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**Not All Comparisons Are Created Equal: Moses and Aaron
compared to Jesus in the Letter to the Hebrews**

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Abstract

The Letter to the Hebrews compares Jesus to both Moses and Aaron and these comparisons are the cornerstone of its argument. It is often considered a truism that Jesus is both a new Moses who inaugurated the new covenant with its heavenly sanctuary and heavenly priestly order and a new Aaron who has offered a more excellent sacrifice to provide cleansing for believers. But, is Jesus both a Moses and an Aaron figure at the same time? Is his sacrifice both the inauguration of the New Covenant and a greater or final Day of Atonement? I will argue that not all comparisons are created equal—especially in Hebrews—and that the comparisons to Moses and Aaron in Hebrews are of different nature and serve different purposes. A better understanding of these comparisons would illuminate the relationship of Christianity as expressed in Hebrews to the traditions contained in the Hebrew Scriptures.

I. [Introduction \(What we know about syncrisis in Hebrews\)](#)

a. [What we know about syncrisis in Hebrews](#)

I don't know about you, but I don't like being compared. (Especially if the one who is doing the comparison thinks I am the one at a disadvantage.) Yet, comparison, or syncrisis, is one of the principal rhetorical devices that the author of Hebrews uses to convey his message to the audience. Unfortunately, as William L. Lane notes, "[t]he writer's sustained use of syncrisis (comparison) to demonstrate the superiority of Jesus to the angels, to Moses, to Joshua, and to other mediators of the word and grace of God to Israel has been cited by Christian interpreters to

denigrate Judaism.”¹ In this paper I would like to invite you to give a second look to the use of syncrisis—or, comparison—in Hebrews.

Recently, Michael W. Martin and Jason A. Whitlark published a couple of articles in *New Testament Studies* discussing the nature of this extended comparison in Hebrews. In their first article, “The Encomiastic Topics of Syncrisis as the Key to the Structure and Argument of Hebrews,”² they argue that the five syncrisis they find—which we will review later—function collectively as a single syncritical project that argues for the superiority of the new covenant to the old covenant. They also argue that the document, like most of the individual comparisons, is arranged topically in accordance with ancient rhetorical theory.

In a second article, “Choosing What Is Advantageous: The Relationship between Epideictic and Deliberative Syncrisis,” they argue “that epideictic syncrisis is consistently in service in Hebrews to deliberative syncrisis, providing it with both the logical premise and the topical theme by which it advances the argument. This relationship is key, the study argues, both to Hebrews’ structure and to its aim, which are decidedly deliberative in nature.”³

Their analyses have confirmed, then, that the use of comparison in Hebrews is both extensive and foundational for the principal argument of the author. They suggest that the ultimate aim of the comparisons in Hebrews is to encourage perseverance—by showing that the new covenant is superior to the old covenant—and discourage apostasy—by showing that if certain courses of action result disastrous in the old covenant, how much more in the new.

I want to suggest, however, that by focusing on the form and logic of the Greco-Roman syncrisis, scholars have missed an important characteristic of comparisons in Hebrews that has important consequences for our understanding of its argument.

I will proceed in three different steps. First, I will explain briefly the Greco-Roman practice of syncrisis and its use in the general argument of Hebrews

¹ Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, cxxv.

² *NTS* 57 (2011): 415–439.

³ *NTS* 58 (2012): 379–400.

according to Martin and Whitlark. Secondly, I will explore the role of the ministries of Aaron and Moses in the argument of chapters 7–10. Finally, I will suggest that the same pattern of comparisons should inform our reading of the rest of Hebrews.

II. What is syncrisis?

Syncrisis could be employed in any of the genres of rhetoric—judicial (justice/injustice), epideictic (praise/blame), deliberative (convince/dissuade).⁴ It was by definition predisposed for epideictic rhetoric where comparisons were used to praise or blame in celebratory speeches or ceremonies.⁵ Probably a majority of scholars have identified Hebrews’s syncrises as epideictic.⁶ Other scholars identify Hebrews’ syncrises as deliberative, that is trying to convince the audience about “the merit (or lack thereof) of a proposed course of action.”⁷ The merits of a proposed course of action were judged according to the advantages they implied or their intrinsic merit (e.g., justice/injustice, honor/disgrace).

Syncrises could take one of three logical forms: comparison to the (a) greater, to the (b) lesser, or to the (c) equal. These arguments naturally took the form of the “from the less and from the greater”—which is so common in Hebrews. That is, if something is true about the lesser “how much more” it is true about the greater. (Or the opposite form in comparison with the greater.)

