὸς μείζονος ὁμόσαι (v. 13) and κατὰ τοῦ μείζονος ὁμνύουσιν (v. 16). In the first case, μείζονος modifies οὐδενός as a comparative adjective; in the second instance, μείζονος is used substantively. In both references, the second referent of the comparison is not explicitly mentioned but can easily be supplied (i.e., "than himself [God]" in v. 13, and "than themselves" [men] in v. 16).

In the same clause, there appears also the comparative adverb περισσότερον in 6:17. It modifies the participle βουλόμενος, which refers to God and serves to intensify the expression.<sup>21</sup> The introductory phrase ἐν ᾧ can be seen to have a comparative function as well. The phrase links the human practice of making an oath as confirmation to end a dispute with God's making an oath to show to the heirs of his promise the unchangeableness of his purpose.

The author then, in order to demonstrate Jesus' superiority over Abraham and the Levitical priesthood, proceeds to argue that the mysterious Melchizedek was greater than Abraham.<sup>22</sup> If Melchizedek's superiority over Abraham is granted, as well as the fact that Jesus' priesthood is patterned after Melchizedek's, not Aaron's, it logically follows that Jesus is superior to Abraham and the Levitical priesthood. In order to prove his first point, the writer states the commonsensical principle that the lesser is blessed by the greater (χωρὶς δὲ πάσης ἀντιλογίας τὸ ἔλαττον ὑπὸ τοῦ κρείττονος εὐλογεῖται;

7:7). The two comparative adjectives, ἔλαττον and κρείττονος, are both used substantively, in the present analogy referring to Abraham and Melchizedek with regard to their respective ranks.<sup>23</sup>

When the writer carries his argument still further, he does so again by employing a comparative adverb as an intensifier. In 7:15, he links his preceding proofs with the phrase, καὶ περισσότερον ἔτι κατάδηλόν ἐστιν. The adjective κατάδηλόν is modified by two adverbs, the comparative adverb περισσότερον and ἔτι. The comparative adverb περισσότερον<sup>24</sup> intensifies the adjective κατάδηλόν, and the adverb ἔτι further intensifies περισσότερον, and thus κατάδηλόν.<sup>25</sup> This compilation of adjectival and adverbial nominals is evidence for the writer's intensity of argument. The referent of this phrase is not explicitly stated. At any rate, what is "even clearer" is related to the fact that Jesus, though descending not from Levi, but from Judah, appeared as a high priest like Melchizedek.<sup>26</sup>

The antithesis between the eternal and the temporal order of things culminates in 7:19 in the writer's reference to the introduction of a better hope when the law had accomplished nothing (οὐδὲν γὰρ ἐτελείωσεν ὁ νόμος, ἐπεισαγωγὴ δὲ κρείττονος ἐλπίδος, δι' ἧς ἐγγέζομεν τῷ θεῷ). Jesus' priesthood according to the order of Melchizedek stands for "the power of indestructible life" (v. 16), while the Levitical priesthood based on "the law of physical requirement" (v. 16) is shown to be "weak and worthless" (v. 19). Thus the comparative adjective κρείττονος modifies ἐλπίδος and has the just described "law" (νόμος) as a second referent. The way in which the hope is better (κρείττονος) is explained in the appended prepositional relative clause, δι' ἧς ἐγγίζομεν τῷ θεῷ.<sup>27</sup>

This better hope is further substantiated by the writer in the immediately following phrase (7:20-22). God's oath in confirmation of Jesus' eternal priesthood is presented as a sure foundation of this hope which in turn is related to Jesus' mediation of a better covenant. The writer sets up a comparative structure, Καὶ καθ' ὅσον (v. 20) . . . κατὰ τοσοῦτο (v. 22). The writer's contrast is between the Old Testament priests' and Jesus' confirmation of priesthood (i.e., the formers' without an oath [see parenthetical remark in v. 21], the latter's with a divine oath). The comparative adjective κρείττονος modifies the noun διαθήκης in v. 22. The writer thus parallels the expressions κρείττονος ἐλπίδος (v. 19) and κρείττονος διαθήκης (v. 22). Jesus' state of being mediator of a better covenant is foregrounded by the author by using the highly marked γέγονεν (cf. the parallel expression γεγονότες in vv. 20 and 23).<sup>28</sup>

The Old Testament priests were subject to death and thus had to exist in greater numbers (καὶ οἱ μὲν πλείονές εἰσιν γεγονότες ἱερεῖς διὰ τὸ θανάτῳ κωλύεσθαι παραμένειν; 7:23).<sup>29</sup> The comparative adjective πλείονες functions as a predicate nominative in this phrase. The implicit contrast is here indicated by the framing device μὲν . . . δέ in vv. 23 and 24, and a chiastic arrangement:

καὶ οἱ μὲν πλείονές εἰσιν γεγονότες ἱερεῖς

διὰ τὸ θανάτῳ

κωλύεσθαι παραμένειν·

ὁ δὲ διὰ τὸ μένειν αὐτὸν

εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα

ἀπαράβατον ἔχει τὴν ἱερωσύνην.

