Strengthened by Grace and Not by Foods
Reconsidering the Literary, Theological, and Social Context of Hebrews 13:7–14

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Abstract

This study interprets the numerous veiled references of Hebrews 13:7–14 against the general problem addressed in the body of the speech, namely, the temptation to apostasy posed by the idolatrous, imperial culture. Specifically, the authors of this study argue that Heb 13:9 warns against idolatry and allegiance to pagan, imperial power broadly, and that the whole of 13:7–14 is a summons to embrace suffering by rejecting such identification in view of God’s promised future. Βρώματα, the authors argue, is shorthand for foods associated with pagan tables and imperial largesse. Βεβαιοῦσθαι τὴν καρδίαν is an expression commonly used to depict literal nourishment, and in contexts where hunger was a real threat. Due to the perennial problems of food scarcity and chronic hunger, and to the critical role that foods derived from pagan and imperial sources played in alleviating these problems, the recipients of Hebrews likely were tempted to eat of these foods.

Keywords

Letter to the Hebrews – idolatry – food insecurity – apostasy – Rome
Hebrews 13:7–14 is one of “the most complex and disputed passages in Hebrews” as James Thompson notes in his commentary.1 This is in a large part due to the numerous ambiguous terms used throughout this passage: “outcome,” “foods,” “grace,” “those who serve in the tent,” “altar,” “outside the camp,” “a city that does not remain,” and “the coming city.”2 Interpreters have rightly described the author’s language with terms that speak to its opacity: “a vague allusion,” “deliberate ambiguity,” “a veiled reference,” “a figurative expression,” “elliptical,” “oblique,” “cryptic,” and the like.3 Verses 9–10, in particular, have proved especially difficult, as these verses feature a notable concentration of elliptical terms: “Do not be carried away by varied and strange teachings, for it is good for the heart to be established by grace, not by foods which are no benefit to those who partake of the them. We have an altar from which those serving in the tent have no authority to eat.” Scholars have variously explained the strange teachings and their objectionable “foods” as having reference to a wide range of scenarios.4 In the most influential of these theories, reversion to non-Christian Judaism is the primary threat to fidelity lurking behind the language of these verses.5 It is argued that association

1 J.W. Thompson, Hebrews (Paideia; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008) 274.
2 Unless otherwise indicated the translations are our own.
4 These scenarios include: Judaizing teachings encouraging kashrut regulations; Jewish Christian or Gnostic teachings encouraging asceticism; teachings encouraging the eating of foods from pagan meals or pagan altars; Jewish ritual dining; various forms of sacramental dining practices; and false teachings in general without specific referents; see F.V. Filson, “Yesterday”: A Study of Hebrews in the Light of Chapter 13 (SBT 4; Naperville: Allenson, 1967) 50–52; Attridge, Hebrews, 394–396; C.R. Koester, Hebrews: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary (AB 36; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001) 567–570.
with tolerated forms of Judaism might have provided some cover from pagan authorities for Jewish or Gentile Christ-followers.6

In the present essay we put forward an alternative understanding of Hebrews 13:9–10, one that takes its direction both from the immediate context of Hebrews 13:7–14 and from the larger context of Hebrews as a whole. We propose that Hebrews 13:9–10 warns against idolatrous eating, and that the whole of Hebrews 13:7–14, much like Hebrews 1–12 itself, is a summons to reject identification with the pagan culture and embrace suffering in view of God’s promised future.

Our argument will proceed as follows. First, we consider the broader context of Hebrews and the immediate context of Hebrews 13:7–14, noting how each in its own way encourages the kind of reversion-to-pagan-culture thesis for which we argue in Hebrews 13:9–10. Then we turn our attention to the difficult vv. 9–10 themselves and argue that the word βρώματα therein functions as shorthand for illicit pagan foods—and thus, the pagan (not Jewish) threat to fidelity we postulate. Such a reading, we observe, makes good sense of the rhetorical turn in v. 10 to the sacrificial foods (whether literal or metaphorical) of the Christian altar as an analogy to those of the Levitical, as such foods are the natural counterpart to sacrificial foods derived from pagan altars. Furthermore, 1 Corinthians 10 offers a valuable precedent in thought, setting the same three sacrificial foods—pagan, Christian, and Levitical—in the same logical relationship to one another, and out of the same hortatory concern.

Having outlined our initial reasons for seeing βρώματα in v. 9 as shorthand for idolatrous, pagan foods, we then highlight five additional considerations that further support such a reading: (1) the background of the wilderness generation’s pining for the foods of Egypt (Exod 16 and Num 11, as mediated in LXX Ps 77 and 1 Cor 10), which encourages seeing in Hebrews 13:9–10 a juxtaposition of pagan sacrificial foods on the one hand and sacrificial foods provided by the Lord on the other; (2) the example of the idolatrous (in the writer of Hebrews’s framing) Esau, who ate βρῶσις μία at cost of his birthright and blessing; (3) the phrase βεβαιοῦσθαι τὴν καρδίαν … βρώμασιν in its literary context, where such

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language refers to the literal nourishment of literal foods (a consideration that argues against taking “being strengthened in the heart by foods” as referring to metaphorical strengthening from regulations or restrictions concerning food); (4) the phrase, βεβαιοῦσθαι τὴν καρδίαν ... βρώμασιν, in its social context, where hunger and food scarcity (as in the wilderness generation and Esau stories) were factors that made illicit pagan foods with their problematic associations so enticing; (5) the analogy in vv. 12–14 of Levitical sacrificial practice, which serves as the model for movement toward the Lord’s altar (on analogy with the priest’s approach to the altar) in support of v. 10, and for movement away from Roman culture (on analogy with the animal sacrifices being burned outside the camp) in support of v. 9.

1 The Broader Context of Hebrews 1–12

We begin our analysis with a view to the larger argument of Hebrews 1–12. Since Hebrews 13 serves as a conclusion to the speech and recapitulates many of its hortatory themes, consideration of the body of the speech and the nature of its exhortations will provide needed context for an informed reading of Hebrews 13:7–14 and its summons (“imitate the faith,” “do not be carried away by varied and strange teachings,” “let us go to [Jesus] outside the camp”).

Five deliberative units comprise the argumentatio of Hebrews 1–12. They are 2:1–18, 3:7–4:13, 5:11–6:19, 10:19–12:17, and 12:25–29. The consistent deliberative appeal of these sections is two-fold: (1) perseverance is advised because of its advantages, and (2) apostasy is discouraged because of its disadvantages. Advantages and disadvantages are framed eschatologically in terms of God’s promised inheritance (e.g., 6:12; 11:36) and God’s final judgment (e.g., 9:27, 10:27).

The first and last deliberative sections may be taken as illustrative of the logical structure of the argument as it occurs in all five deliberative units of Hebrews. Immediately following the opening syncrisis of heavenly mediators of the two covenants (the angels and Jesus, Heb 1:4–14), the writer transitions to exhortation in Hebrews 2:1–3:

For this reason, it is necessary for us to pay careful attention to what we have heard lest we drift away. For, if the message declared through angels

was valid, and every transgression or disobedience received a just penalty, how can we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?

Here one observes a comparative logic that sets fidelity under the covenant mediated by angels (i.e., the old covenant—hereafter, OC) and fidelity under the covenant mediated by the Lord Jesus (i.e., the new covenant—hereafter, NC) in a parallel, oppositional relationship to apostasy. The writer argues that if apostasy was penalized under the OC, how much more will apostasy be penalized under the NC. The author does not engage in a simple, antithetical warning to heed the message of the Lord Jesus instead of the message delivered by angels (law-observant Judaism)—a message he also considers valid and just. Rather, his is a classic, a minore ad maius argument that only heightens the urgency of covenant fidelity in the case of the greater NC. If the writer is concerned about his audience’s giving their fidelity to the OC, it is odd that he repeatedly cites fidelity to the OC as exemplary.

The final deliberative unit, likewise, displays the same a minore ad maius logic. Referring again to the immediately preceding syncrisis, here of Sinai and Zion (12:18–24), Hebrews 12:25 states:

See to it that you do not neglect the one speaking. For if they (the wilderness generation) did not escape who refused the one who warned them on earth (Sinai), how much more will we not escape if we reject the one who warns from heaven (Zion).

