The building materials used in the bricolage constructed by the author of Hebrews has been the object of intense study.1 While most scholars look to Jewish sources for the theological background of Hebrews, the portrait of Aeneas in Augustan theology also shows clear parallels with Hebrews. In this essay I wish to advance the thesis that three perspectives in Hebrews’ christological portrait that are not emphasized in its author’s scriptures or in gospel tradition—the pious son, the priestly son and the founding son—are found in the divine son of Augustan theology, Aeneas.

Virgil’s Aeneid is the primary exemplar of “Augustan theology” for this study, but I do consider Aeneas materials preserved in Ovid and Dionysus of Halicarnassus, as well as the Forum of Augustus and the Ara Pacis. The latter is not an Augustan poet as the former two are; Dionysus considered himself an historian. But still as an historian writing in Rome, his work must be consulted. This is not to say that the author of Hebrews was consciously modeling his homiletical letter on the Aeneid as its foundational text, or that he was consciously reacting against or adapting Augustan theology, but I am arguing that along with the previously recognized sources for the heroic presentation of Jesus in Hebrews, the Septuagint and the Heracles story cycle, Hebrews’ portrait of the hero Jesus makes sense when read alongside portraits of the “goddess-born Aeneas” in Virgil, Ovid, and Dionysus of Halicarnassus.2 And far from being an incidental source, the Aeneid models

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1 This study begins from the now established viewpoint that a plurality of conceptual backgrounds accounts for Hebrews’s distinctive literary and theological traits (L.D. Hurst, The Epistle to the Hebrews: Its Background of Thought, SNTSMS 65 [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990], 131–33; Craig R. Koester, Hebrews: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary, AB36 [New York: Doubleday, 2001], 76–79. I am therefore not claiming that the Aeneid is the only literary foundation for Hebrews, as Marianne Palmer Bonz does for Luke-Acts in her The Past As Legacy: Luke-Acts and Ancient Epic (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000).

2 “Goddess-born” or “nate dea” in Virgil’s text, is a standard designation for Aeneas, the son of the goddess Venus and human Anchises, e.g. Aen. 3.433; 8.59. See also “sate sanguine divum” (6.125).
for Hebrews what Hebrews’s other sources cannot—a hero story that shows how the hero’s people are religiously superior to their cultural ancestors. The author of Hebrews taps into the motifs of purification, the divinely favored people in search of a divinely founded city and paideia of the son as Virgil uses them in the Aeneid, to show that the hero and his cult surpass their cultural ancestors.

1. Why Cross the Language Divide and Look to the Aeneid?

Before exploring the parallels between the Aeneid and Hebrews, an objection must first be voiced: why look to the Aeneid? There are no direct quotations of the Aeneid, and even such a New Testament scholar as oriented to the Greco-Roman bank of parallels as J.J. Wettstein mentions the Aeneid only at Hebrews 13:14 in his Novum Testamentum. As recently as 1973, William George Johnsson [sic] concludes his dissertation with the judgment, “It must be admitted that the writer’s sustained references to the Jewish cult, with corresponding omission of any reference to pagan sacrifices, are in favor of his having a Jewish background. But the point cannot be affirmed with certainty.” He goes on to reject suggestions that the letters’ first addressees must necessarily be viewed as Jewish, since in his estimation the danger that is poised over the readers is apostasy out of the believing community rather than a return to Judaism.3 L.D. Hurst guardedly concedes “It should not be denied that ‘Greek’ influence has contributed at some point to the ideas found in Hebrews,” but goes on to dismiss the suggestion of Platonic or Philonic influence on Hebrews’ author.4 Craig Koester cites nine parallels between discrete phrases or ideas in Hebrews and the Aeneid, more than Attridge’s single parallel.5 Herbert Braun only cites the Aeneid at the “enduring city” phrase in Hebrews 13:14.6 Most commentators follow the lead of Otto Michel, who concentrates on Jewish parallels and occasionally offers

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4 L.D. Hurst, The Epistle to the Hebrews: Its Background of Thought, SNTSMS 65 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 7–42; quotation from 41.