The writer then goes on to say that Jesus is a fitting high priest for us, holy, without evil, undefiled, separated from sinners, and more exalted than the heavens (7:26). The most foregrounded aspect in this phrase is Jesus' state of separation from sinners (κεξωρισμένος). The comparative adjective ὑψηλότερος modifies the participle γενόμενος (cf. 1:4), and is followed by a genitive of comparison, τῶν οὐρανῶν.<sup>30</sup> Jesus' complete separation from sinners stands in paradoxical contrast with his close identification with them. Jesus needed to become like men to be able to atone for their sins; he needed to be God to make an eternal, infinite atonement.<sup>31</sup>

The expression πρότερον-ἔπειτα in 7:27 reflects literary language.<sup>32</sup> The two adverbs express sequence of action.

#### *IV. Jesus Mediator of a Better Covenant (8:1-10:18)*

No less than three comparative adjectives are found in 8:6.<sup>33</sup> The author had summarized his main point up to then in 8:1, i.e. that we have such a high priest who has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty on high (cf. 1:3). In 8:6, the writer launches in the very heart of his argument: Jesus' ministry is more excellent than Moses (cf. 3:3, 8:5), He is the mediator of a better covenant (cf. 7:22), based on better promises (cf. 6:13-18). For the rest of this section, the author will develop this argument more fully.

All three comparative adjectives are in an emphatic position, significantly preceding the nouns they modify (cf. 3:3):

νυνὶ δὲ διαφορωτέρας τέτυχεν λειτουργίας,  
ὅσω καὶ κρείττονός ἐστιν διαθήκης μεσίτης,

ἥτις ἐπὶ κρείττοσιν ἐπαγγελίαις νενομοθέτηται.

The structure is parallel; the comparatives are in the third position. The verbal aspect in lines one and three is stative. The deictic indicator *νυνί* relates the statement to the present time, i.e. “But now he [Jesus] experiences a superior ministry [than Moses—v. 5].” The second line is backgrounded a bit; Jesus is the mediator of a better covenant. Line three is again foregrounded: the condition of the new covenant as it is founded on better promises [than the old covenant] is emphasized.<sup>34</sup>

The author then quotes Jeremiah 31 at length (8:8-12) and describes the earthly tabernacle, the focus of the first covenant (9:1-10). In 9:11, Jesus is squarely set against the old system of approaching God. Jesus, by giving His flesh and blood into death to provide eternal redemption, entered “through the greater and more perfect tabernacle . . . the holy place once for all.”<sup>35</sup> The comparative adjectives *μείζονος* and *τελειότερας* both modify the noun *σκηνῆς*, which in turn is further explained by the following adjective, by an explanatory formulaic clause introduced by *τοῦτ’ ἔστιν*, and a series of further specification (v. 12).

In 9:13-14 the writer presents an argument *a minori ad maius* (“from the lesser to the greater”).<sup>36</sup> “If the blood of goats and bulls [the “lesser”] . . . sanctif[ies] for the cleansing of the flesh, *how much more* will the blood of Christ [the “greater”] . . . cleanse your conscience . . . to serve the living God?” In this style of argument, the comparative adverb *μᾶλλον* often combines with the form *πόσῳ* to raise the rhetorical question: If a certain “lesser truth” is true (*εἶ*), how much more (*πόσῳ μᾶλλον*) will the “greater truth” be true? The writer of Hebrews skillfully uses this formula to highlight the wide contrast between the cleansing power of sacrificial animals during the old covenant system and

the cleansing power of Christ's blood in the new covenant.<sup>37</sup> The contrast is also between mere flesh (v. 13, σαρκός) and the eternal Spirit (v. 14, πνεύματος αἰωνίου).

Similarly, the writer asserts in 9:23 that the copies of heavenly things (i.e., the sacrificial instruments used in the old covenant system) needed to be cleansed with “these” (the blood of sacrificial animals), but the heavenly things themselves needed cleansing with better sacrifices than these. The comparative adjective κρείττοσιν modifies the noun θυσίαις, followed by the preposition παρά.

