HOW GREEK WAS THE AUTHOR OF “HEBREWS”?
A STUDY OF THE AUTHOR’S LOCATION
IN REGARD TO GREEK ΠΑΙΔΕΙΑ

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Many and varied have been the investigations of the author of Hebrews’s interaction with classical culture and his “location” within that culture. These investigations have ranged from explorations of the “Platonism” of Hebrews vis-a-vis Jewish apocalypticism,¹ to points of commonality between the author’s critique of the Levitical cult and philosophical critique of the practice of traditional Greco-Roman religion and popular religion,² to the rhetorical artistry and composition evidenced by the author of this well-crafted sermon.³ The present study seeks to supplement this larger venture by collecting observations concerning the author’s location in regard to Greek παιδεία, the theory and practice of shaping new, productive, culturally engaged citizens. This study will approach this question by an investigation of the intertexture—the arenas of cultural knowledge upon which the

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author draws—as well as the inner texture of Hebrews. At what points in the midst of the dense array of Jewish scriptural intertexture would a Greek reader resonate with the author’s sermon and feel, after all the strangeness, “at home” with the author’s imagery, convictions, and forms of presentation? What might this tell us about the author’s own formative experiences as he moved from being an unskilled infant to maturation, able not only to digest, but artfully to prepare and serve, solid food?

1. Greek Educational Philosophy

The author of Hebrews shares at least two fundamental tenets regarding education with his Greek cultural environment. The first emerges in his description of Jesus’ own process of becoming qualified to serve as the perfect high priest, a process of formative education in which “he learned (ἐμαθεν) obedience from the things he suffered [or, experienced, ἔπαθεν]” (Heb 5:8). With the words ἐμαθεν … ἔπαθεν, the author incorporates a celebrated Greek word play, the classical equivalent of our “no pain, no gain.”Greek teachers sought to prepare their students to embrace the difficulties—even the pains—of the process of formative discipline (παιδεύς) that would equip them with the skills, and carve into them the virtues, that would position them to flourish in Greek culture and leave behind a praiseworthy remembrance of a life well lived. Discipline was not merely punitive (i.e. punishment for doing something wrong, with the result that learning came from trial, error, and a whooping). Educative discipline challenged students with rigorous exercises training mind, soul, and body.

Students following the progymnasmic course of studies would encounter early on the famous saying of Isocrates, “the root of education is bitter but its fruit is sweet” (Hermogenes, Preliminary Exercises 3.7). This saying draws on agricultural imagery to communicate the same cultural assumption as

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4 See, for example, Aeschylus, Ag. 177; Herodotus, 1.207. For further references, see Harold W. Attridge, The Epistle to the Hebrews (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 152 n. 192; N.C. Croy, Endurance in Suffering: Hebrews 12:1–13 in its Rhetorical, Religious, and Philosophical Context (SNTSMS 98; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 139–144.

5 Quotation is from the translation of G.A. Kennedy, Progymnasmata: Greek Textbooks of Prose Composition and Rhetoric (Writings from the Greco-Roman World 10; Atlanta: SBL, 2003), 77; See also Priscian, De usu 35–64; Aphthonius, On the Chreia 23–77; Nicolaus of Myra, On the Chreia, 72–73, 83–84, 133–134, all to be found in R.F. Hock and E.N. O’Neil, The Chreia in Ancient Rhetoric: Volume I. The Progymnasmata (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1986).