

## THE USE OF PERFECTION LANGUAGE IN HEBREWS 5:14 AND 6:1 AND THE CONTEXTUAL INTERPRETATION OF 5:11–6:3

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Two issues that have warranted considerable attention in scholarship surrounding the Epistle to the Hebrews are the concept of perfection as well as the ominous “warning passages.” It would seem that these two debates meet in the parenthetic section of 5:11–6:12. Possibly the most infamous of the warning passages (Heb 6:4–6) is contained in this section as well as two instances of perfection language (τελείω in 5:14 and τελειότητα in 6:1). Although a clear understanding of the various forms of the τέλειος word grouping would indeed have something significant to contribute to the discussion surrounding this warning passage, scholarship has to a certain degree failed to recognize the importance of this passage from the perspective of the theme of perfection.<sup>1</sup>

### I. PERFECTION LANGUAGE IN HEBREWS

There are fourteen different occurrences of the derivatives of τέλειος and τελειώ in one form or another in Hebrews.<sup>2</sup> The occurrence of these is as follows: τέλειος (5:14; 9:11), τελειότης (6:1), τελειώ (2:10; 5:9; 7:19, 28; 9:9; 10:1, 14; 11:40; 12:23), τελειωτής (12:2), τελειώσις (7:11). In the New American Standard translation all occurrences, with the exception of 5:14 and 6:1, are translated as “perfect,” “perfected,” “perfector,” or “perfection.” Only in the previously mentioned passages does the translation carry the connotation of mature or maturity instead. Du

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<sup>1</sup> This fact is easily enough explained by the truth that the perfection debate has “bigger fish to fry,” so to speak, regarding the perfection of Christ and the issues of the hypostatic union. See Allen Wikgren, “Patterns of Perfection in the Epistle to the Hebrews,” *NTS* 6 (1960) 164–66; C. Spicq, *L'Épître aux Hébreux* (Paris: Librairie Lecoffre, 1952) 2.36; Moisés Silva, “Perfection and Eschatology in Hebrews,” *WTJ* 39 (1976) 61–71; Anthony A. Hoekema, “Perfection of Christ in Hebrews,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 9 (1974) 31–37; and D. G. Peterson, *Hebrews and Perfection: An Examination of the Concept of Perfection in the “Epistle to the Hebrews”* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982). Similarly, the perseverance debate has appropriately broadened to take into consideration all of the warning passages in the epistle in a synthetic analysis. See Scot McKnight, “The Warning Passages of Hebrews: A Formal Analysis and Theological Conclusions,” *TrinJ* NS 13 (1992) 21–59; Alan Mugridge, “Warnings in the Epistle to the Hebrews: An Exegetical and Theological Study,” *Reformed Theological Review* 46 (1987) 74–82; Stanley D. Toussaint, “The Eschatology of the Warning Passages in the Book of Hebrews,” *GJJ* 3 (1982) 67–80. Much of this work has been synthesized in the publication of Herbert W. Bateman IV, ed., *Four Views on the Warning Passages in Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007). Neither debate is focusing solely at this time on the embattled pericope of 5:11–6:12.

<sup>2</sup> This accounts for nearly one-third of all occurrences in the NT, making Hebrews the book with the most occurrences of this cognate group in the NT.

Plessis argues for the “elastic adaptability” of the term in biblical and extrabiblical usage.<sup>3</sup> The question still remains to what extent the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews calls on such elasticity of meaning.

Is the author intending that τέλειος and τελειώω ought to carry with them the concept of maturity in 5:11 and 6:1 when all other passages seem to be holding a stronger connotation of perfection? Even if in these instances a translation of “mature” or “maturity” is appropriate, can the term be interpreted in light of its overall thematic usage in Hebrews? According to Silva, the concept of perfection and the usage of the term τέλειος are of more than just casual importance to the author.<sup>4</sup> Could the τέλειος word grouping be used consistently throughout the epistle in a way that would maintain the force of “perfection” but could also accommodate the context of 5:11 and 6:1?<sup>5</sup>

This paper seeks to demonstrate three things. First, τέλειος and its cognates are used in a consistent sense throughout the epistle to make explicit statements of either the perfection of the new covenant and the elements thereof or the imperfection of the previous covenant and its elements. Second, a different paradigm of interpretation ought to govern 5:11–14, shifting away from the discussion of Christian immaturity versus Christian maturity and toward a discussion of covenantal imperfection versus covenantal perfection. And finally, such an interpretation should be carried over into the exegesis of 6:1–2 to the effect that in the foundation (θεμέλιον) of “the elementary teachings about the Messiah” (τὸν τῆς ἀρχῆς τοῦ Χριστοῦ λόγον) the author is referring to beliefs accepted as foundational by means of the previous covenant rather than elementary “Christian” teaching.

## II. PERFECTION/IMPERFECTION DUALISM IN HEBREWS

When a critical consideration of the theme of perfection is undertaken in the Epistle to the Hebrews, it should be noted, as Wikgren does, that the author is using a dualism of ideology.<sup>6</sup> That is, whenever the author uses “perfection” terminology, there is always an implied or explicit “imperfect” that corresponds. Typological interpretation and application of the OT is common in Hebrews. This is exemplified by several antipodal pairs, type-antitype pairs that form prominent expository sections of the epistle.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> P. J. Du Plessis, *TEΛΕΙΟΣ: The Idea of Perfection in the NT* (Kampen: Kok, 1959) 212. Gerhard Dellling provides a number of possible interpretive options regarding its usage (“τελειώω,” *TDNT* 8.79–84).

<sup>4</sup> Silva, “Perfection” 60; More forcefully Peterson argues that understanding perfection is central for an interpretation of the Epistle to the Hebrews (*Hebrews and Perfection* 1).

<sup>5</sup> Silva makes passing reference to such an interpretation but does not develop it fully (“Perfection” 60).

<sup>6</sup> Wikgren, “Patterns” 161.