The adverbial sequence ἀνώτερον-τότε in 10:8 and 9 functions like the phrase πρότερον-ἔπειτα mentioned above (7:27). Like πρότερον, ἀνώτερον is morphologically a comparative adverb.<sup>38</sup>

#### V. *The Need for Greater Faith and Endurance (10:19-13:17)*

In this practical section of application, the writer uses comparatives very frequently. In 10:25 he exhorts the Hebrews not to forsake their assemblies, but to encourage one another; he then adds, to give the exhortation an even greater urgency, “and this all the more, as you see the day approaching.” The construction he uses here is τοσούτῳ μᾶλλον ὅσῳ. The comparative adverb μᾶλλον is used similarly to the usage discussed above (9:13-14). Altogether, μᾶλλον occurs five times in this section (10:19-13:17), an evidence of the intensified argument of the writer.<sup>39</sup>

The writer makes the very serious point in 10:26 that “if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins.” In 10:29, the author then directly addresses the Hebrews and asks, “*How much more severe a judgment, do you think, will the one deserve who tramples under foot the*

Son of God . . . ?” The comparative adjective χείρονος modifies the noun τιμωρίας and is intensified by the emphatic πρόσω. The argument is similar to the one in 9:14, *a minori ad maius*. The “lesser” offender is the one who set aside the Law of Moses and died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses (10:28). The “greater” offender is the one who “tramples under foot the Son of God,” i.e. who consciously rejects the revelation concerning Christ the Son of God (cf. 6:1-8). The future ἀξιωθήσεται denotes expectation, the aorist καταπατήσας looks at the apostate’s action as a whole (i.e., complete rejection); the imperfective δοκέιτε is foregrounded, emphasizing the writer’s challenge to his audience.

The writer reminds his readers of the “former days” (πρότερον<sup>40</sup> ἡμέρας) when, after having been enlightened, they responded well to suffering, knowing that they have for themselves a better and abiding possession (10:32-34). The comparative adverb πρότερον modifies the noun ἡμέρας and functions with it as a deictic marker, indicating that the recipients’ enlightenment occurred in the past. The present participle γινώσκοντες points to their progressive acquisition of this knowledge of a better possession as they respond positively to suffering. The comparative adjective κρείττονα modifies the noun ὑπαρξιν and is paralleled by the exegetical participle μένουσαν. The phrase κρείττονα ὑπαρξιν is vague at this point in the argument, but will be explained by the writer in the following exposition.

There are six uses of comparatives in the eleventh chapter of Hebrews, the well-known “Hall of Faith” of Old Testament characters. The writer makes every effort to provide positive encouragement for his readers to show that the familiar heroes of the

Jewish faith in fact followed the very principle of faith in God that he has been trying to advocate in this epistle.<sup>41</sup>

In his exposition of the Old Testament faithful, the writer notes that Abel, by faith, brought God a better sacrifice than Cain.<sup>42</sup> The comparative adjective *πλείονα* modifies the noun *θυσίαν* and is followed by the preposition *παρά*. Abel and Cain are the first and second referents of the writer's comparison. The point in the comparison is consistent with the whole chapter, i.e., that it was *faith* which made the difference in the two men's offerings.

In 6:11-12, the author had told his audience,

And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope until the end, that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

In 11:13, he says about the Old Testament saints from Abel to Abraham, "All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance. . . ."

In 11:16, the writer gives the reason for their quest:

*νῦν δὲ κρείττονος ὀρέγονται, τοῦτ' ἔστιν ἐπουρανίου.* As in 8:6, *νῦν* functions as deictic marker; the verb *ὀρέγονται* is foregrounded. The comparative adjective *κρείττονος* is in the genitive singular, modifying the elliptic form of *πατρίς* from verse 14. The implied contrast is between these Old Testament saints' earthly countries (v. 15) and their heavenly country. As in 9:11, an explanatory formulaic clause introduced by *τοῦτ' ἔστιν* is used to provide exegetical information, i.e., that the "better" country is a heavenly one.