Here again we find the same logic setting OC and NC fidelity in parallel opposition to apostasy. The writer argues that if apostasy in response to warnings from the earthly Sinai was punished, how much more will such unfaithfulness in response to warnings from the heavenly Zion be punished? Again, the author does not warn practitioners of the faith associated with the heavenly Zion not to revert to the faith practiced at the foot of Sinai. Rather, in both cases the voice that warns from the mountain is the same, as is the exhortation to maintain fidelity to the one, true God.8

8 It may be, as M.H. Kibbe argues, that the wilderness generation’s request for a mediator is the first step in the rejection of God and one that leads to the gold calf rebellion (i.e., idolatry) and apostasy (Godly Fear or Ungodly Failure: Hebrews 12 and the Sinai Theophanies [BZNW 216; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2016] 201–212). Accordingly, we can understand the escalation of “refusal” (παρατέομαι) evident from v. 19 (the request that God not speak to them but have Moses mediate God’s words) to v. 25 (the rejection of God and thus the committing of idolatry). The audience of Hebrews then has even greater reasons to heed God who speaks to them from Zion and not Sinai. Kibbe’s argument would also tie into the author’s warning...
If the prevalent manner of argumentation in Hebrews shows that “reversion to Judaism” is not the overarching concern, but rather covenantal infidelity in the manner of generations past, then other clues from the body of Hebrews clarify the kind of covenantal infidelity the writer has in mind. In 6:1, he laments the need to “lay again the foundation of repentance from dead works (νεκρῶν ἔργων) and faith toward God.” Though “dead works” has long been read with reference to Paul’s rhetoric against “works of the law,” the phrase is more naturally taken with reference to idols. That is, Jewish polemic commonly castigated idols both as “works” of the hand (in contrast to the uncreated and eternal God) and as “dead” (in contrast to the living God). In the Wisdom of Solomon, these two critiques come together in 13:10: “But miserable, with their hopes set on dead things (νεκροῖς), are those who give the name ‘gods’ to the works (ἔργα) of human hands”; and again in Wisdom 15:17: “what they make (ἔργα ἑλπιῶν) with lawless hands is dead (νεκρόν); for they are better than the objects they worship, since they have life, but the idols never had.” Similarly, Shepherd of Hermas attests the confluence of these two forms of polemic, saying of those who “worship idols” (9.21.3) that while “their words alone live, their works (ἔργα) are dead (νεκρά)” (9:21.2).

Against the background of this rhetoric, the writer’s use of the phrase “dead works” in 6:1 may be seen as an elliptical reference to idols. In describing the “basic teaching” or “foundation” of Christian preaching as “repentance from dead works and faith toward God,” the writer describes what for the readers was their early conversion experience from idolatry and to the Christian faith. Indeed, the language of repentance from “dead works” belongs to early Christian polemic against idols. In 1 Thessalonians 1:9, Paul praises the Thessalonians for having “turned (ἐπεστρέφατε) to God from idols”; and in Acts 14:15, Paul summons Gentiles to “turn (ἐπιστρέφειν) from these vain objects (idols) to the living God.”

against idolatry elsewhere (see the following paragraph above). Pace G.L. Cockerill, who relates the mountains to contrasting alternatives—Sinai (i.e., apostasy) and Zion (i.e., perseverance) (“Hebrews 12:18–24: Apocalyptic Typology or Platonic Dualism?,” TynBul 69 [2018] 225–239). The deliberative trajectory of the units devoted to the two mountains is, instead, the same. Both units frame the choice before the people as one of faithfulness or apostasy vis-à-vis the God who speaks from the mountain in view. As L. Stolz argues, the greater responsibility primarily lies with the greater experience of access and revelation by the Son (cf. 10:28–29; Der Höhenpunkt des Hebräerbriefs: Hebräer 12, 18–29 und seine Bedeutung für die Struktur und die Theologie des Hebräerbriefs [WUNT 2.463; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018] 288–289).

9 See J.A. Whitlark, Resisting Empire: Rethinking the Purpose of the Letter to “the Hebrews” (LNTS 484; London: T&T Clark, 2014) 61–75, for further discussion of these texts.
Similarly, the exhortation of Hebrews 9:13–14, with its allusion to “dead works,” appears to have in view the same issue: “If the blood of goats and bulls and the sprinkled ashes of cows made spiritually contaminated people holy and clean, how much more will the blood of Jesus wash our consciences clean from dead works (νεκρῶν ἔργων) in order to serve the living God?” One observes in this exhortation that “dead works” is perfectly antithetical to “living God” if the former expression is taken with reference to idolatry. In describing God as “living,” the writer continues the polemic against idols as non-living objects of human creation. Furthermore, ancient Jewish and early Christian writers commonly set the phrase “living God” over and against idols (“the gods of gold, and silver, and brass, and iron, and wood, and stone” / “the living God,” LXX Dan 5:23; the “idol,” Bel and “idols made with hands” / “the living God,” Bel 1:3–4; the “living God” of Joseph/the “dumb idols” of Aseneth and her family, Jos. Asen. 8.5; “idols” / “the living God,” 1 Thess 1:9; “idols” / “the living God,” 2 Cor 6:16; “vain” idols / “the living God,” Acts 14:15). Thus, the polarity of 9:13–14 is familiar anti-idolatry rhetoric. Further still, one sees that in context “dead works” cannot likely function as a phrase castigating the practices required by the cultus, as the latter has just been cited as a positive analogy to the practices of the cultus. Indeed, this sentence is another example of the same a minore ad maius argumentation found everywhere in Hebrews, where OC and NC faithfulness stand in a parallel, oppositional relationship to sin and apostasy.

One may also point to Hebrews 12:15, where the writer warns against “a root of bitterness springing up and causing trouble.” This is the language Moses used to depict the defiling effects of idolatry in his warnings to the wilderness generation against idolatry in LXX Deuteronomy 29:17 (see the discussion of Esau below). One may also cite the immediately following Hebrews 12:16–17 and the example therein of Esau’s apostasy, which the writer interprets as an example of idolatrous eating in support of the exhortation of Hebrews 12:15 (again, see the discussion of Esau below). Similarly, one may note the several exempla of faith in Hebrews 11 who are praised for their resistance to pagan culture, including Moses (Egypt), Rahab (Canaanite Jericho), and the Maccabean martyrs (Seleucid kingdom) (11:23–31, 35). The example of Moses, in particular, is telling. The writer praises Moses because he “refused

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10 See Whitlark, Resisting Empire, 63–65; the use of the phrase over and against idolatrous nations/rulers may reflect the same polemic against idols: 1 Sam 17:36 (the Philistines); 2 Kgs 19:4, 6 (the Assyrians); Isa 37:4, 17 (the Assyrians); Hos 1:10 (become “children of the living God” after pursuing idols; cf. 2:8, 13); 3 Macc. 6.28 (the Ptolemaic ruler).
11 For further discussion see Whitlark, Resisting Empire, 46–76.
to be called a son of Pharaoh’s daughter,” because he “chose rather to share ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin,” and because he “considered abuse suffered for the Christ to be greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt” (Heb 11:24–26). These are likely the same kinds of temptations faced by the audience of Hebrews as they consider whether and to what extent they will accommodate themselves to the pagan, imperial culture of Rome.

In short, Hebrews 1–12 cites the audience’s advantages under the NC strictly as greater cause to practice the fidelity that has always been required of God’s people. OC representatives from the past are not invoked as symbols of an alternative form of Judaism to which the recipients are tempted to revert, but rather, function in conjunction with their NC comparison partners in support of a recurring a minore ad maius argument for covenant fidelity. Several allusions throughout the speech indicate that the primary threat to such fidelity, moreover, is accommodation to the pagan, idolatrous culture of imperial Rome (and not reversion to non-Christian Judaism or Judaizing Christianity). 12

This conclusion invites new consideration of the deliberative aims underlying Hebrews 13:7–14, especially since that passage also speaks of advantages under the NC in comparison to the OC. As we shall argue, the comparison may also be seen to function as an a minore ad maius argument for covenant fidelity, with the OC cultus invoked in comparison to the NC cultus because of an assumed parallel relationship to the pagan cultus. 13


The Immediate Context of Hebrews 13:7–14

Also critical to an understanding of the elusive Hebrews 13:9–10 is the immediate context of the section in which those verses appear, Hebrews 13:7–14. Here we encounter additional clues that the prevailing threat to fidelity facing the audience consisted in pressure to identify with idolatrous imperial culture (and not “Judaism”).

Bracketing the unit are hortatory units at the beginning (vv. 7–8) and end (vv. 13–14) that arguably share a common theme and that point, each in their own way, to pagan, imperial culture as the threat facing the community.

In the latter unit in verse 14 we find the expression, “here we do not have a city that remains (μένουσαν).” As has been observed elsewhere, the writer with this expression echoes (and rejects) imperial rhetoric concerning the city of Rome as eternal in its existence and rule. The importance of this observation is seen in the fact that the present clause serves to clarify the meaning of the exhortation, “go to Jesus outside the camp,” in verse 13. If the latter verse still uses the metaphorical language of the priestly analogy drawn from both the high priest and Christ’s sacrifices, verse 14 clarifies the meaning of the summons in language drawn from the world of the audience. To go to Jesus metaphorically “outside the camp” is to leave behind the city that famously claims to be eternal, Rome, and to seek the city that actually is eternal, the heavenly “city to come.” In other words, the exhortation of verses 13–14 coheres with the general summons found repeatedly in Hebrews to identify no longer with pagan, imperial culture and embrace instead the suffering that attends identification with God’s people in view of future or eschatological advantages.