<sup>7</sup> Angels and the Son (1:4–2:18); Moses and Joshua and Christ (3:1–4:13); Levitical high priests and the perfect High Priest of the order of Melchizedek (4:14–8:6); the first covenant and the new covenant (8:7–10:39). Rice assures that although the technical structure may differ in the debate, “that is not to say that Hebrews’ major themes are lost in the discussion” (George E. Rice, “Apostasy as a Motif and its

It is this dualism, which raises many questions,<sup>8</sup> that provides answers to the particular questions raised regarding the interpretation of τελείων in 5:14 and τὴν τελειότητα in 6:1. It is important to note that in considering the theme of perfection in Hebrews, every usage of the τέλειος word group can be applied to this dualistic interpretation. There is always an explicit or implicit perfect in contrast with an explicit or implicit imperfect. The author intends to use the theme in such a way as to set in contrast the perfection of the elements prominent in the new covenant and the imperfection of the elements prominent in the previous covenant.

The chart below contains a synopsis of such type-antitype pairings within the argument of the epistle. Any time there is an explicit statement of either perfection or imperfection it is listed in bold print. Any time perfection or imperfection is implied in a statement it is listed in italics. The particular form of the τέλειος cognate is also provided.

Table 1: Covenantal Dualism and the Use of Perfection Language in Hebrews

<b>Explicit</b> or <i>Implied</i> Imperfection of the Central Elements of the Previous Covenant	<b>Explicit</b> or <i>Implied</i> Perfection of the Central Elements of the New Covenant
<i>Angels</i> (1:5–7, 13–14; 2:5)	Jesus, <b>the Son</b> , is perfected (τελειώσαι) through suffering (2:10)
<i>Aaron, the Levitical high priest</i> (5:1–4)	<b>Jesus, the Melchizedekian high priest</b> has been made perfect (τελειωθείς; 5:9)
Perfection (τελείωσις) is not through the <b>Levitical priesthood</b> (7:11)	<i>Melchizedekian priesthood</i> (7:4–16)
<b>The “former commandment”</b> made nothing perfect (ἐτελείωσεν) and is characterized by weakness and uselessness (7:18–19)	Jesus has become the guarantee of a “ <i>better covenant</i> ” (7:19–22)
<i>The Law appoints “those who are weak” as high priests</i> (7:28)	<b>The Son as priest</b> “has been made perfect (τετελειωμένον) forever” (7:28)
<b>The gifts and sacrifices of the “outer tabernacle”</b> cannot perfect (τελειώσαι) the conscience of the worshipper (9:9)	<i>Christ’s blood</i> cleanses the conscience (9:14)
<i>The tabernacle of the first covenant is a copy</i> (9:24)	Jesus enters <b>the greater, more perfect</b> (τελειοτέρας) <b>tabernacle</b> (9:11) <b>and mediates a new covenant</b> (9:15)
<b>The Law is a shadow of things to come and can never make perfect</b> (τελειώσαι) those who draw near (10:1)	<b>Jesus offers one sacrifice and he has perfected</b> (τετελείωκεν) for all time the worshipper (10:14)

Effect on the Structure of Hebrews,” *AUSS* 23 [1985] 29). See also George Guthrie, *The Structure of Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994) 117.

<sup>8</sup> Even the topic of dualism brings up much debate as to how much the author was influenced by Platonic idealism and the possible relationship to Philo or Alexandrian interpretation (Wikgren, “Patterns” 161) or Gnostic dualism (Ernst Käsemann, *The Wandering People of God: An Investigation of the Letter to the Hebrews* [trans. R. Harrisville and I. Sandberg; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984] 186–94; or Heinrich Schlier, “γάλα,” *TDNT* 1.645–47).

<p><b>Pre-Messiah faith gains approval but believers are not made perfect</b> (τελειωθῶσιν) apart from post-Messiah believers (11:40)</p>	<p><b>Jesus, the revealed Messiah, is the author and perfecter</b> (τελειωτήν) <b>of faith</b> (12:2)</p>
<p><i>The image of Mt. Sinai</i> (12:18–21)</p>	<p><b>Mt. Zion, and the spirits of the righteous are made perfect</b> (τετελειωμένων; 12:23)</p>

Occurrences of perfection language provide part of the framework for the type-antitype patterns within the epistle while the data call for certain conclusions. It should first of all be noted that the passages this paper wishes to address (5:14 and 6:1) have been excluded in this preliminary survey. The goal of this section is to note certain similarities in all other uses of the τέλειος word group and then apply them to the controversial passages at hand.

A few conclusions are merited from the data. First, whenever any term from the τέλειος word group appears in the text of Hebrews, it is making an explicit statement about either the perfection or imperfection of an element (people, symbols, or institutions).<sup>9</sup> Regardless of what exactly the concept of perfection means, the author is never unclear what elements (people, symbols, or institutions) are considered τέλειος.

Second, it should also be noted that when perfection language appears, the implied or explicit counter-type is not far off in the text. In most cases, the implied counterpart is found within the same chapter a few verses away or is even within the same verse.

A third conclusion that is merited from the text is that explicit or implied imperfection is always equated with some integral element of the previous covenant. Angels who revealed the previous covenant to Moses (1:5–7, 13–14; 2:1–9, 16); Moses (3:2–6), Joshua (4:8), and Aaron (5:1–4) who delivered the previous covenant to the people of Israel; Levitical high priests who mediated the previous covenant (7:1–8:6); the Law which dictated the terms of the previous covenant (7:19–28); the earthly tabernacle of the previous covenant (9:1–10) and its sacrifices (9:9–28); pre-Messiah believers of the previous covenant (11:39–40); and Mt. Sinai which is the mountain of revelation of the previous covenant (12:18–21) are all explicitly or implicitly deemed imperfect. The author of Hebrews may state this most plainly after quoting Jer 31:31–34 (38:31–34 [LXX]; Heb 8:8–12), “When he says, ‘a new *covenant*’ he has worn out (πεπαλαίωκεν) the first *covenant*. And the thing that is worn out (τὸ παλαιούμενον) and growing old (γηράσκον) is close to disappearing (ἐγγὺς ἀφανισμοῦ)” (Heb 8:13). According to the author, imperfection is indicative of the previous covenant and the persons, symbols, and institutions asso-

<sup>9</sup> For our purposes the term “element” applies to any of the people (Christ, Moses, Joshua, Aaron), institutions (Levitical priesthood, Melchizedekian priesthood, earthly tabernacle, heavenly tabernacle), or symbols (Mt. Sinai, Mt. Zion) associated with either of the covenant systems.

ciated with it and nowhere associated with the new covenant and the most recent revelation in the Son.<sup>10</sup>

Consequently, a fourth conclusion from the above data is that perfection in Hebrews is always associated with the new covenant inaugurated by the person and work of Jesus. Among the elements either explicitly stated to be perfect or implied to be perfect are the Son (2:10), Melchizedekian priesthood (5:9), the “better covenant” (7:22; 8:6–7), the greater and more perfect tabernacle (9:11), the new and living way of Jesus (10:14–19), full assurance of faith (10:22), as well as the author of salvation and faith (12:2). Perfection for previous covenant believers will not come “apart from us” who stand in new covenant faith because “God had provided something better (κρείττον) for us” (11:39–40).