A similar calculation, the writer claims, was made by Moses. By faith, when he had grown up, he refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter (11:24). The following participial construction modifies this main clause. Moses chose to suffer with the people of god rather than (μᾶλλον . . . ἢ) to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin (11:25). The comparative adverb μᾶλλον and the corollary comparative particle ἢ are used to present the contrasting choices Moses faced.<sup>43</sup>

The next use of a comparative is grammatically straightforward, however difficult it may be theologically. In 11:35, the writer says that "others were tortured, not accepting their release, that they might obtain a better resurrection" (κρείττονος ἀναστάσεως). The comparative adjective κρείττονος modifies the noun ἀναστάσεως. The reference seems to be to these martyrs' expectation of greater rewards in eternity for earthly sufferings for their faith.

The thought presented in 6:11-12 and picked up again in 11:13 regarding the inheritance of God's promises is summed up in 11:39-40: "And all these, having gained approval through their faith, did not receive what was promised, because God had provided something better for us, so that apart from us they should not be made perfect." The comparative adjective κρείττόν modifies the pronoun τι and is the object of the genitive absolute τοῦ θεοῦ . . . προβλεψαμένου. The term κρείττων occurs here already for the twelfth time in Hebrews and is used by the writer as a stylistic device to highlight the superiority of the new covenant over the old.

On the strength of the encouragement provided in chapter 11, the writer exhorts his readers one more time to consider Jesus "who has endured such hostility by sinners . . . so that you may not grow weary and lose heart" (12:3; cf. 3:1). The Hebrews' suffering

ultimately must be seen as sovereign divine discipline. This the writer asserts by another argument *a minori ad maius* (cf. 9:13-14).<sup>44</sup> If we submitted to the discipline of our *earthly* fathers, who disciplined us “for a short time as seemed best to them” (12:10), should we not much more submit to the discipline of god, who is our *heavenly* Father (εἶτα τοὺς μὲν τῆς σαρκὸς ἡμῶν πατέρας εἶχομεν παιδευτὰς καὶ ἐνετρεπόμεθα· οὐ πολὺ δὲ μᾶλλον ὑποταγησόμεθα τῷ πατρὶ τῶν πνευμάτων καὶ ζήσομεν; 12:9)? The exhortation is phrased in the form of a rhetorical question, provoking a decidedly positive response. The particles μὲν . . . δέ accentuate the contrast that is presented. The comparative adverb μᾶλλον is intensified by πολὺ. The question is phrased by a negated verb denoting expectation, οὐ . . . ὑποταγησόμεθα, and has deliberative force. A similar construction with πολὺ μᾶλλον is found in 12:25.

The reason for the need to submit to God’s discipline is given in 12:11, using a construction including the comparative adjective ὕστερον. For the moment (πρὸς μὲν τὸ παρόν), discipline seems painful, but afterwards (ὕστερον δέ) it yields rich fruit. Again, the particles μὲν . . . δέ are used further to accentuate the alternative options. Within the first part of the clause, there is a further contrast, οὐ . . . χαρᾶς . . . ἀλλὰ λύπης.

By using the metaphor of weary limbs that need to be infused with new strength, the writer exhorts the Hebrews to strengthen their resolve so that the “lame limb” might not be “put out of joint,” but rather be healed (ἵνα μὴ τὸ χωλὸν ἐκτραπή, ἰαθῆ δὲ μᾶλλον; Heb 12:13). The comparative adverb μᾶλλον here intensifies the contrast presented between μὴ . . . ἐκτραπή, ἰαθῆ δέ. The latter is a chiasmic construction, with ἰαθῆ being the writer’s emphasis.

In 12:18-24, the author teaches that the Hebrews had joined the Old Testament saints in their heavenly city, Jerusalem. In 11:4, he had commended Abel whose sacrifice “through faith, though he is dead, still speaks.” Now the writer claims that Jesus’ blood speaks even better than the blood of Abel (11:24):

Ἰησοῦ, καὶ αἵματι ῥαντισμοῦ κρείττον λαλοῦντι παρὰ τὸν “Ἀβελ. The comparative adjective κρείττον modifies the participle λαλοῦντι which in turn modifies αἵματι. The comparative particle παρὰ is used with the elliptic τὸν [αἷμα] Ἀβελ.

Hebrews 12:25 uses another *a minori ad maius* argument, similar to 12:9 (which see). If those did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less (πολὺ μᾶλλον) shall we escape who turn away from Him who warns from heaven.