Multiple authors refer to Rome as the eternal city (urbs aeterna): Tibullus, Elegies 2.5.23; Ovid, Fast. 3.72; Livy, Ab Urbe Condita 4.4.4, 5.7.10, 25.28.11; Virgil, Aen. 3.85–89; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Ant. Rom. 1.31.3. Cf. “roma perpetva” and “aeternitas p.r.s.c.” on the coin legends of Vespasian; also, the appearance on Flavian coins of the goddess, Aeternitas, holding the sun and moon, a symbol of the persistence of Roman rule so long as there is night and day. For the full argument, see Whitlark, Resisting Empire, 100–121. In Hebrews the verb, μένω, is regularly used with reference to eternality (7:3; 24; 10:34).
Similarly at the beginning in verse 7 we find an exhortation to consider the ἔκβασις, or “outcome,” of the leaders’ way of life. This expression, too, likely evokes the pressures of the pagan, imperial culture, as the term may very well allude to the martyrdoms of past leaders. That is, while ἔκβασις can refer to the successful results of a person’s way of living (so Wis 11:14), it can also refer to the end of a person’s life (i.e., death; so Wis 2:17). That the term entails the second connotation in the present context (in addition, possibly, to the first—the two are not mutually exclusive) seems likely from the summons to remember the leaders, which implies they are no longer part of the present community. Also, the absence of an accompanying command to obey them, as in verse 17 concerning present-day leaders, is fitting if the leaders in view are deceased. Their description, too, as leaders “who spoke (ἐλάλησαν) to you the word,” because of its use of the aorist, seems to locate their work in the past (it is possible that these leaders are also those who first declared the gospel to the community; cf. 2:3).15 Further still, in summoning the audience to imitate the leaders’ faith (πίστις), the writer recalls the discourse on the faith (πίστις) of the community’s past exempla in chapter 11. The implication of this language may be that the leaders of 13:7 are among the “cloud of witnesses” (12:1), all of whom have died and left an example of faithfulness to imitate.

Thus, it would seem the leaders in view are deceased, and while one cannot say with certainty the imperial authorities were responsible for taking their lives, the possibility must be considered, given that those same authorities had also taken the property and freedom of some community members (Heb 10:34).16 Further, the discourse on the cloud of witnesses repeatedly notes the martyrdom of the faithful, which may very well reflect the early experiences of the community. Abel, the writer notes, was killed because of his faithfulness, and yet is still speaking through his faith (11:4). Others “were tortured to death and refused to be released” (11:35b). And while some “suffered public shaming and flogging, chains and imprisonment” (11:36), others “were stoned to death, sawn in two, or killed by the sword” (11:37). Though Moses was not killed, his life was threatened by Pharaoh (11:27); and Jesus, the ultimate martyr, was crucified (12:2). All of these passages, including (if we may) Heb 13:7, resemble other early Christian texts that present martyred leaders as examples to imitate (cf. 1 Clem 5:2–7; Mart. Pol. 19.1).17

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15 Cf. K. Backhaus, Der Hebräerbrief (rnt; Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 2009), 466.
16 Backhaus thinks the leaders’ absence could also be because of exile, which still would point to hostile (imperial) authorities (Der Hebräerbrief, 466).
17 The arguments in these two paragraphs are taken from Whitlark, Resisting Empire, 116–18. Cf. Backhaus, Der Hebräerbrief, 466.
Lastly, if these two bracketing hortatory units provide context for understanding the problem underlying the elliptical verses 9–10 in the middle, they also may assist us in better understanding why the language of the entire unit is so ambiguous in the first place. In referring to Rome and martyrdom elliptically, and in obliquely challenging the claims to eternality of the former, the writer appears to engage in the ancient rhetorical device of σχῆμα or figura (“figured speech”).¹⁸ The ancient rhetoricians defined this device as speech that “involves a departure from the simple and straightforward meaning of expression” (Quintilian, Inst. 9.1.3 [Butler, l.c.l.]) and that “leaves more to be suspected than has been actually asserted,” or “leaves the hearer himself to guess what the speaker has not mentioned” (Rhet. Her. 4.53.67 [Caplan, l.c.l.]). They commended it, especially, in cases where speaking directly was dangerous or improper. Such figured speech was also known as ἔμφασις. Pseudo-Dionysius describes the two purposes of ἔμφασις as “propriety” and “caution” (Rhet. 295.15–296.5).¹⁹ Similarly, Quintilian says ἔμφασις is used “first if it is unsafe to speak openly; secondly, if it is unseemly to speak openly …” (Inst. 9.2.66 [Butler, l.c.l.]; and elsewhere, “to indicate our meaning in the safest or most seemly way” (Inst. 9.1.21 [Butler, l.c.l.]). Pseudo-Demetrius observes of speech in the context of powerful democracy or tyranny, “Flattery no doubt is shameful, while adverse criticism is dangerous. It is best to pursue the middle course, that of the covert hint” (Eloc. 5.294 [Roberts, l.c.l.]). Quintilian similarly observes, “we may speak against the tyrants in question as openly as we please without loss of effect, provided always that what we say is susceptible of a different interpretation … And if the danger can be avoided by any ambiguity of expression, the speaker’s cunning will meet with universal approbation” (Inst. 9.2.67 [Butler, l.c.l.]). The writer of Hebrews, it would appear, refers to the unseemly and dangerous matter of martyrdom and the power behind it, Rome, indirectly, out of this very rhetorical sensibility.²⁰ The same sensibility underlies, we think, the elliptical warning against “foods.”

¹⁸ For the following, see Whitlark, Resisting Empire, 21–35.
¹⁹ The text consulted and referenced here is from Radermacher and Usener, Dionysii Halicarnasii quae exstant (vol. 6; Bibliotheca scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum Teubneriana; Stuttgart: Teubner, 1967).
²⁰ One can imagine that in the imperial context such speech would have been habitual for the rhetorically trained, and especially those of marginal communities and associations, particularly those committing their words to papyrus or vellum. On the laws against slander, the omnipresence of informers, the expectations of imperial audiences, and other factors encouraging the wide use of figured speech out of sheer caution, see Whitlark, Resisting Empire, 36–48. See also J. Nicholson, “The Delivery and Confidentiality of Cicero’s Letters,” c/j 90 (1994) 33–63, who notes the security risks in sending letters as well
3  Βρώματα as Idolatrous Foods

Turning to the difficult verses of Hebrews 13:9–10, we seek an understanding that aligns with both the broader context of Hebrews in its entirety and the immediate context of the unit in which these verses appear, Hebrews 13:7–14. We begin our analysis with consideration of the elliptical term, βρώματα, which is featured in verse 9 in a polarity with χάρις. In this verse, the writer exhorts the audience not to embrace “devious and foreign teachings,” which have apparently encouraged “being strengthened in the heart ... by foods (βρώματα)” rather than “by grace (χάρις).” These comments raise the question: to what foods in the world of the audience might the illicit βρώματα of Hebrews 13:9 refer? What “foods” might have tempted the audience of Hebrews to turn to them for strengthening in lieu of divine “grace”? However one answers this question, one would expect, in view of the prevailing logic of Hebrews as a whole and its recurring warnings against apostasy, that “foods” somehow evokes the temptation to return to and to identify with pagan culture and its idolatry. One might also think, given the allusion to the city of Rome in verse 14, that the foods might also be somehow associated with pagan imperial culture.

In view of these considerations, an obvious thesis presents itself: βρώματα in Hebrews 13:9 refers to “foods” in some way associated with the pagan deities or pagan largess of the Empire.21 So understood, the “foods” in view would represent a temptation not unlike the idolatrous “foods” (βρῶσις, 1 Cor 8:4; βρῶμα, 1 Cor 8:8) discussed in 1 Corinthians 8–10. As in that passage, so in verse 9 the writer of Hebrews may be seen to be discouraging the sharing in such foods as the use of cryptic language in Cicero’s correspondences containing sensitive political matters (esp. 39–42).