The author is building two distinct columns that are descriptive of the two covenants and the elements thereof. The word group of τέλειος is used in part to establish this covenantal dualism. Other terms are employed to develop the characteristic qualities of the two systems. The previous covenant was “spoken long ago,” while the most recent covenant is “spoken in these last days” (1:1–2). The elements of the previous covenant are lesser (ἐλάσσων; 7:7), weak (ἀσθενής; 7:18, 28), useless (ἀνωφελής; 7:18), copy (ὑπόδειγμα; 4:11; 8:5; 9:23; ἀντίτυπος; 9:24), shadow (σκιά; 8:5; 10:1), not faultless (ἄμεμπτος; 8:7, 8), worn out (παλαιῶ; 8:13), old (γηράσκω; 8:13), ready to disappear (ἀφανισμός; 8:13), darkness, gloom, whirlwind (γνόφος, ζόφος, θύελλα; 12:18), and terrible (φοβερός; 12:21).

On the other hand, the elements of the new covenant are more excellent (διαφορωτέρας; 1:4; 8:6), so great (τηλικούτος; 2:3), worthy of more glory (πλείονος; 3:3), sure and steadfast (ἀσφαλής, βέβαιος; 6:19), greater (μέγας; 4:14; 6:13, 16; 7:7; 9:11; 10:21; 11:26), indestructible (ἀκατάλυτος; 7:16), better (κρείττων; 1:4; 6:9<sup>11</sup>; 7:7, 19, 22; 8:6; 9:23; 10:34; 11:16, 35, 40; 12:24), new (καινός; 8:8, 13; 10:20; 12:24), true (ἀληθινός; 9:24), fresh (πρόσφατος; 10:20), living (ζάω; 10:20), heavenly (ἐπουράνιος; 11:16; 12:22), and unshakable (ἀσάλευτος; 12:27–28). While these other terms are used at various points in the argument, perfection language is used consistently and throughout Hebrews to indicate the perfection of the new covenant and the imperfection of the previous.

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<sup>10</sup> It would be premature to dismiss the previous covenant in a wholesale manner. There is perhaps work to be done in identifying the nature of the imperfection of the previous covenant in Hebrews. Richard B. Hays cautions against seeing the author of Hebrews as employing a supersessionist hermeneutic. He quips insightfully, “Hebrews is no more supersessionist than Jeremiah” (Hays, “Here We Have No Lasting City: New Covenantalism in Hebrews,” in *The Epistle to the Hebrews and Christian Theology* [ed. Richard Bauckham et al.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009] 165). See also the respondents to Hays in the same volume.

<sup>11</sup> Every other instance of κρείττων in the epistle modifies some element of the new covenant. The use of κρείττων in 6:9 is evidence that the dualism of the expository sections is carried over into the hortatory section and is not absent in this warning passage.

### III. A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE PREVAILING INTERPRETATION OF HEBREWS 5:11–6:2

With the landscape of perfection language in Hebrews established, it is now appropriate to critique the prevailing interpretation in its light. In short, the prevailing interpretation sees 5:11–14 as a discussion of Christian immaturity and maturity,<sup>12</sup> while 6:1–2 lists the fundamentals or foundational aspects of the Christian faith.<sup>13</sup>

Beginning in 5:11–14, the traditional interpretation interprets  $\nu\theta\theta\rho\delta\varsigma$  (5:11) as some sense of acquired moral or spiritual dullness.<sup>14</sup> The phrase “by this time you ought to be teachers” (5:12) is implicit of a spiritual stagnation, namely that some time has passed since this group has become Christian and they have not moved forward in their faith. Because of this dull spiritual condition, the audience is shamefully in need of a refresher course in the basics of Christianity (“the elementary principles of the oracles of God”). They are in need of milk, which is basic Christian doctrine. Their need reveals their condition as babes, namely that they are immature Christians. But milk will simply not do in their case. Remaining in immaturity is not an option as they are called upon to partake of solid food and become spiritually mature.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> The nuances here range from moral or intellectual immaturity (Luke Timothy Johnson, *Hebrews* [NTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006] 156; Craig R. Koester, *Hebrews* [AB 36; New York: Doubleday, 2001] 302; Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* [Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989] 158–59; Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text* [NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993] 307), to spiritual immaturity (Gareth Lee Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* [NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012] 256; Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews* [PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010] 206–7). In each of these cases the conclusion remains that this is a reference to immaturity within the Christian audience.

<sup>13</sup> Some have gone so far as to argue that 6:1–2 forms some sort of an early creedal statement. See J. Clifford Adams, “Exegesis of Hebrews 6:1f.,” *NTS* 13 (1967) 379, for a listing of such scholars. This idea is not well represented among recent commentators.

<sup>14</sup> A notable exception is Attridge, who calls this a use of rhetoric and notes this is not a true condition of the audience (*Hebrews* 158).

<sup>15</sup> The list of those who hold to the prevailing interpretation of Christian immaturity versus Christian maturity in 5:11–14 is quite extensive: Attridge, *Hebrews*; Raymond Brown, “Pilgrimage in Faith: the Christian Life in Hebrews,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 28 (1985) 28–35; F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990); Jean Calvin, *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews and the First and Second Epistles of St. Peter* (Calvin’s Commentaries 12; trans. W. B. Johnston; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963); Cockerill, *Hebrews* 260–64; Ellingworth, *Hebrews*; Jim Girdwood, *Hebrews* (The College Press NIV Commentary; Joplin, MO: College Press, 1997); Donald Guthrie, *The Letter to the Hebrews: An Introduction and Commentary* (INTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983); Donald Hagner, *Hebrews* (NIBC; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1990); Jean Hering, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (London: Epworth, 1970); Thomas Hewitt, *The Epistle to the Hebrews, an Introduction and Commentary* (INTC; London: Tyndale, 1960); P. E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans: 1977); Homer A. Kent, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972); Koester, *Hebrews* 309; William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1–8* (WBC 47A; Dallas: Word, 1991); Moffatt, *Hebrews* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1924); Hugh Montefiore, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (BNIC; London: Adam & Charles Black, 1964); Leon Morris, *Hebrews* (EBC 12; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981); Alexander Nairne, *The Epistle of Priesthood* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1913); A. C. Purdy and J. Harry Cotton, “Hebrews,” *IB* 11; Robert H. Smith, *Hebrews* (Augsburg Commentary on the NT, Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984); B. F. Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: The Greek Text with Notes and Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1889); and