#### *Closing (13:18-25)*

In closing, the writer asks for prayer (13:18). “And I urge you all the more<sup>45</sup> to do this,” he says, “that I may be restored to you the sooner” (13:19).<sup>46</sup> The comparative adverbs περισσοτέρως and τάχιον are used. Both are in an emphatic position; both modify their respective verbs. Περισσοτέρως had already occurred in 2:1; περισσότερον in 6:17 and 7:15. Τάχιον is used again in 13:23, there in a positive rather than comparative way.<sup>47</sup>

#### *Conclusion of the Analysis of Comparatives in Hebrews*

Comparatives are used consistently throughout Hebrews to reinforce the central theme of the book, the superiority of Christ’s new system over the sacrificial system of the old

covenant. The key word κρείττων and other comparatives are employed to point to the better quality of every constituent element of the new system over the old.

However, comparatives are not just used in the theological section; they also occur frequently in the application part of the book. In light of the inauguration of the better system, the readers are strongly exhorted to hold on to the new way in Christ, even in the face of suffering and persecution.

Grammatically, the writer shows considerable variety in his use of comparatives. Different constructions with regard to word order, prepositions, comparative genitive, and vocabulary appear in the book. While superlative forms are not found, comparative forms are very frequent, though at times they may carry an elative rather than a comparative force.

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. the appendices.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. F. F. Bruce, "The Structure and Argument of Hebrews," *SW JournTheol* 28 (1, '85): 6-12, for a similar outline; for a more innovative approach, cf. A. Vanhoye, "Literarische Struktur and theologische Botschaft des Hebräerbriefs (1. Teil.)," *Studien zum Neuen Testament und seiner Umwelt* (Linz) 4 (1979): 119-47. See also Barnabas Lindars, "The Rhetorical Structure of Hebrews," *NTS* 35 (3, '89): 382-406.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Cotterell and Max Turner, *Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 23.

<sup>4</sup> For example, in Hebrews 3:3, Jesus is said to possess greater glory than Moses: πλείονος γὰρ οὗτος δόξης παρὰ Μωϋσῆν ἠξίωται. Note that the second referent is not always explicitly mentioned. In Hebrews 8:6, Jesus' "system" is presented as superior to the "old system" in three ways: νυνὶ δὲ διαφορωτέρας τέτυχεν λειτουργίας, ὅσω καὶ κρείττονός ἐστιν διαθήκης μεσίτης, ἥτις ἐπὶ κρείττοσιν ἐπαγγελίαις νενομοθέτηται. The "old system," however, is not explicitly mentioned in this phrase. For other examples of παρά plus accusative see Wallace, *Greek Beyond the Basics*, 297, n. 10 (citing Zerwick, *Biblical Greek*, 48). Wallace cites Heb. 1:4; 3:3; 9:23; 11:4; 12:24 (see also Luke 3:13) and quotes BAGD, s.v. παρά, III.3, to the effect that in this type of comparison "one member may receive so little attention as to pass fr. Consideration entirely, so that 'more than' becomes *instead of, rather than, to the exclusion of.*" If so, a better rendering of Heb. 3:3 might be, "He was counted worthy of glory rather than Moses."

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Turner, 29; BDF, ¶60, pp. 32-33. An example of the replacement of the superlative by the comparative can be seen in Heb. 13:19 where the form τάχιον is a comparative form, yet in context can be seen to function as a superlative, translated as "as quickly as possible." As Wallace, *Greek Beyond the Basics*, 299, notes, the use of the comparative for the superlative is relatively rare in the NT. Wallace cites Matt. 18:1; Mark 9:34; Luke 9:48; 1 Cor. 13:13; 1 Tim. 4:1.

---

<sup>6</sup> For completeness' sake, it should be pointed out that comparative clauses would also be a grammatical feature expressing comparison in Greek. The only example of a comparative clause in Hebrews is 4:2, where καθάπερ is used.

<sup>7</sup> Many commentators believe that Hebrew is “not a true letter” (so Bruce, 6). Bruce quotes G. Zuntz' assessment that Hebrews is “a midrash in rhetorical Greek prose—it is a homily” (ibid.). He adds that “Zuntz lays special weight on its [Hebrews'] repeated use of *synkrisis*, ‘a traditional device of encomiastic Greek and Latin rhetoric: the person or object to be praised is placed beside outstanding specimens of a comparable kind and his, or its, superiority (ὑπεροχή) is urged” (ibid.; reference is to G. Zuntz, *The Text of the Epistles*, Schweich Lectures [London: The British Academy, 1953], 286). For a discussion of the rhetorical device of *synkrisis*, see David A. DeSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle “to the Hebrews”* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 54-56. Bruce's own assessment is that Hebrews is indeed a homily in literary form, based on Psalm 110 and other Old Testament readings associated with the festival of Pentecost. If Apollos was the original preacher, not necessarily the final compiler of the message(s) contained in Hebrews, the polished oratory and the excellent grasp of the Hebrew Scriptures would be explained (concerning Hebrews' style, cf. BDF ¶¶3-7, pp. 2-6). References throughout this paper to the “writer” or “author” of Hebrews do not indicate my denial of the homiletical character of this “Epistle.”