21 This thesis was proposed by Moffatt, Hebrews, 233. See, too, G. Gelardini (“Useless Foods: Communal Meals in Hebrews,” in T&T Clark Handbook to Early Christian Meals in the Greco-Roman World [ed. S. Al-Suadi and P.-B. Smit; London: Bloomsbury, 2019] 278–293), who argues that “foods” in Heb 13:9 refers to idolatry and idolatrous eating. She takes as the primary text of reference, however, Exod 33:7–11, and interprets the “camp” (Heb 13:31) as a place of defiling idolatry due to the illicit worship of the golden-calf with its altar, sacrifices, and feasts (286). It is not entirely clear, however, which particular situation Gelardini thinks the author of Hebrews is addressing in Heb 13:7–16, though Gelardini’s earlier work imagines Hebrews as a synagogue sermon on Tisha B’Av. We certainly affirm Gelardini’s conclusion that the allusion to “foods” evokes idolatrous eating, but we find the primary intertextual reference to be Num 11 and related texts for the reasons given. Further, we take the dual analogies of sacrifices burned outside the camp and priestly offerings born to the altar to be positive analogies establishing the pattern of sacrificial and priestly fidelity for the audience.
in some sense and encouraging instead exclusive sharing in Christ. Similarly, in warning against the “devious and foreign teachings” promoting such foods, the writer may be seen to counter the kind of slogans Paul challenged in 1 Corinthians 8–10 that were permissive with regard to idolatrous foods (or even, perhaps, the kind of permissiveness Paul himself displays in ch. 8). Certainly the issue was much debated in early Christianity, with numerous early Christian voices challenging teachings that were permissive with regard to idolatrous foods (1 Cor 8–10; Rev 2:6, 14, 15, 20; Justin Martyr, Dial. 351–3; Didache 6.1–3). Further, the word, ξένος, or “foreign,” is commonly used in the LXX with reference to things foreign and therefore Gentile (cf. Ruth 2:10; 2 Sam 15:19; 1 Macc 11:38; 2 Macc 10:24; Ps 68:9; Isa 18:2; Lam 5:2). It is more natural to take this word with reference to teachings that (in the writer’s perspective, at least) encourage idolatry than, say, to teachings encouraging various dietary practices long associated with the Jewish faith.

One of the reasons this thesis is especially appealing is that it accounts for the seemingly abrupt shift in verse 10 to talk of eating from the Lord’s “altar.” If the writer in verse 9 is indeed orienting the audience away from “foods” derived from or in some way associated with pagan altars, then it is quite natural for him to then orient the audience instead toward the Christian counterpart, the foods available to them on the Lord’s altar (whether literal or metaphorical). Here again, 1 Corinthians 8–10 may be cited in support as offering a precedent for such a reading. In 1 Corinthians 10:18–22, Paul himself juxtaposes the sacrificial foods from pagan altars with the sacrificial foods found at the Lord’s table, and with the argument that sharing in the latter precludes sharing in the former. Thus, Paul supplies a precedent for the kind of rhetorical move we posit for Hebrews 13:9–10.

This thesis is also appealing because it accounts well for the analogy made in verse 10 to the lesser Levitical priestly altar in the argument. Here the writer

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22 Paul takes a more nuanced approach to the matter, with emphasis on whether religious or symbolic meaning was attached to the foods or meats in the context of the meal. By comparison, Revelation, Justin Martyr, and the Didache allow for no compromise on the issue, flatly forbidding the eating of such foods altogether. The straightforward warning in Heb 13:9 against “foods” appears to align more readily with the latter perspective. Given the brevity and elliptical nature of the warning, however, it is impossible to say with certainty. Cf. J.N. Kraybill, Imperial Cult and Commerce in John’s Apocalypse (JSNTSup 132; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996) 38–56. Negotiating participation in the imperial cult (or even other cults) was a complex phenomenon among Jews and Christians. There was a spectrum of participation from full to no participation along with a range of responses to various levels of participation; cf. L.M. White, “Capitalizing on the Imperial Cult: Some Jewish Perspectives,” in Rome and Religion: A Cross-disciplinary Dialogue on the Imperial Cult (ed. J. Brodd and J.L. Reed; WGRWSup 5; Atlanta: SBL, 2011) 153–171.
not only orients the audience toward the Lord’s altar, but he reminds them of what a privilege it is to eat from it. Priests who served continuously23 in the tent do not even have the right to eat from it! The implication is that the audience has all the more reason to share in Yahwistic altar foods than previous generations.

This is the same a minore ad maius logic seen everywhere in the body of Hebrews, wherein the superiority of NC experience to OC experience is invoked not as an argument for leaving the latter for the former, but rather, as an argument for covenantal fidelity all the more. Indeed, this is the same a minore ad maius logic witnessed the last time NC and OC priestly ministry was compared in the body of the speech, in 7:1–10:18. That lengthy synchronis ended not with a summons to leave the inferior OC cultus for the NC cultus, but rather, with a summons for fidelity to the NC priestly cultus all the more in view of its (just demonstrated) superiority to the old (Heb 10:28–29):

Anyone who has rejected the law of Moses dies without mercy “on the testimony of two or three witnesses.” How much worse punishment do you think will be deserved by those who have trampled underfoot the Son of God, profaned the blood of the covenant by which they were sanctified, and outraged the Spirit of grace?

In both the larger argument of Hebrews 7:1–10:18, and the brief, recapitulatory argument of Hebrews 13:9–10 as we are explicating it, Levitical priestly ministry is cited in its inferiority not as an inherently negative symbol of a religion to be left behind, but rather, as an argument from the lesser case for covenantal fidelity.

In this regard, too, 1 Corinthians 10 may be cited as a precedent. That passage also invokes the Levitical altar as a lesser analogy for the Christian counterpart, the Lord’s “table” (Paul employs the word with the cultic meaning it sometimes had, i.e., “altar”; cf. Ezek 41:22; Mal 1:7, 12). Paul asks the Corinthians to notice that they, too, share in the sacrificial foods of a table, on analogy to

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23 The present tense participle in the expression, οἱ τῇ σκηνῇ λατρεύοντες, implies continuous aspect (“those who continuously served ...”), as opposed to the undefined aspect of the aorist tense (“those who served in the tent”). To take the present participle as necessarily implying present time relative to the speaker (“the ones presently serving”) is to misunderstand the function of time in the Greek participle; see D.B. Wallace, Greek Grammar beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 1996), 613–616. To translate it as such in this context, moreover, is to ignore the implication of the word “tent,” i.e., that the time of the wilderness generation is (still) in view.
the Israelites’ sharing in the sacrificial foods of the Levitical altar. That passage, too, employs the same implicit *a minore ad maius* logic. The claim that one cannot simultaneously share in the table of demons and the table of the Lord depends upon the analogy to the lesser Levitical altar, for it is a given that sharing in the Levitical altar precluded sharing in pagan altars.

In short, interpreting βρώματα with reference to sacrificial foods derived from pagan altars (or associated with pagan practices) not only coheres well with the argument as it unfolds in verse 10, but it also coheres well with the prior *a minore ad maius* argumentation employed in the body of the speech in the earlier comparison of the NC and OC priestly ministries. Moreover, there is precedent in 1 Corinthians 10 for the writer’s setting sacrificial foods of the Christian altar, on analogy to sacrificial foods of the Levitical altar, over and against the sacrificial foods of pagan altars.

Beyond these initial considerations, several others further encourage the view that the βρώματα in verse 9 is shorthand for illicit pagan foods—and, thus, evidence that the prevailing concern of Hebrews 13:9–10 (like that of Hebrews as a whole) is reversion to pagan culture, not “Judaism.”

### 3.1 The Wilderness Generation’s Pining for the “Foods” of Egypt as Background

Throughout Hebrews the story of the wilderness generation has served as a touchstone story, a cautionary tale warning against covenantal infidelity to God and its great cost. In Hebrews 13:9–14, it is quite apparent that the writer is still presenting wilderness generation covenantal experience as the predominant analogy for the present generation’s experience under the NC. This much is evident from verse 10, which points the readers to the sacrificial foods of Christ’s “altar” on analogy to the Levitical altar and its foods. In this analogy, the readers are cast as priests in correspondence to those of the wilderness generation “who continuously served in the tent.” Similarly, in verses 11–13, the dual summons of the audience to approach the altar with their priestly offering of Christ’s reproach, and to suffer outside the “camp,” are made on analogy, respectively, to the wilderness generation priests’ offerings at the altar and the animal sacrifices burned outside the camp (see further below). In short, these allusions to the “tent” in v. 10 and to the “camp” in vv. 11 and 13 show that the writer is still thinking of the wilderness generation and its cultus as an analogy.

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24 Paul likely intends Israelite, not priestly, sharing in the altar; see G.D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (N1C1T; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 470. In either case, though, the general point is the same.
for present day covenantal experience, just as he has throughout the body of the speech.

Thus, it should not surprise us if the enigmatic βρώματα of Hebrews 13:9 also finds its background in the experiences of the wilderness generation. We contend that the juxtaposition of illicit βρώματα on the one hand and the foods from the Lord’s altar on the other hand is a polarity that derives from the tradition of the wilderness generation’s illicit pining for the foods of Egypt—and that this background further encourages seeing the illicit βρώματα in view as illicit pagan foods associated with idolatry.