The traditional interpretation then naturally carries over the idea of Christian immaturity and maturity into 6:1–2. The audience is to leave the milk of the foundation of Christianity and press on into the “meaty” teachings associated with maturity. Repentance from dead works, faith toward God, instruction about washings, laying on of hands, resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment are considered entry-level teachings of Christianity (milk).<sup>16</sup> Beginning in 6:3, scholars begin to vary widely on how to interpret the remainder of the passage; however, up to this point there is a considerable amount of agreement.

There are a number of reasons why such a long-standing and prevailing interpretation should be questioned:

(1) The traditional interpretation has failed to clarify the more controversial passage that follows. In other words, the interpretation of Christian maturity and immaturity has not necessarily provided a context that helps in making sense of 6:4–6. This is evidenced historically in the exegetical chaos that surrounds this particular warning passage, which any honest exegete encounters when engaging in even casual research regarding interpretive options.

(2) This passage (5:11–14) in the prevailing interpretation is often interpreted based on the context of 1 Corinthians 3:1 rather than the context of the entire Epistle to the Hebrews. From the time of Origen, exegetes have turned to the clearer passage (1 Cor 3:1–3) to make sense of the more difficult (Heb 5:11–6:2).<sup>17</sup> In 1 Cor 3:1–3, the need for milk indicates spiritual immaturity or carnality. The terms in the Hebrews passage (milk, babes, and solid food) make a tempting parallel. One reason for rejecting these as parallel passages is that Pauline authorship of Hebrews is almost universally rejected.<sup>18</sup> In this case, there would be no particular reason to interpret one author’s use of the metaphor in light of another’s. Even if

R. McLachlan Wilson, *Hebrews* (New Century Bible Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987). It may be best simply to note those who do not hold the prevailing interpretation of Christian immaturity versus Christian maturity but rather see some sort of doctrinal or covenantal imperfection. They are Kenneth S. Wuest, “Hebrews Six in the Greek NT,” *BibSac* 119 (1962) 49–53; Silva, “Perfection” 68–69; and John MacArthur, *Hebrews* (Chicago: Moody, 1983).

<sup>16</sup> There is some disagreement here in the question of whether these elements are unique to Christianity. For the view that these are primarily Christian teachings see Raymond Brown, *Christ Above All: The Message of Hebrews* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1982) 105–7; Calvin, *Epistle* 71; William P. DuBose, *High Priesthood and Sacrifice* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1908) 108–9; Gridwood, *Hebrews* 190–98; Hering, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* 43–44; Hughes, *Hebrews* 193–205; Kent, *Hebrews* 106–7; Koester, *Hebrews* 310–11; Moffatt, *Hebrews* 72; Montefiore, *Hebrews* 105; Morris, *Hebrews* 53–54; and Smith, *Hebrews* 78. Those holding that these are shared elements of both Judaism and Christianity are Attridge, *Hebrews* 163; Bruce, *Hebrews* 113–18; Cockerill, *Hebrews* 264–67; Ellingworth, *Hebrews* 310–16; D. Guthrie, *Hebrews* 204–6; Hagner, *Hebrews* 87–88; Hewitt, *Hebrews* 104–6; Lane, *Hebrews* 1.140; Moffatt, *Hebrews* 73–75; Wilson, *Hebrews* 107; and Westcott, *Hebrews* 145–46. In the end, however, both views see these elements as necessary foundations of Christianity that are particularly “Christian” rather than “Jewish.”

<sup>17</sup> Brown, *Hebrews* 104; Bruce, *Hebrews* 108; Calvin, *Epistle* 68; Morris, *Hebrews* 52; Girdwood, *Hebrews* 189; Hughes, *Hebrews* 191; Kent, *Hebrews* 103. To be fair, not all exegetes rely on the context of 1 Cor 3:1–3 in order to interpret this passage. Some actually make special note that this is not appropriate; see Attridge, *Hebrews* 159–60; and Johnson, *Hebrews* 156.

<sup>18</sup> See Ellingworth, *Hebrews* 3. He states, “The idea of Pauline authorship is now almost universally abandoned.”

the apostle Paul is the author of Hebrews, it can be noted that he uses a completely different term to denote a mature diet.<sup>19</sup> Most writers also point out that the imagery of the progression from infancy to adulthood is a common metaphor for growth in various types of training in the first century. Therefore the situation of Hebrews and the use of milk, babes, and solid food may differ, and most probably does, from the situation of the church in Corinth. The author's usage of this metaphor deserves a reading based on the context in which it is found rather than a foreign context imported into the text.

(3) Aside from being interpreted through a Pauline lens the passage is often interpreted through Hellenistic ethical teachings. The use of the language of the metaphor of milk and solid food finds considerable parallels in the contemporary Hellenistic literature.<sup>20</sup> This often leads interpreters to find this discussion relating more to moral teaching as opposed to doctrinal teaching, essentially importing the content of Hellenists along with the imagery of the Hellenists. It would be important to note that the author of Hebrews is not bound to a certain meaning or content by employing certain imagery. In this case, he uses the language of Hellenists and, as Wilson puts it, "baptizes it," using it for unique Christian content.<sup>21</sup>

(4) Furthermore, the passage does not entirely make sense in such a reading. Though the author says the audience needs milk, he refuses to feed the audience such "foundational" milk. Only solid food is appropriate. Similarly, exegetes have had difficulty explaining the author's choice of διὰ ἀφέντες at the beginning of 6:1.<sup>22</sup> This is due to the seeming contrast of the exhortation to "leave" these things and "press ahead" into maturity. MacArthur notes the rudimentary difficulty, "We are never to leave the basics, the elementary teachings of the gospel, no matter how mature we grow in the faith ... at no time does the Word of God suggest that a Christian drop the basics of Christianity and go on to something else."<sup>23</sup> Exegetes have noted the difficulty and offered explanation as to how ἀφέντες (leaving) ought to be taken,<sup>24</sup> while others offer explanations as to the apparent paradox of needing milk but being told to leave what essentially is milk.<sup>25</sup>

(5) Another problem associated with 6:1–2 describing foundational Christian doctrine is that in none of the six items mentioned (repentance from dead works, faith toward God, instructions about washings, the laying on of hands, resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment) is there anything specifically or uniquely Chris-

<sup>19</sup> βρῶμα (meat) is used in 1 Cor. 3:2 while ἡ στερεὰ τροφή (solid food) is used in Heb 5:12.