<sup>8</sup> Κρείττων is thus a very significant word in Hebrews. The term is only used nineteen times in the whole New Testament; besides Hebrews, only 1 Cor uses the term more than once, i.e. three times. Cf. Leon Morris, *Hebrews*, EBC, Vol. 12 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervans, 1981), 15. Cf. also Philip E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1977), 50, n.1. Hughes notes that κρείττων is concordant with the book's focus on Christ's *superiority*. Κρείττων occurs in 1:4 (superior name), 6:9 (superior things), 7:7 (superior priest), 7:19 (superior hope), 7:22 (superior covenant and superior promises), 9:23 (superior sacrifice), 10:34 (superior possession), 11:16 (superior country), 11:35 (superior resurrection), 11:40 (superior privilege), and 12:24 (superior blood shedding). See the analysis in the body of this paper.

<sup>9</sup> BDF ¶473 (2), p. 249, point out the separation of elements in 1:4 that belong together as the writer's way to emphasize the separated elements: in τισούτῳ κρείττων γενόμενος τῶν ἀγγέλων ὅσω διαφορώτερον παρ' αὐτοὺς κληρονόμηκεν ὄνομα, κρείττων and ἀγγέλων are separated, as are διαφορώτερον and ὄνομα, emphasizing ἀγγέλων and ὄνομα.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. BDF ¶185, p. 99, who cite as alternatives to the genitive of comparison the use of ἢ or of the prepositions παρά and ὑπέρ. Cf. also Turner, 216.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Stanley E. Porter, *Verbal Aspect in the Greek of the New Testament, with Reference to Tense and Mood* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989), 263; cf. also Morris, 16.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Turner, 29, who attributes the use of παρά in comparisons to “the double influence of Semitic usages and the general trend of the Greek language.”

<sup>13</sup> Hughes, 73, comments that in first-century Greek the superlative was becoming less common so that the comparative was often found doing double duty. He cites the adverb περισσοτέρως as a good example of this and suggests that it probably carries an elative sense not only in 2:1 but whenever it occurs in the New Testament. Thus the proper translation of 2:1 would be, “We ought, then, to pay the greatest attention” (Phillips). Hughes contends that taking περισσοτέρως with a comparative force would imply that the exhortation would be to be more seriously attentive to God's Son than to the law which was declared by angels, which, in his opinion, would be erecting a false dichotomy (ibid.). However, the comparison may simply be between the “lesser” divine revelation in the Law and the “greater” revelation in His Son Jesus (cf. 1:1-4; see interpretation in the text of the paper). Furthermore, in 13:19, where περισσοτέρως is used as well, a superlative rendering hardly makes sense, while the comparative fits well (“And I encourage you to do this *all the more* [the most?!], in order that I might be restored to you the sooner;” see discussion there).

---

<sup>14</sup> Cf. the uses of περισσοτέρως/περισσότερον in Mt 11:9, Mk 7:36, 12:33,40, Lk 7:26, 12:4, 48, 20:47; 1 Cor 12:23 (2), 24, 15:10, 2 Cor 1:12, 2:4,7, 7:13, 15, 10:8, 11:23 (2), 12:15, Gal 1:14, 1Thess 2:17.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. for a similar argument 2 Corinthians 3.

<sup>16</sup> As Hughes, 160, points out, οἱ πρότερον εὐαγγελισθέντες here resumes the terminology of verse 2, ἐσμεν εὐηγγελισμένοι καθάπερ κάκεινοι. Reference is to the “good news” of the “rest” for God’s people; while settled in Canaan, God, through David, spoke in Ps 95 of *yet another rest* prepared for God’s people, which was yet future, and which is in fact eschatological (cf. Heb 11:13-16, 35; 12:18ff., 13:14). The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews thus contends that at any time the hope of God’s people was eschatological, and their primary orientation was not earthly and temporal, but heavenly and abiding.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. BDF ¶62, p. 34: “Πρότερον of the first of two acts (‘the first time’ with reference to the giving of the law; contrast πάλιν v. 7).”

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Paul in Eph 6:17, and especially John in Rev 1:16, 2:12, and 9:15.