The story as it is told in its various versions (LXX Exod 16, LXX Num 11, LXX Ps 77), of course, does not concern idolatrous, sacrificial foods. It does, however, treat the hunger-driven desire for the foods of Egypt as apostasy against God and as a failure to trust in or be content in his provision—a potentially apt analogy for Christians tempted in their hunger to share in pagan, idolatrous foods rather than trusting in the grace and provision of the Lord. In LXX Exodus 16, the people grumble to Moses and Aaron, remembering the bread and meat of Egypt fondly, and saying they have brought the people into the desert to kill them via starvation. In response, the Lord declares they have grumbled against him and gives them manna and quail in a demonstration, contrary to their claims, that he can provide. In LXX Numbers 11, the people again grumble against the Lord regarding food. The narrator reports that they “craved a craving” (ἐπεθύμησαν ἐπιθυμίαν) and “sat down to weep” (καθίσαντες ἔκλαιον) for the various foods of Egypt, complaining that they only had manna to eat (LXX Num 11:4). This angered the Lord, and his fire burned against them and consumed the edges of the camp. In his anger, the Lord gave them flesh to eat for a month, and while “the flesh was yet between their teeth,” the Lord “smote the people with a very great plague” (LXX Num 11:33). In LXX Psalm 77, the events of LXX Exodus 16 and LXX Numbers 11 are conflated, but the tenor of the story remains the same. The psalmist reports that the people sinned against, provoked, and tested God in asking for “foods” (βρώματα, v. 18), and faithlessly question whether God could provide a “table” (τράπεζα, vv. 19, 20) in the desert. In response, God gives them an abundance of manna and quail, and yet while the “food” (βρόσις, v. 30) was still in their mouths, their illicit “desire” (ἐπιθυμία, v. 30) for it was not satiated, and so God struck down the fattest and best of their number.

That Paul in his discussion of idolatrous “food” (βρόσις, 1 Cor 8:4; βρώμα, 1 Cor 8:8) looks to these events as the basis for his rhetoric in 1 Corinthians 10 seems clear. Paul reports that the people “ate the same spiritual food” (1 Cor 10:3) referring to the food provided by the Lord in this story—and framing it as analogous to food of the Lord’s Supper. Yet, as Paul cautions, “God
was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness” (1 Cor 10:5)—referring to the punishment of Numbers 11. Paul then states his thesis in terms that echo Numbers 11:4 (also LXX Ps 77:29): “These things were examples for us, so we will not crave evil things just as they craved (εἰς τὸ μὴ εἶναι ἡμᾶς ἐπιθυμητὰς κακῶν, καθὼς κἀκεῖνοι ἐπεθύμησαν)” (1 Cor 10:6). In Paul’s use of the story, then, the Lord’s provision of manna and flesh in the desert is analogous to the provision the Corinthians have of the Lord’s “table” (1 Cor 10:21; cf. LXX Ps 77:19, 20), while the foods of Egypt that the people craved are made an analogy for the altar foods the Corinthians are now tempted to eat.

Furthermore, Gary Collier has convincingly argued that Paul interprets the events of Numbers 11 as idolatrous eating.25 That is, immediately after referring to the “craving” of Numbers 11, Paul states, “Do not become idolaters as some of them did.” Paul then cites in support Exodus 32:6: “just as it is written, ‘The people sat down to eat and drink, and they rose up to play.’” As Collier observes, Paul should not be seen as abruptly shifting his focus to the story of the golden calf episode. Rather, Paul should be viewed as interpreting Numbers 11 in light of that story via midrashic exegesis, as Numbers 11 also reports that the people “sat down” and “rose up” to eat. This linguistic connection allows Exodus 32:6 to serve in Paul’s argument as a summary of Numbers 11, even as it midrashically imports the notion of idolatrous eating to the story.26 Thus, the analogy of Numbers 11 to the Corinthians’ situation is even closer than it at first may seem. In “sitting down” and “rising up,” the wilderness generation in Numbers 11 hungrily engaged in what may be viewed via midrashic exegesis as an idolatrous feast—when that generation should have looked instead to the manna of the Lord’s table for sustenance.

That these same events, understood in the general manner of Paul, serve as background, too, for the brief comments of Hebrews 13:9–10 seems probable from the linguistic and thematic parallels Hebrews 13:9–10 shares with the passages just discussed. The polarity of illicit βρώματα on the one hand and the Lord’s χάρις (v. 9) found at the Lord’s altar (v. 10) on the other may be compared especially with LXX Psalm 77:17–18, which juxtaposes the illicit βρώματα of Egypt with the provision of the Lord found at his τράπεζα (“table”).

It is Paul’s mediation of such tradition, however, that provides more substantial linguistic and thematic links between Hebrews 13:9–10 and the LXX


26 Collier notes, furthermore, that all four sins in 1 Cor 7–10 occurred in connection with eating—and so are tied via midrash to Numbers 11.
Strengthened by Grace and Not by Foods

accounts of the wilderness generation’s illicit craving. If in the LXX the βρώματα are merely the foods of Egypt, in Paul’s retelling, they have become idolatrous βρώματα, as we have seen from Collier’s analysis. And if in the LXX the Lord’s τράπεζα is merely a “table” of manna and flesh, in Paul’s argument, the τράπεζα has become an altar (the second, more specific meaning of τράπεζα; again, see Ezek 41:22; Mal 1:7, 12), since for Paul the manna or flesh Christians eat is a sacrificial food analogous to Israelite and pagan altar foods. Thus, Paul may liken the Christian τράπεζα to the Levitical θυσιαστήριον (“altar,” 1 Cor 10:16–18), since the Israelites similarly ate of its sacrificial foods. Thus, also, Paul may set the Christian τράπεζα over and against the pagan θυσιαστήριον (“altar,” 1 Cor 10:19–21), since sharing in the foods of the Yahwistic altar—whether past or present—naturally precludes sharing in the foods of pagan altars.

In short, the themes, language, and association of ideas seen in Hebrews 13:9–10 find their background in, and are more fully explicated by, the story of the wilderness generation’s craving for the foods of Egypt—particularly as that story is used in Christian instruction against the eating of foods from pagan altars.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Idol foods</th>
<th>God’s foods</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>βρώματα (LXX Ps 77:18); Idol βρώμα (1 Cor 8:8); βρώσις (1 Cor 8:4)</td>
<td>The Lord’s τράπεζα (LXX Ps 77:19, 20) πνευματικὸν βρῶμα (1 Cor 10:3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food from the τράπεζα of demons (i.e., idols) (1 Cor 10:21)</td>
<td>Food from the Lord’s τράπεζα (1 Cor 10:21) on analogy to food from the Levitical θυσιαστήριον (1 Cor 10:18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>βρώματα (Heb 13:9)</td>
<td>Food from the Lords’ θυσιαστήριον (Heb 13:10) on analogy to food from the Levitical θυσιαστήριον</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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3.2 Recapitulatio and the Example of Esau
A second consideration supporting our reading of the “foods” as having in view the temptation of idolatrous eating is the exemplum of Esau cited in Hebrews 12:15–17:

See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace (χάριτος) of God; that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble, and through it many become defiled. See to it that no one becomes like Esau, an immoral
and godless person, who sold his birthright for a single meal (βρώσεως μίας). You know that later, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, even though he sought the blessing with tears.

The passage deserves close scrutiny because it shares remarkable thematic and linguistic parallels with Hebrews 13:9–10. Thematically, it features the motif of apostasy and infidelity to God in the form of eating. Esau out of hunger chooses a meal at cost of both birthright and God's blessing. Linguistically it features a close lexical polarity, the association of χάρις with fidelity on the one hand, and the association of the eating of βρῶσις μία with infidelity on the other.

Such thematic and linguistic parallelism may be explained as a function of rhetorical convention. Concluding comments in a speech such as those of Hebrews 13:9–10 conventionally engaged in recapitulatio, or the rehearsal in brief form of themes and motifs expounded more fully in the body of the speech. Given their parallels and their respective locations in the speech, it is likely that Hebrews 13:9–10 recapitulates the same concerns that underlie Hebrews 12:15–17—and so the latter may help to illuminate the former.

Thus, it is critical to observe that Hebrews 12:15–17 is concerned with idolatry. The exhortation of Heb 12:15, “See too it ... that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble (μή τις βίζα πικρίας ἀνω φύουσα ένοχλή) and through it many are defiled,” echoes LXX Deuteronomy 29:17, as we noted earlier. There Moses warns against the idols of the nations “lest some root springs up in bitterness and gall ... (μή τίς ... βίζα ἀνω φύουσα ἐν χολῇ καὶ πικρία).” The writer of Hebrews thus may be understood to warn against the defiling effects of idolatry, and with the very language Moses used to warn the wilderness generation.

Moreover, in support for this warning, the writer invokes as a negative exemplum the story of Esau’s apostasy. As others before us have observed, the writer appears to interpret Esau as a person of idolatrous character. In calling Esau a πόρνος, or “fornicator,” the writer attributes to the figure a quality that was closely associated with idolatry, as Craig Koester observes (citing 1 Cor 6:9; Eph 5:5; cf. Num 25:1–2; Hos 1:2). In this attribution, moreover, the writer is possibly alluding to Esau’s marriage to two Hittite women—an act

27 Martin and Whitlark, *Inventing Hebrews*, 222–49; Cockerill, *Hebrews*, 673–77. The functions of the *peroratio* are to stir the emotions and recapitulate the arguments of a speech.
28 In LXXABF, ἐνοχλή (“causes trouble”) appears in place of ἐν χολῇ, and so the correspondence is closer. See Koester, *Hebrews*, 532.
that in later Jewish reception was considered illicit because it was tantamount to idolatry (cf. Mal 2:11; Ezra 10:2–3).  