<sup>20</sup> Philo, *Agric.* 9; *Cong.* 19; *Migr. Abr.* 29; *Som.* 2.9; *Omn. prob. lib.* 160; Epictetus, *Diss.* 2.16.39 are examples. See Koester, *Hebrews* 302; and Moffatt, *Hebrews* 71–72 for a more complete treatment.

<sup>21</sup> Wilson, *Hebrews* 104.

<sup>22</sup> Hering, *Hebrews* 43; Moffatt, *Hebrews* 71; Attridge, *Hebrews* 162; Bruce, *Hebrews* 111.

<sup>23</sup> MacArthur, *Hebrews* 137

<sup>24</sup> Manson, *Hebrews* 61; Attridge, *Hebrews* 162; Lane, *Hebrews* 1.131; Ellingworth, *Hebrews* 311. The standard argument is that the author encourages the audience to leave standing or build upon the foundation but not abandon these teachings. Some note that this is a common rhetorical device implying that it is simply time to "move on" in the argument having already established these things (Koester, *Hebrews* 303; Johnson, *Hebrews* 158). Brown takes ἀφίημι to mean that we are to "establish" this doctrine, going substantially against the typical reading (*Christ Above All* 105).

<sup>25</sup> Koester, *Hebrews* 310; Montefiore, *Hebrews* 104.



tian.<sup>26</sup> For those who would hold that these verses form somewhat of an elementary Christian creedal statement, this critique is devastating. One must only imagine walking into a first-century synagogue stating a belief in the elements mentioned in 6:1–2, in the language they are presented, and awaiting response. Most likely such a “Christian” creed or introductory teaching would have caused no controversy in the synagogue or tension within the audience. Nothing new to previous covenant teaching is stated here and so these items are not uniquely “Christian.”

(6) Conversely, items known to cause the eventual bifurcation of what become known as Judaism and Christianity are not found in this set of elements. Adams notes that the early confession “Jesus is Lord” is conspicuously absent,<sup>27</sup> while various others note that God is the object of faith while Jesus is not. There is also no mention of the breaking of bread, or the Eucharist, which is uniquely Christian.<sup>28</sup>

(7) An objection that needs to be raised addresses more generally the difficulty of the interpretation of τὸν τῆς ἀρχῆς τοῦ Χριστοῦ λόγον (“the elementary teaching about the Christ” 6:1) as the basics of Christian doctrine. It seems as though some commentators are making the unnecessary connection of Χριστός with “Christian.”<sup>29</sup> Considering the author's use of the LXX and the first-century setting, Χριστός is familiar to the author and the audience as, more appropriately, the Messiah figure of the previous covenant.<sup>30</sup> Most commentators unconsciously interpret Χριστός from a second- or third-century, or even present-day, understanding of “Christ,” inciting a flood of knowledge and emphasis known to us today but almost entirely absent from the first-century audience. Essentially, Χριστός ought to evoke at least a discussion of the concept of Messiah in this passage; however, it fails to do so for the prevailing interpretation.<sup>31</sup>

(8) Overall, and to the point of this article, such an interpretation of Christian maturity/immaturity breaks pattern with the author's consistent dualism of perfection/imperfection throughout the epistle. The author sets up a dualism in which everywhere else in Hebrews people, symbols, and institutions treated in the argument are categorized as either perfect or imperfect. They are either associated with the perfection of the new covenant or with the imperfection of the previous cove-

<sup>26</sup> Johnson notes the ambiguity of the list, “Neither is there a clear distinction drawn between things broadly practiced in Judaism and those specific to the ‘messianic movement’ centered in Jesus. . . . The author’s precise meaning is impossible to pin down, because the possibilities of reference are multiple” (Johnson, *Hebrews*, 158). See also Nairne, *Epistle of Priesthood* 334–35; William Neil, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (London: SCM, 1953) 66.

<sup>27</sup> Adams, “Exegesis of Hebrews 6:1f” 380.

<sup>28</sup> J. Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus* (New York, 1955) 84.

<sup>29</sup> See Brown, *Hebrews* 105; D. Guthrie, *Hebrews* 138; Hewitt, *Hebrews* 104; Kent, *Hebrews* 105; Moffatt, *Hebrews* 73; Montefiore, *Hebrews* 104.

<sup>30</sup> Attridge, *Hebrews* 163; Bruce, *Hebrews* 112–13; Hughes, *Hebrews* 195; Lane, *Hebrews* 1.140; Westcott, *Hebrews* 142. These make the connection to these elements having some foundation in Judaism but still do not connect Χριστός with Messiah. Ellingworth goes beyond this to actually note that Χριστός may mean Messiah (*Hebrews* 310).

<sup>31</sup> Johnson (*Hebrews* 157–60) offers the most of a nuanced discussion that the audience of Hebrews is a “messianic” community.

nant. The prevailing interpretation artificially creates a third, middle category: perfect but immature. This third category breaks with the author's use of perfection dualism, as is demonstrated in Table 2 below.

Table 2: The Failed Dualism of the Traditional Interpretation of Heb 5:11–6:3

Explicit or Implied Imperfection under the Previous Covenant		Explicit or Implied Perfection under the New Covenant
Imperfect teaching or doctrine under the previous covenant.	Elementary/beginning teaching or doctrine under the perfect new covenant?	Perfect teaching or doctrine under the new covenant.
Imperfect means of dealing with sin.	Immature believers within the perfect new covenant?	Perfect means of dealing with sin.
Imperfect believers		Perfected believers

This calls for the question whether the author finds a place for this middle category in any other passage in Hebrews. Nothing associated with the new covenant in Hebrews is considered imperfect or even immature. If the prevailing interpretation is held, there must be an explanation of why any teachings of the new covenant are either milk, elementary, for babes, must be left, or leave one in a state of immaturity. This third column in the middle is somewhat artificial and difficult to support throughout the epistle as a whole.