<sup>19</sup> BDF ¶185, p. 99, give Jn 12:43 and Gal 1:14 as further examples of the use of ὑπέρ in a comparative function. BDG, 839, add Lk 16:8.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. 1:1-4.

<sup>21</sup> Hughes, 232, describes περισσότερον as comparative in form, though not in sense. He regards the term as emphatic and elative, to be translated “especially.” The idea is tht God, whose word-unlike man’s – is firm *without* any further assurances, swore by *Himself* to show *more convincingly* the unchangeable character of His purpose.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Porter, 264, who argues for the significance of perfect verbs with past implicature in emphasizing the reversal of roles between Abraham and Melchizedek.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Jn 2:10 for a similar construction.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. BDF ¶60, p. 33. Περισσότερον is used in the Gospels; in Paul, περισσοτέρως appears in part to have a still stronger force while it can be replaced elsewhere by μάλλον; BDF cite Heb 7:15 as example for περισσότερον=μάλλον.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Turner, 29, who classes the addition of particles like ἔτι and of adverbs like πολύ and πολλῶ to the comparative under “heightening of comparison,” together with accumulations like πολλῶ μάλλον. Cf. also BDF ¶246, p. 129, who cite Mt 5:20, 6:26, Mk 7:36, 2 Cor 7:13, and Phil 1:23 as further examples of heightening of comparisons.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Morris, 68.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. 4:16 and 10:22; cf. also Jas. 4:8.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Porter, 264.

<sup>29</sup> Turner, 30, classes this use of πλείονες under “Comparative for Positive,” citing the RSV translation “many in number;” a use as a true comparative, however, makes good sense as well (translation “more”); but see Turner, 31. Cf. also BDF ¶244, p. 127, who give the meaning of οἱ πλείονες in Heb 7:23 as “the majority.” (?) Hughes, 268, on the force of the present tense εἰσιν, argues that the author is here speaking of a present situation. He states that “the force of the Greek is to suggest that there were levitical priests still in office when these words were written . . . The present force of the Greek has clear implications for the dating of our epistle.” This argument falls when one abandons traditional time-based verbal analysis and uses aspect theory where verbs are not taken as indicating time of action in and of themselves. In that

---

case, εἶσιν would be stating a timeless principle, or be past-referring. In light of the preceding personal deictic indicators (Melchizedek, Aaron), I prefer the latter alternative. The writer of the Epistle foregrounds the greater number of priests in the old system by using a more marked form than e.g. the aorist and a less remote form than the imperfect. Those in the state of priests were more in number, because they were kept from remaining (same level of emphasis as εἶσιν) by death.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. BDG, 849-50 who list ὑψηλότερος as a comparative of ὑψηλός, and refer to Heb7:26 as example of an occurrence with the genitive of comparison, to be translated as *raised to greater heights than the heavens*.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. e.g. the similar introductory formulae and the contrasting statements in 2:10 Ἐπρεπεν γὰρ αὐτῷ, δι' ὃν τὰ πάντα καὶ δι' οὗ τὰ πάντα, πολλοὺς υἱοὺς εἰς δόξαν ἀγαγόντα τὸν ἀρχηγὸν τῆς σωτηρίας αὐτῶν διὰ παθημάτων τελειῶσαι, and 7:26 Τοιοῦτος γὰρ ἡμῖν καὶ ἔπρεπεν ἀρχιερεὺς, ὅσιος, ἄκακος, ἀμίαντος, κεχωρισμένος ἀπὸ τῶν ἁμαρτωλῶν, καὶ ὑψηλότερος τῶν οὐρανῶν γενόμενος.

<sup>32</sup> BDF ¶64, p. 34.

<sup>33</sup> B. F. Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1965), 219, perceives that, as in 1:4, διαφορώτερος and κρείττων are juxtaposed in 8:6. he says, “Perhaps κρείττων has regard to intrinsic superiority and διαφορώτερος to a superiority which is manifested directly. Moreover διαφ. recognizes an exceptional excellence in that which is surpassed” (i.e., both angels and the ministry of the Levites; *ibid.*).

<sup>34</sup> Cf. 7:11, where the same verb form (νενομοθέτηται) is used for the people’s reception of the law on the basis of the Levitical priesthood.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Jn 1:14: Καὶ ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο καὶ ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν. . . .