That the writer casts Esau as idolatrous in character is fitting, since his apostasy is cited in support of a warning, as we have said, against the defiling effects of idolatry.

We would add that the description of Esau as βέβηλος, or “profane, godless,” also contributes to the portrait, as the word could be used to speak of the defilement caused by idolatrous worship (e.g., 3 Macc 4:16). We would note, furthermore, that subsequent Jewish exegesis independently came to regard Esau as an idolater (see BerRab 63:6, 10).

Lastly, while the writer may treat Esau as a negative exemplum of the defiling effects of idolatry simply because he was (in the writer’s view) idolatrous on the one hand and an apostate through eating on the other, we think it more likely the writer regarded the act of eating itself as idolatrous in nature. First, the language of Genesis 25:34, καὶ ἔφαγεν καὶ ἔπιεν καὶ ἀναστὰς (“and he ate and drank and rising .…”), has likely encouraged such a view. Paul shows in his interpretation of Numbers 11 (1 Corinthians 10; see above) that similar language can readily evoke via midrashic exegesis Exodus 32:6 (καὶ ἐκάθισεν ὁ λαὸς φαγεῖν καὶ πιεῖν καὶ ἀνέστησαν, “and the people sat down to eat and to drink and they rose .…”) and, thereby, the notion of idolatrous eating.

Second, in the ancient Mediterranean milieu, devotion to the belly was readily construed as a form of illicit religious devotion. In 3 Maccabees 7:10–11, the people are accused of committing apostasy “for the sake of the belly.” Euripides’s Cyclops flaunts his impiety by declaring his belly the greatest of divinities to which he sacrifices, not Zeus (Cycl. 334–35). Philo of Alexandria castigates pagan festivals as only ministering to the pleasure of the belly (Cher. 91–93). Paul warns against those enemies of Christ whose god is their bellies (cf. Rom 16:18; Phil 3:19). Such texts show how Esau’s act of eating might also be construed in ancient perspective as idolatrous. Moreover, because the belly was often associated with the sexual appetite, Esau’s ravenous eating, in which he despised his birthright, may be the grounds by which the writer has called Esau both “sexually immoral” and “godless.” Such descriptors

31 Johnson, Hebrews, 324–325.
32 For discussion of a belly-devoted lifestyle in the ancient Mediterranean world see K.O. Sandnes, Belly and Body in the Pauline Epistles (SNTSMS 120; Cambridge: cUP, 2002) passim.
33 Belly devotion entailed a trinity of vices: eating, drinking, and sex (cf. Aristotle, Eth. Nic. 118a31, b18; Eth. Eud. 1221b10–27). One who was enslaved to one’s stomach was also enslaved to sexual desire (e.g., Sir 23:6; Philo, Vir. 208; Anonymous Latin Physiognomy 69). For further discussion see Sandnes, Belly and Body, passim.
together speak to a person devoted to their physical appetites instead of God. One may compare James’s metaphorical description of the community as “adulterers” because they choose “desires” and “friendship with the world” (4:4) over devotion to God.34

In short, we take Hebrews 12:15–17 in its entirety as concerned with the temptation of idolatry. Hebrews 12:15a encourages fidelity to God (“see to it that no one comes short of the χάρις of God”), while Hebrews 12:15b warns against the defiling effects of idolatry, using the language of Moses’s warning against the same in Deuteronomy 29:17. Hebrews 12:16–17 then offers a proof in support of these deliberative appeals: the negative exemplum of the idolatrous Esau who traded his birthright and blessing for a single idolatrous βρῶσις.35 In similarly juxtaposing illicit “foods” and divine “grace” as alternative choices facing the audience, Hebrews 13:9–10 may be seen as recapitulating the same warning. Taken together, both passages reveal a concern for idolatry expressed in and through the eating of idolatrous foods, a perennial concern, as we have said, in early Christianity (cf. 1 Cor 8–10; Rev 2:6, 15; cf. 2:14, 20; Justin, Dial. 35:1–3; Didache 6:1–3). Hebrews 13:9 speaks to the concern directly, albeit briefly, and Heb 12:15–17 does so through the example of Esau’s apostate and idolatrous (in the writer’s view) eating.36

3.3 βεβαιοῦσθαι τὴν καρδίαν ... βρώμασιν in Its Literary Milieu
A third consideration favoring our thesis that βρώματα has in view pagan, idolatrous foods in Hebrews 13:9 is the word’s appearance in the phrase, “being strengthened in the heart by foods.” If our understanding is correct, then this phrase must refer to the nourishment that comes from eating literal foods and cannot be taken to signify, for example, the benefit derived from the rules

34 Similarly, in Matthew 4:1–4 (cf., too, Luke 4:1–4), Satan tempts Jesus’s devotion to God with regard to his hunger. In his response, Jesus sets life that comes from bread over and against life the comes from God through his word.

35 Obviously, the Genesis narrative does not present Jacob as preparing a meal for an idol. Our argument is not that Genesis frames the meal Jacob serves as idolatrous, but rather, that the writer of Hebrews for a variety of reasons (traditional interpretation of Esau as idolatrous, the cultural background of belly worship, and the language of Genesis lending itself well to midrashic interpretation of Esau’s actions as idolatrous eating) interprets Esau’s manner of eating as idolatrous. Thus, the writer can treat the story of Esau’s eating not as a generic warning against apostasy, but as a cautionary tale that speaks more directly to the audience’s own temptation to eat idolatrously.

restricting eating (e.g., Jewish dietary rules or Jewish ascetic practices). Already favoring our view is the Greek itself. One cannot help but wonder if the phrase has been too readily spiritualized in the NRSV’s, “it is well for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by regulations about food.” Certainly, the translation is highly interpretive, as the Greek obviously does not have the words “by regulations about.”

Further supporting our view is the evidence from the ancient Mediterranean literary milieu. Here we find the phrase, “strengthened in the heart,” and similar such language regularly used in connection with food to evoke the literal nourishment or revitalization that comes from literal eating.

In LXX Psalm 103, a passage celebrating God’s providence over creation and provision for creatures, the psalmist proclaims in verses 14–15:

You make the grass to spring up for livestock and green herb for the service of humans so that they may bring forth bread/food from the earth. And wine to gladden the hearts of humans, to make their faces cheerful with oil, and bread/food to strengthen human hearts (ἄρτος καρδίαν ἀνθρώπου στηρίζει).

Clearly, in this context, ἄρτος καρδίαν ἀνθρώπου στηρίζει refers to physical nourishment. One notices that here, as in Hebrews 13:9, the “heart” is the object “strengthened by food.”

Such language renders what appears to be a Hebrew trope. In Gen 18:5, Abraham, addressing the three men who visit his tent, says, וְאֶקְחָה פַת־לֶחֶם וְסַעֲדוּ לִבְּכֶם, “and I will bring a morsel of bread/food, that you may strengthen your heart.” Similarly, in Jdg 19:5, the unnamed father-in-law says to his daughter’s husband, the unnamed Levite who has traveled from Ephraim,ךָסְעָד לִבְּפַת־לֶחֶם וְאַחַר תֵּלֵכוּ, “Strengthen your heart with a morsel of bread, and afterward you may go.”

Reflected in these texts is the Hebraic notion of the heart as “the seat of physical vitality,” among other things—and thus, the object of food’s vitalizing capacities.

This same general kind of language is attested, too, in classical Greek literature, a fact that suggests such language was probably pan-Mediterranean. In the Iliad, we encounter the story of the Greek embassy sent to Achilles which fails to persuade him to rejoin the war effort to stave off the imminent destruction of the Greeks’ ships. Diomedes concludes, nonetheless, that the weary Greek army needs to rest and prepare for battle. He commands that they first

37 Cf. LXX Jdg 19:5: στήριξον σου τὴν καρδίαν ψωμίῳ ἄρτου καὶ μετὰ τοῦτο πορεύσοσθε.
“satisfy their hearts with meat and wine, for in them are courage and strength” (9.705–707). Here, again, we encounter the imagery of food establishing the heart, and again the literal nourishment of the hungry is in view. It is in this same, general vein that the writers of the New Testament, too, may speak of God “filling your hearts with food” (Acts 14:17), or of the “hearts” of the overly indulgent wealthy being “fed for the day of slaughter” (Jam 5:5) or, alternatively, of “hearts” being “weighed down by wine” (Luke 21:34).