#### IV. CONSIDERATION OF HEBREWS 5:11–6:3: A PROPOSED INTERPRETATION OF “COVENANTAL DUALISM”<sup>32</sup>

On the other hand, there is clear dualism in 5:11–6:3 that aligns with the perfection dualism, and covenantal dualism, that is clear throughout the epistle. Employing this interpretive grid of covenantal dualism offers a way forward in this passage in which the “immature” and “imperfect” are associated with elements from the previous covenant and the audience is being chided for not pressing into the perfection of the new. Let us begin by noting that Hebrews here is using some sense of categorical dualism in 5:11–6:3, which can be charted thus:

Table 3: The Covenantal Dualism of Heb 5:11–6:3

Explicit or Implied Imperfection of the Previous Covenant	Explicit or Implied Perfection of the New Covenant
	(5:11) Concerning this we have much to say ...
... but it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing (νωθοὶ γεγόνατε ταῖς ἀκοαῖς).	(5:12) For though by this time you ought to be teachers (διδάσκαλοι)

<sup>32</sup> Although MacArthur, Wuest, and Nairne can be cited as the initial proponents of this general direction of interpretation, Gary Tuck of Western Seminary, San Jose was the first to point out such a paradigm to me.

You have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the beginning of the words of God (τὰ στοιχεῖα τῆς ἀρχῆς τῶν λογίων τοῦ θεοῦ).	
You have come to need milk (γάλακτος) and not ...	... solid food (στερεᾶς τροφῆς)
(5:13) Everyone who partakes only of milk (γάλακτος) is not accustomed to ...	... the word of righteousness (λόγου δικαιοσύνης)
For he is a babe (νήπιος).	(5:14) But solid food (ἡ στερεὰ τροφή) is for the mature (τελείων), who because of their mature state (τὴν ἕξιιν) have their senses trained to discern good and evil.
(6:1) Therefore, leaving the elementary teaching about the Messiah (τὸν τῆς ἀρχῆς τοῦ Χριστοῦ λόγον) ...	let us press on into perfection (τὴν τελειότητα)
Not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, and instruction about washings, and laying on of hands, and the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment.	And this (press on into perfection) we shall do, if God permits.

That we find such consistent dualism coupled with the use of perfection language (τελείων, 5:14; τὴν τελειότητα, 6:1) ought to inform our interpretation. Throughout the epistle the author is using this language to denote the imperfection of the previous covenant and the perfection of the new covenant. If such dualism remains analogous, all the elements in the left hand column above should be associated with the previous covenant teaching, while all the elements in the right hand column above should be associated with the new covenant.

The terms associated with imperfection/immaturity and with the previous covenant are “the elementary principles of the oracles of God,” “milk,” “babe,” and the six items associated with “the elementary teaching about the Messiah.” These, then, would not be descriptive of elementary new covenant teaching. These all are set in contrast to the perfection of the new covenant: “solid food,” “word of righteousness,” “mature,” “mature state,” and “maturity.”

1. *Searching for context:* “Concerning this we have much to say.” The author is tying the thought of the previous doctrinal exposition to the state of the audience. Generally the Melchizedekian priesthood of Messiah and all that is doctrinally included is what is taken by Περὶ οὗ. The participle in the previous passage (τελειωθεῖς; 5:9) is referring to Messiah being perfected as a Melchizedekian high priest. The relative pronoun οὗ of 6:1 most likely refers to the whole of the Melchizedekian priesthood

of Messiah.<sup>33</sup> Since the concept of perfection is still fresh in the context, even as the author is transitioning into the warning passage, the connection between the use of τελειωθεῖς in 5:9 and τελείων in 5:14 and τὴν τελειότητα in 6:1 should be maintained thematically.<sup>34</sup> The perfection theme of the expositional section can be carried over into the hortatory section.

2. *Needing to be taught vs. teachers.* The notion that the audience “needs to be taught” (5:12) is an allusion to their failure to press forward into the new covenant. The author quotes Jer 31:34 in Heb 8:11 implying that under the new covenant there will be no need for each person to do such teaching: “Each one will certainly not teach his fellow citizen, nor each his kin.”<sup>35</sup> Yet, the audience needs such teaching, which proves they have not entered fully into the realities of the new covenant as described by Jeremiah. In fact, they ought to be teachers (διδάσκαλοι) by this time, and they ought to be able to share what they know with others.

Instead, they “need” to be taught the elementary principles (τὰ στοιχεῖα). This is most likely a rhetorical device to show them the shame of thinking they need such remedial teaching “again” (πάλιν).<sup>36</sup> Of course the shame of what they feel or think they need is evidenced in its description as the food of infants. The point is that they really do not need the elementary teachings of the previous covenant, but rather the solid food of the new.

3. *Elementary principles of the oracles of God vs. the word of righteousness.* The basic and remedial nature of the previous covenant is described as τὰ στοιχεῖα τῆς ἀρχῆς τῶν λογίων τοῦ θεοῦ (“the elementary principles of the beginning of the oracles of God”), which is a construction unique to Hebrews but whose parts are attested elsewhere. The phrase τῶν λογίων τοῦ θεοῦ refers elsewhere to the revelation of God and is generally taken as a general designation of Scripture.<sup>37</sup> For Hebrews this would be the revelation discussed in Heb 1:1 “spoken by the prophets to the fathers in many portions and many ways.” This is the revelation of the previous covenant before the most recent revelation in the Son. Adding τῆς ἀρχῆς implies that the referent of this construction is something that the author believes to be ontologically simple and temporally at the beginning or in the past. The previous covenant is in mind here since in Hebrews it was spoken long ago (1:1) and is now worn out and growing old (8:13).

The construction λόγου δικαιοσύνης (“word of righteousness”) is set as the foil to “the elementary principles” and has been difficult to interpret.<sup>38</sup> Using the

<sup>33</sup> Attridge notes that the relative pronoun is “ambiguous” and follows the same conclusion (*Hebrews* 156).

<sup>34</sup> To my knowledge only Koester (*Hebrews* 303) and Johnson (*Hebrews* 155) call attention to the use of τελειώω in 5:9 and its proximity in context in the interpretation of these passages.