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Donald A. Carson, “Jesus and the Sabbath in the Four Gospels,” in Donald A. Carson, ed., *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982), 72. Carson reflects the consensus when he writes that “[t]his was an accepted rabbinical method of arguing, the so-called *qal wahomer* (‘light and heavy’) principle” (p. 93, n. 100). Cf. also 12:9, and 12:25. This tyle of argument is also used by Jesus (Mt 6:26=Lk 12:24; Mt 6:30=Lk 12:28; Mt 7:11=Lk 11:13; Mt 10:25), and Paul (Rom 5:9, 10, 15, 17; 8:32; 11:12, 24; 1Cor 12:22; 2Cor 3:9, 11; Phil 1:23; 2:12; Phlm 16).

<sup>37</sup> Cf. the Gospel accounts of the institution of the Lord’s Supper.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Lk 14:10.

<sup>39</sup> The other references of μᾶλλον besides 9:14 and 10:25 are 11:25, 12:9, 13, and 25.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. BDF ¶62, p. 34, who maintain that πρότερος has surrendered the meaning “the first of two” to πρῶτος and now means only “earlier;” but see 4:6 and 7:27. Hughes, 426, disagrees with BDF. He asserts: “The expression τὰς πρότερον ἡμέρας indicates here a particular period or occasion in the past; because of the weakening of the distinction between comparative and superlative forms in Koine Greek, with the result that a comparative form often bears a superlative sense, a more suitable translation may be ‘the first days,’ that is, the time when they first responded to the message of the gospel.” I see no reason why “former” days would not be an appropriate rendering of πρότερον in this passage. Besides, “first” can hardly be said to represent a “superlative” form, but would rather be a positive.

<sup>41</sup> Note that this writer’s treatment of faith differs in perspective, though not substance, from the treatments of John, Paul, or James.

---

<sup>42</sup> Hughes, 453, points out that *πλείονα* literally means “more.” Contra Westcott, 354, he contends that the comparative refers to greater *quality* rather than *quantity*. The writer’s point is not that Abel brought a more plentiful offering than Cain but that his offering was “better,” i.e., of “more quality” than Cain’s because of his (Abel’s) faith. Hughes cites Mt 5:20, 6:25, 12:41, Mk 12:23, and Lk 11:31, as using *πλεῖον* with reference to greater quality.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. BDF, ¶245a, p. 129, who maintain that the expression is similar to Hebrew usage where the adjective and *ἢ* are used to express comparison, a practice carried over into the LXX. They concede that the construction has parallels in secular Greek, but that their frequency is due to the Semitic model. The construction can denote comparison (“compared with”) or separation (“in contrast to”); BDF cite Lk 18:14, Jn 3:19, and 1 Tim 1:4 as example of the latter usage, and cite Bauer<sup>5</sup> as accepting the majority of NT passages as carrying this usage which is also called “exclusive,” citing Ac 27:11 and 2 Tim 3:4. Cf. also Zerwick, ¶445d), p. 150, who calls the construction a *disjunctive proposition*, a Semitic peculiarity to express one member negatively so as to lay more stress on the other. He cites Hos 6:6 (“I desire mercy, not sacrifice”), Mk 9:37, Lk 10:20, Jn 3:19, 7:16, 12:43-44, Ac 4:19, 5:29, 27:11, 1 Tim 1:14, 2 Tim 3:4, and Heb 11:25 as examples. He adds, “This idiom reflects the same mentality as that which uses ‘hate’ to say ‘love less’ (cf. Lk 14:26 with Mt 10:37)” (ibid.).

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Hughes, 529-30.

<sup>45</sup> Hughes, 588, points out that *περισσοτέρως*, though comparative in form, is probably elative in force, without any comparison intended. He also doubts that *τάχιον* has a comparative sense with positive force (as in 13:23). He concludes that “what our author is saying, then, is ‘Pray especially that I may be restored to you soon,’ rather than ‘The more earnestly you pray the sooner I will be restored to you.’” Hughes’s rendering is possible; I prefer the comparative sense for both adverbs. The writer of Hebrews had already asked for prayer in 13:18. It seems more plausible that he follows up this request by a repeated plea for prayer, this time giving the purpose, i.e., a more imminent reunion. If this rendering is correct, the writer of Hebrews reveals in his request a belief that prayer *does* make a difference, i.e., that his readers’ prayers may speed up his coming to them.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. BDF ¶244, p. 127, who prefer the comparative force: “*Τάχιον* probably means ‘more quickly, sooner.’” But see discussion of the replacement of the superlative by the comparative in the introduction of this paper, favoring a translation as a superlative, “as quickly as possible.” Morris, 154, deems either alternative possible.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Turner, 30.