In view of these texts, it is difficult to imagine that the audience of Hebrews would have understood the language of “the heart” being “strengthened … by foods” as referring to anything other than nourishment from literal foods in some sense. Taking the phrase with this meaning, moreover, allows βρώματα to be translated straightforwardly with its conventional meaning, “foods.” Alternative theories that see the phrase as referring to Jewish dietary rules, Jewish ascetic practices, or Jewish ritual dining, by contrast, must not only ignore the conventional meaning of βεβαιοῦσθαι τὴν καρδίαν … βρώμασιν, but they also must gloss βρώματα with unconventional, periphrastic renderings.

3.4 βεβαιοῦσθαι τὴν καρδίαν … βρώμασιν in Its Social Milieu
Several literary considerations above suggest not only that the audience of Hebrews was tempted to partake of illicit pagan foods associated with idolatry, but that the temptation was driven by hunger. In the background story of Numbers 11, the wilderness generation pines for the foods of Egypt out of hunger and fear of starvation, expressly doubting that God could provide food in the desert and believing they would die in the desert because of it. Similarly, in the cautionary tale of Esau as the writer tells it, the idolatrous Esau sells his birthright and blessing for but one meal because he is starving. One notices, furthermore, from the discussion above that the phrase used in the warning of Hebrews 13:9, “not being strengthened in the heart by foods,” is the kind of language typically employed in narrative settings where hunger and food scarcity are the prevailing concern of vulnerable subjects: soldiers encamped in the field and, thus, dependent on the provisions supplied by their generals (Il. 9.705–707); travelers who are sojourning and, thus, dependent on provision of food by hosts for their return journey (Gen 18:5; Jdg 19:5); creatures dependent upon their creator for the provision of food (LXX Ps 103:15).

These literary clues collectively suggest that the fundamental appeal of pagan “foods” for the audience of Hebrews was their capacity to address hunger. Considerations from the audience’s social context, we believe, provide additional grounds for this view. That is, social context further commends seeing “not being strengthened in the heart … by foods” as a warning against the
literal eating of pagan foods as solution to the problems of hunger and food scarcity.

Chronic hunger and food insecurity in the ancient Mediterranean world were persistent threats, especially in population centers like Rome, where Hebrews, we believe, was sent. In the literature devoted to the subject, “food insecurity” or “food poverty” refers to scarcity experienced by households in their inability to obtain food staples adequate for some or all of their members. “Chronic hunger,” meanwhile, refers to the persistent shortfall of food necessary to sustain an active working life. The effects of hunger are well-documented: lethargy, anxiety, depression, miscarriages, anemia, and birth defects. Food shortages or scarcity in the ancient world and Rome, in particular, were frequent, but their effects varied according to societal class.

Strategies used by the non-elite to address food insecurity of all types, from short-term to severe, included adjusting one’s age for marriage, observing wider intervals between births, altering diets, implementing abortion/infanticide, selling children, emigrating, and committing suicide. From 123 BCE, Rome instituted a monthly distribution of subsidized grain, though this only effected a minority of the inhabitants, mostly freeborn Roman adult males. Access to the dole provided economic advantages and conveyed social status.

It has been estimated that 920 kg of wheat per year were needed to sustain a family of four. Rome, however, only supplied 44% of what was needed, and this was likely only distributed to 5% of the urban population (plebs frumentaria). Thus, even those who received some of this government subsidy had to make up for the deficiency in other ways. In addition to the strategies listed above,

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43 Cherry, “Hunger,” 435: “The effects [of food crises] were felt chiefly by the poor.”
45 Garnsey, “Food Crisis,” 136. Garnsey notes that grain reserves, special grain-purchase funds, and regular grain distributions were very rare for cities in the ancient Mediterranean world (139).
47 Cherry, “Hunger,” 437–441, see n. 18.
there were certain major options for addressing food scarcity that entailed acquiescence to pagan, imperial culture—among them, cultivating the patronage of a social elite with food resources, belonging to voluntary associations, and participating in public festivals where food was supplied.\textsuperscript{48} Each of these latter options would likely have presented a challenge for communities committed to first-commandment loyalty to the God of Jesus Christ.

Food subsidies tied to festivals and patronage, for example, often came with pagan, religious entanglements. Plutarch recounts that Crassus “made a great sacrifice to Hercules, feasted the people on ten thousand tables, and made them an allowance of grain for three months” (\text{12.2 [Perrin, L.C.L.]}). Such festivals, with their food distributions, were surely much anticipated by the urban population due to perennial problems of food insecurity and hunger. Juvenal describes the public feast as “a glad and merry day with grand banquets, with tables set out at every temple and every crossway, with night-long feasts, and with couches spread all day and all night” (\text{Sat. 15:38–44}). Additionally, Plutarch recounts that abundant wine and meat, along with the hoped-for favor of the gods, gladdened the hearts of the participants at the religious festivals (cf. \text{Suav. viv. 21 [1102A]}). Mary Beard’s words of caution concerning mass public eating in the ancient world deserve notice, specifically as they relate to the Roman triumph. It is likely that the large-scale formal public banqueting was primarily for the elite, though the masses may also have been sent home with food or a cash allowance for private use.\textsuperscript{49} Josephus, for example, recounts that, after sacrifices were made at the conclusion of the triumph of Vespasian in 71 CE, some were entertained at the tables of leaders while provision was made for “all the rest” to have banquets in their homes, and, thus, “the city of Rome kept festival that day” (\text{BJ 7:156–57}). Of course, participation in pagan festivals would have likely been problematic for a community that had turned from idols (“dead works”) to faith in the “living God.”

Voluntary associations were another avenue to address food insecurity and hunger. Community dining was an essential function of most associations. Like most other activities in the Roman world, these meals featured honoring the gods as a central practice. Virtually all associations and guilds offered sacrifices and libations at banquets.\textsuperscript{50} Aristides in his \textit{Oration 45} claims that, at

\textsuperscript{48} Garnsey notes that patrons and benefactors often prevented food shortages from developing into famines and that such food crises provided opportunities for the elite both to relieve the crisis and to be enriched by it if they had access to food stores (“Food Crisis,” 131, 140–141).


meals in Serapis’s honor, Serapis is both partner in and recipient of libations.\textsuperscript{51} The cultic dimensions of association meals would have made participation extremely difficult for members of a community like that of the intended audience of Hebrews.\textsuperscript{52} Withdrawal from an association could have resulted in the loss of meals, in the loss of sportulae at association gatherings, or in the imposition of fines.\textsuperscript{53} Furthermore, withdrawal or forced expulsion from an association would undoubtedly have resulted in the loss of social capital.\textsuperscript{54} Thus, even cultivating patronage outside association networks to acquire necessary resources like money for grain, for its milling, and for its baking would have been virtually impossible, since identification with a despised group like the community addressed in Hebrews offered no incentive for honor-loving patrons.\textsuperscript{55} Moreover, loyalties demanded by a patron could come into conflict with loyalty required by God and his Son.\textsuperscript{56}

Such conflicts could also have adversely impacted access to the distribution of food stuffs. As J. Rufus Fears notes, “no benefit of the emperor was more cherished than the gift of Abundantia.”\textsuperscript{57} The close connection of the gift of abundance with the imperial cult is seen in the frescos of the Collegiate House of the Augustales in Herculaneum. In one scene, Hercules is depicted with the face of Titus bearing the stolen horn of Achelous, which is subsequently

\textsuperscript{51} Cf. R.S. Ascough et al., \textit{Associations of the Greco-Roman World: A Sourcebook} (Waco: BUP, 2012) no. 43.

\textsuperscript{52} By the third century CE, Cyprian disparages Christian participation in associations because of the ethos of the banquets and profane burials with strangers which, as Cyprian possibly implies, led to apostasy by obtaining certificates of idolatry (Ep. 67,6.2).


\textsuperscript{56} This may be the scenario depicted in Jam 2:1–13 where favoritism that is shown to a patron calls into question the audience’s imitation of the faith or loyalty of the Lord Jesus Christ to God and the poor. It certainly would be an example of “doublemindedness” denounced in 1:8. Cf. G. Theissen, “Éthique et Communauté dans l’épître de Jacques: Réflexions sur son Sitz im Leben,” \textit{ETR} 77 (2002) 166–167.

fashioned into the cornucopia of Abundantia. Similarly, Annona, goddess of the grain supply, appears on imperial coins as a symbol of the grain brought from other parts of the empire to Rome to feed its inhabitants. Such imagery shows the importance of food provision in imperial rhetoric concerning Roman rule and the imperial cult. Rome required and received praise for such provision. Thus, Pliny spends a significant part of his panegyric praising Trajan for the abundance and fertility that his rule has brought to the world (Pan. 29.1–33.1).

In Rome the grain distribution was carefully managed according to each neighborhood. It is likely that the magistri vici assisted in the maintenance of lists of eligible recipients (plebs frumentaria) for the dole. Certainly to be excluded from this list or prohibited from accessing the dole would have created a hardship for those already food insecure and would have also resulted in a diminishment of honor. It is not inconceivable that members of a community who had already experienced confiscation of property and deprivation of honor were perennially in danger of exclusion from such lists and from the access to foods they granted. Such a dynamic may have led in some cases to compromised loyalty to Jesus Christ and his people.