<sup>35</sup> Koester, *Hebrews* 301; Cockerill, *Hebrews* 256–58.

<sup>36</sup> Koester, *Hebrews* 308.

<sup>37</sup> Attridge, *Hebrews* 159; for the phrase see Num 24:16; Ps 12(11):7; 18(17):31; 107(106):11 and as a general designation for the Scriptures see Acts 7:38; Rom 3:2; 1 Pet 4:11.

<sup>38</sup> Koester, *Hebrews* 302; Attridge (*Hebrews* 160) takes it as “speaking of righteousness.” Ellingworth (*Hebrews* 306–7) gives a thorough discussion of options.

interpretive grid of perfection language and the covenantal dualism it illumines, the “word of righteousness” would simply be the teachings of the new covenant.<sup>39</sup>

4. *Milk and infants vs. solid food and maturity.* The author is tying the concepts of milk (γάλα) and babe (νήπιος) back to the elementary (τὰ στοιχεῖα τῆς ἀρχῆς τῶν λογίων τοῦ θεοῦ). Milk is then descriptive of the content and teaching of the previous covenant and those who feed on it alone are babies in the analogy. The shameful imagery is that the audience feels the need to suckle once again at the breast of the previous covenant when they are grown adults and have been introduced to the teaching of the new.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, one does not go back and recite the alphabet (τὰ στοιχεῖα) every morning after one is able to carry on intelligent conversations. Going back to being fed by “the elementary principles of the beginning of the word of God” is unheard of and shameful once one has been weaned and started on the solid food of the “word of righteousness.” Going back to the elementary teaching about the Messiah when perfect new covenant teaching about the Messiah is available is not an option.

The tie between solid food (ἡ στερεὰ τροφή), word of righteousness (λόγου δικαιοσύνης), and mature (τελείων) is rarely questioned.<sup>41</sup> The single corrective we offer at this point is that solid food is not the content of “Christian” maturity, but rather it is more precise to call it “covenantal” maturity. The way forward for the audience is not so much the slow weaning process leading to Christian maturity but a radical dietary transformation feeding heartily now on the meaty teachings of the new, and perfect, covenant.<sup>42</sup>

5. *The elementary teaching about the Messiah vs. perfection (τὴν τελειότητα).* There has to this point been some discussion of the participle ἀφέντες. The prevailing interpretation seeks to uphold the plain meaning of “leaving” while not moving too far from the foundational elements, since the foundational teachings of Christianity can hardly be left. Thus there is some tension here for the prevailing interpretation, as stated above. This tension, however, can be relieved by simply taking the term ἀφέντες at face value and evaluating the construction τὸν τῆς ἀρχῆς τοῦ Χριστοῦ

<sup>39</sup> Melchizedek whose priesthood supplies the new covenant is the “king of *righteousness*” (7:2). The *righteous* one lives by faith (10:38), which is available under the previous covenant (11:4, 7, 33) but is not made perfect apart from those to whom the new covenant is available (11:39–40). God’s discipline of new covenant children yields the fruit of *righteousness* (12:11), and the heavenly Mt. Zion of the new covenant (contrasted with the earthly Mt. Sinai of the previous covenant) is a place where the spirits of *righteous* people are made perfect (12:23).

<sup>40</sup> Our present-day understanding of milk is different from a first-century understanding. The process of pasteurization today has made milk part of the diet of many adults. It is difficult to find evidence from the first century that milk was considered a beverage option for adults. A baby was born, suckled, and then was weaned, never to return to a diet of milk. See J. Robert Sallares, “milk,” *OCD* 981.

<sup>41</sup> An interesting addition to this debate is offered by John A. L. Lee, who challenges traditional lexical explanations and argues that τὴν ἔξιν refers to a “mature state.” He offers the translation, “But solid food is for adults, who *because of their mature state* have their senses trained to distinguish between good and bad.” John A. L. Lee, “Hebrews 5:14 and ἜΞΙΣ: A History of Misunderstanding,” *NovT* 39 (1997) 166.

<sup>42</sup> Perhaps it would be appropriate to see the idea of “maturity” here in that it refers to the idea of the new covenant being the “mature,” “completed,” or “perfected” state of the previous covenant. The new covenant is a perfected covenant.

λόγον in light of the covenant dualism that undergirds our proposed interpretation. In this case the audience is actually encouraged to “leave behind” the “elementary/beginning teaching about the Messiah.”

Under our proposed dualism, “the elementary teaching about the Messiah” (τὸν τῆς ἀρχῆς τοῦ Χριστοῦ λόγον; 6:1) is parallel with “the elementary principles of the beginning of the oracles of God” (τὰ στοιχεῖα τῆς ἀρχῆς τῶν λογίων τοῦ θεοῦ; 5:12). Both contain content (λόγον, λογίων) that is both ontologically simple and temporally beginning (ἀρχή). Here is “elementary” teaching about the Messiah.

It is the term τοῦ Χριστοῦ that may be most significant in this discussion. The construction τοῦ Χριστοῦ λόγον is correctly classified as an objective genitive.<sup>43</sup> However, there is no need to take Χριστός as “Christian.” Hebrews’ use of the LXX and first-century dating of the epistle (at least pre-AD 95), before a clear parting of the ways, would actually call for this term to be read from a Hellenized Jewish perspective implying “Messiah.”<sup>44</sup> With the reading “the beginning/elementary teaching about the Messiah,” there are a great many problems solved. Such teaching would be found in the content of the previous covenant, which “God spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophet in many portions and in many ways” (1:1). Under the previous covenant, Messiah’s coming had been prophesied, and Messiah would deliver the people of Israel. The problem with that sort of elementary teaching about the Messiah is that there has been a recent emphatic revelation of the Messiah (1:2): “In these last days he [God] has spoken in his Son” (1:2). According to Hebrews, Messiah has come, his name is Jesus, and he has inaugurated the new covenant of Jeremiah 31, which provides a better way into the rest and presence of God. This most recent revelation from God would be understood as the perfection (τὴν τελειότητα) toward which they are to strive. It would now be apparent why the author encourages them to abandon this sort of “beginning/elementary teaching about the Messiah” because it is no longer useful and has become outdated if one believes that Jesus is the true Messiah: it is worn out (παλαιόω), growing old (γηράσκω), and ready to disappear (ἀφανισμός; 8:13).

6. *Repentance from dead works; and faith toward God; instruction about washings; laying on of hands; the resurrection of the dead; and eternal judgment.* As the author continues, he lists six things that compose a foundation that has already been laid. Commentators are split as to whether these six items are foundational Jewish teachings or foundational Christian teachings.<sup>45</sup> Employing the dualism that has informed our interpretation, these six elements ought to be identified primarily with previous covenant Judaism rather than early foundational Christian teaching. Many other scholars

<sup>43</sup> J. C. Adams (“Exegesis of Hebrews VI.1f,” *NTS* 13 [1966–67] 378–85) has challenged the prevailing interpretation of this passage by classifying τοῦ Χριστοῦ λόγον as a subjective genitive (see also Attridge, *Hebrews* 162). Under his reading this audience is looking too much at what Christ taught (the beginning words *spoken by* Christ) and not enough at who he *was* and what he *did*. However, his claim has largely been dismissed by recent commentators (Cockerill, *Hebrews* 261).

<sup>44</sup> Morna D. Hooker, warns against interpreting this anachronistically as if the parting of the ways had so clearly taken place by the time of the writing of Hebrews (“Christ the ‘End’ of the Cult,” in *The Epistle of Hebrews and Christian Theology* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009] 190).

<sup>45</sup> See n. 16 above.

have already paved the way for such an interpretation noting that these have their origin under the previous covenant but are developed by subsequent messianic communities.<sup>46</sup> Hagner clarifies the likely social situation well:

It is striking that the six items mentioned all find parallels within Judaism. This may suggest that the readers were attempting somehow to remain within Judaism by emphasizing items held in common between Judaism and Christianity. They may have been trying to survive with a minimal Christianity in order to avoid alienating their Jewish friends or relatives.<sup>47</sup>

The author is admonishing them to abandon such a strategy. Judaism and Christianity (as they would become known) differ precisely in their teaching about the Messiah, and the author foresees this bifurcation. The author sees previous covenant teaching about the Messiah as elementary and needing to be abandoned for the more recent and specific information. MacArthur goes too far when he says that “divorce” from Judaism is necessary for inclusion into Christianity.<sup>48</sup> The author is much more nuanced. His encouragement is that the audience cease relying on previous covenant teaching and become “new covenant believers” accepting the new and perfect teaching about the Messiah and what it implies about their means of approach to God.<sup>49</sup> The argument is not that these elements cannot be found within early Christianity; it is simply that these elements, by the author’s intention, are evoking images of primarily previous covenant Jewish teaching.<sup>50</sup>

These six items, though obviously having developments within later Christianity, are used by the author in this context to denote elements from the previous covenant. These elements are to be left behind while the audience presses on into perfect revelation and teaching about the Messiah, Jesus. Their ambiguity may get at why the author urges the audience to go beyond them. Holding to these allows the audience to straddle both the world of the previous covenant and the world of the new covenant without having to make any concessions or feel any tension about the Messiah.

## V. CONCLUSIONS

The author is using perfection language, particularly the τέλειος cognate group, in a consistent manner throughout Hebrews. It is used to punctuate the

<sup>46</sup> See Johnson, *Hebrews* 158.

<sup>47</sup> Hagner, *Hebrews* 67. The only item to note here is that “Judaism” and “Christianity” are anachronistic terms. At the same time, Hagner’s understanding of a “minimalist” messianic faith is most likely the situation that the author is attempting to address.

<sup>48</sup> MacArthur, *Hebrews* 137. He cites ἀφίημι as used in 1 Cor. 7:10–11. However, the range of meaning for ἀφίημι is far too broad to be interpreted from one isolated usage.

<sup>49</sup> Space here prohibits engaging the larger issue of whether Hebrews is supersessionist and what is the nature of continuity and discontinuity between the covenants in Hebrews. What particularly should be “left behind” from the previous covenant and what is compatible with faith in Jesus as the Messiah? The most recent discussion of this can be found in Bauckham et al., *Epistle to the Hebrews and Christian Theology* 151–228.

<sup>50</sup> The six elements obviously find a place within what develops into “Christianity”; however, they take on a different, more fulfilled meaning than they previously did in previous covenant Judaism.

superiority of the new covenant over the previous covenant. Although such perfection language is found in 5:14 and 6:1, the majority of exegetes have failed to see its significance. And so the prevailing interpretive paradigm of Christian immaturity versus Christian maturity is called into question. The author's use of dualism and perfection language throughout the entirety of the epistle ought to be the paradigm that governs this passage as well. This in place, the author then is not chiding the audience in 5:11–14 for moral or spiritual immaturity but for messianic and covenantal imperfection. It is then this messianic and covenantal imperfection of the previous covenant that must be left behind in 6:1–2 as the audience presses ahead into perfect teaching about Messiah, which is found in the revelation of Jesus and the new covenant. The six items that compose “the elementary teaching about the Messiah” should be seen as having their primary roots in previous covenant Judaism rather than Christian initiation. This interpretation ultimately unifies the language of perfection employed by the author and expels the artificial “middle” category of perfected believers in the sphere of the New Covenant that are somehow lacking something integral to their faith. In the author's thought there is nothing lacking in the sphere of the perfect new covenant.

Pressing ahead with these conclusions into 6:3–6, the audience is not in danger of apostasy related to a continual sub-par, immature Christianity. The audience is rather in danger of exchanging the perfect and more specific teaching about Jesus the Messiah in favor of the imperfect and more general teaching about the Messiah found in the previous covenant. The author finds this a shameful and disturbing movement. The progression naturally should be from imperfection to perfection, but because of the stress and strain of their current situation the opposite is true. This situation is as shameful as a person desiring the nourishment of breast-feeding after being weaned and now feasting on bread and meat (milk/solid food dualism; 5:12–14). It is as shameful as a person feeling the need to recite the alphabet daily after teaching others how to carry on conversations (elementary principles/teaching dualism; 5:11–12). Ultimately, it is as shameful as the exodus generation of Israel standing on the edge of the promised land, sending in some to investigate, hearing the good report, tasting its fruit, and then refusing to go in (dull of hearing/faith dualism; 4:2–3; 5:11). This group of people addressed in 5:11–6:12 is in danger of demonstrating faithlessness by exchanging the perfect teaching about Jesus the Messiah in favor of the imperfect previous covenant teaching about the Messiah.