In short, hunger and food insecurity were surely perennial issues for large portions of the population in the Roman Empire and in Rome in particular. Access to food could be gained by participation in patron-client relationships, public festivals, Greco-Roman associations, and grain doles. Much of this access required honoring pagan deities and Roman power that looked to these deities for legitimacy. Such a social context helps to explain the powerful attraction pagan “foods” likely had for Christians in Corinth (1 Corinthians 8–10), and why the story of the wilderness generation’s hunger-driven and idolatrous (in Paul’s telling) pining for the foods of Egypt served as such a powerful example of apostasy for that community. The same social context, moreover, helps to explicate Hebrews’s implicit appeal to this same story and to the same general

59  E.g., RIC 3.175. Sometimes Annona will appear with a ship’s prow (e.g., RIC 3.231) as well as a cornucopia and possibly a statue of Spes (e.g., RIC 3.95).
61  The honor of enrollment in plebs frumentaria is, in part, demonstrated by second-century CE inscriptions for vigiles that indicated a person had obtained such a status. Vigiles were entitled to enrollment after three years of service. This privilege likely began under the Flavians. See Virlouvet, La plèbe frumentaire, 11–41, 105–186.
effect in its commending divine “grace” and Christ’s “altar” as a source of nourishment over and against illicit “foods.” It helps to explain the writer’s use of language (“being strengthened in the heart with foods”) typical of literary contexts where food scarcity and hunger were potential threats for vulnerable subjects. And it helps to explicate the earlier appeal, which Hebrews 13:9–10 recapitulates, to Esau’s hunger-driven, idolatrous eating. Thus, several literary clues that hunger may have driven some of the audience of Hebrews to illicit foods associated with idolatry go hand in hand with the evidence from the Roman social context, which suggests the same.

3.5 The Analogy of Priestly Service in Heb 13:11–14
A final consideration that argues for seeing Hebrews 13:9–10 as anti-idolatry rhetoric is the analogy of priestly service in Hebrews 13:11–14. Any attempt to reinterpret verses 9–10 as having in view the threat of idolatrous “foods” must account for these verses and, in particular, the summons of verse 13: “let us go to him outside the camp and bear his reproach.” This clause arguably more than any other in Hebrews has lent itself well to the reversion-to-Judaism thesis.

There is already considerable difficulty with this interpretation given the broader context of Hebrews, for as we have repeatedly noted, the emblems of the wilderness generation’s covenantal experience are nowhere treated in the body of the speech as symbols of a religion to leave behind. Rather, they are invoked for their correspondence to analogous symbols from NC experience, and always with the call to covenantal fidelity all the more in view of the superiority of NC experience. Thus, we should expect that the emblems of covenantal life from the past that appear in verses 11–14—the priestly offering at the altar and the burning of animal sacrifices outside the camp—have the same function. A close analysis of Hebrews 13:11–14 reveals that this is, in fact, the case.

These verses may be seen as closely related to and directly supporting the writer’s attempt in verses 9–10 to orient the readers away from idolatrous “foods” (v. 9) and toward the foods of the Lord’s altar instead (v. 10). Having just pointed out the recipients’ exclusive priestly rights to NC altar foods in verse 10, the writer then in verses 11–12 states the reason (γάρ, v. 11) they have these exclusive priestly rights—namely, because Christ suffered outside the camp (on analogy to OC sacrificial animals) and thereby sanctified the people with his blood (on analogy to the OC high priest). It is this sanctification that makes it possible for the audience of Hebrews themselves to approach as priests the NC altar and its foods, should they choose to suffer sacrificially like Christ.
One notices that in this argument that the audience is, in effect, being summoned to engage in faithful priestly sacrifice on analogy to that offered by Levitical priests under the old covenant (OC). The summons is not a call to give up the OC and its priestly cultus for the new. Here, OC priestly emblems are being used just as they have been in the body of Hebrews, as revealing the patterns of covenantal fidelity that Christ and his people adopt as new covenant (NC) priests.

One observes, too, that in the Levitical analogy the audience is summoned to identify, like Christ, not only with the Levitical priests, but also with the Levitical sacrificial animals. Indeed, in the dense argument of vv. 11–13, each verse divides into halves devoted to these respective metaphors. On the one hand, to “go outside the camp” (v. 13a) is to share in Christ’s role as a sacrificial animal: Christ himself “suffered outside the gates” (v. 12a) on analogy with OC sacrificial animals whose “bodies are burned up outside the camp” (v. 11b). On the other hand, to “bear (φέροντες) his reproach” is to share in Christ’s role as priest: Christ himself “sanctified the people with his blood” (v. 12b), on analogy with OC priests who “bear (εἰσφέρεται) the blood of animals into the holy of holies as a sin offering” (v. 11a).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Animal sacrifice</th>
<th>Priestly service</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“bodies are burned up outside (ἔξω) the camp” (v. 11)</td>
<td>Priests “bear (εἰσφέρεται) the blood (αἷμα) of animals into the holy of holies as a sin offering” (v. 11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christ “suffered outside (ἔξω) the city gates” (v. 12)</td>
<td>Christ “sanctified the people through his blood (αἷμα)” (v. 12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audience “goes outside (ἔξω) the camp” (v. 13)</td>
<td>Audience “bears (φέροντες) his reproach” (v. 13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audience “does not have here a city that remains” (v. 14)</td>
<td>Audience “seeks a city to come” (v. 14)</td>
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One notices, furthermore, that the two-part summons to identify like Christ as both priests and sacrificial offerings on analogy to the respective Levitical counterparts is translated by the writer in v. 14 in terms drawn from the audience’s political reality. That is, the call to go outside the camp on analogy to Levitical animal sacrifices is explicated as movement out of the city that falsely claims to be eternal, Rome (v. 14a). Similarly, the summons to bear offerings on analogy to Levitical priests in their entrance into the holy place is explicated...
as movement toward “the city to come,” the heavenly Jerusalem (v. 14b). The former entails suffering as a Roman outsider—like Christ who suffered outside the city gates, on analogy to Levitical animal sacrifices burned outside the camp; the latter entails approaching as a priestly insider—like Christ who bore the priestly offering of his own blood into the heavenly sanctuary, on analogy to Levitical priests who brought the offering of blood into the holy of holies.

Lastly, one observes how the two-fold summons, thus politically translated, serves the larger concern of Hebrews 13:9–14 to orient the readers away from idolatrous “foods” (v. 9) and toward the foods of the Lord’s altar (v. 10) instead. To leave behind idolatrous foods is to leave behind Rome and its pagan, idolatrous culture and become a cultural outsider. And to approach the NC altar and eat of its foods is to move toward the city to come and share in its culture as a priestly insider.62

4 Conclusion

In conclusion, Hebrews 13:7–14 is a recapitulatory summons, marked by a series of brief, elliptical references (some likely reflective of a hostile, pagan imperial context), to continued fidelity to God in the face of pressures to apostatize. Specifically, the audience is summoned to maintain their allegiance to God by continuing to reject permissive “devious and foreign teachings” (διδαχαῖς ποικίλαις καὶ ξέναις) allowing participation in idolatrous aspects of pagan imperial culture, particularly the eating of “foods” (βρώματα) associated with idolatry and imperial power. The author has encouraged the recipients to be nourished (βεβαιοῦσθαι τὴν καρδίαν) instead by God’s provision (χάρις) – and all the more, since they have access as NC priests to a sacred food source from which priests of the wilderness generation (οἱ τῇ σκηνῇ λατρεύοντες) had no right to eat, namely, the community’s “altar” (θυσιαστήριον). Viewed in this

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62 This two-fold summons, it should be noted, recapitulates the implicit summons inherent in the exemplum of Moses, who left behind the riches of Egypt, choosing to be ill-treated “with God’s people” (Heb 11:24–25; in correspondence to “go outside the camp”); and who, on the other hand, willingly endured “the reproach (ὀνειδισμός) of Christ” (Heb 11:26; in correspondence to “bearing his reproach [ὀνειδισμός]”). Such a close, two-fold correspondence shows the importance of this polarity as a fixture in the writer’s thought. It also provides corroborating evidence that the departure in view in 13:9–14 is one from pagan imperial culture (cf., too, the exemplum of Rahab in Heb 11:31, who chose to identify with the people of God rather than the “disobedient” Canaanites of Jericho).
light, it is clear that Hebrews 13:7–14 does not warn the audience against reversion to some form of non-Christian Judaism or Judaizing Christianity. Rather, the passage continues the drumbeat begun in the body of the speech, recapitulating the call therein to fidelity to God and his son, a fidelity that rejects the foods of Egypt and its gods and perseveres instead on the basis of God’s provision.