The publication of the *Progymnasmata* by George A. Kennedy in 2003 has helped significantly to the understanding of the importance of these rhetoric devices in Greco-Roman education. The *Progymnasmata* constituted the highest level of training expressly intended for written composition. It was part of the third and final level of Greco-Roman education and prepared young aristocratic men for public service.⁸ The *Progymnasmata* show that syncrisis was one of the basic literary or rhetorical devices (or forms) taught in the textbooks. Thus, syncrisis was a basic building block of Greco-Roman speeches and, as George A. Kennedy argues,

⁴ Martin and Whitlark, “Choosing,” 379.

⁵ Martin, “Philo’s use of syncrisis,” 271, 274.

⁶ Martin and Whitlark, “Choosing,” 380.

⁷ Martin and Whitlark, “Choosing,” 382.

⁸ Martin, “Philo,” 271–72.

early Christians “were molded by the habits of thinking and writing” taught in the progymnastic curriculum.⁹

Martin and Whitlark have argued that Hebrews uses both epideictic syncrisis and deliberative syncrisis but that the former serves the latter. That is, Hebrews first praises the new covenant elements and then uses that praise to persuade the readers to faithfulness toward that covenant and warn them against apostasy. Thus, the final and greater purpose of Hebrews is deliberative. He also shows that the syncrisis are ordered following the suggestions of the *progymnasmata*: origin, birth, education, deeds, death/posthumous events.

They see five epideictic syncrisis related to five deliberative syncrisis in Hebrews:

The first couple of syncrisis focuses on Jesus and the angels in chapters 1–2. Thus, in the epideictic syncrisis, Jesus, the covenant mediator has greater origins than the angels in 1:1–14; 2:5–18. The deliberative syncrisis (2:1–4) argues, then, that we need to pay greater attention and not neglect the superior salvation announced by the greater covenant mediator.

The second couple of syncrisis focuses on Jesus and Moses in chapters 3–4. In the epideictic syncrisis, Jesus was born greater than Moses (3:1–6). The deliberative syncrisis (2:1–4) argues, then, that we should not listen faithlessly to the greater born covenant mediator, but follow him into the rest.

The third couple of syncrisis focuses on Jesus and the Aaronic high priests in chapters 4–6. The epideictic syncrisis shows that Jesus is better trained than the Aaronic high priests in (5:1–10). The deliberative syncrisis (5:11–6:20) argues, then, that we should undergo the better training of the new covenant based on better promises.

The fourth couple of syncrisis focuses on the Melchizedekian and the levitical priesthoods in chapters 7–12. In the epideictic syncrisis, Jesus, the Melchizedekian priest has better deeds (sacrifice, ministry, cleansing, tabernacle, etc.) than the levitical priests. The deliberative syncrisis (10:19–12:17) argues, then,

⁹ Martin, “Philo,” 272.

that enabled by the greater deeds of the new covenant we should approach, hold fast, and provoke one another to loving action and not defect from the community.

Finally, the fifth couple of syncrisis focuses on Sinai and Zion in 12:18–29. Thus, in the epideictic syncrisis, Zion offers superior access to God (12:18–24). The deliberative syncrisis (12:25–29) argues, then, that we should not refuse the voice speaking from Zion.

III. [How are different the comparisons in Hebrews?](#)

This is a beautiful analysis of the rhetorical argument of Hebrews. It seems to me, however, that there is an important aspect of these comparisons that has been neglected.

I would like to suggest that not all the comparisons in Hebrews were created equal. For Greco-Roman rhetors comparison served the purpose of defining who or what was better in order to praise it or to persuade the hearers to follow a certain course of action. The author of Hebrews, however, seems to use comparison in some cases not only to show the superiority of the new covenant, but to explain its nature. In other words, the author of Hebrews does not use syncrisis only for encomium and persuasion, but also to explain the deeper nature of the covenant elements. They are not only evaluatory but also explanatory.

Let me explain. Every comparison implies placing side-by-side two objects or persons that are similar in some respects and different in others. You may focus on things that are similar and argue that the lesser thing is in fact a pattern that is more perfectly realized in the greater thing. In this sense, the compared things are similar in nature, but different in worth. If the comparison focuses on things that are different, the lesser thing becomes a foil that contrasts and projects the greater worth of one of the elements. In this sense, the compared things are different in nature and different in worth. I will suggest, then, that Hebrews uses both types of comparison—patterns and foils—to explain respectively the nature and worth of the New Covenant.

In chapters 7 – 10, Moses is compared to Jesus as ministering the sacrifice for the inauguration of the covenant and Aaron as ministering the yearly sacrifice of Yom Kippur. (I should note that Hebrews does not refer in fact to Aaron, but to the Aaronic priesthood.) Yet, Aaron is clearly the representative of this group with whom Jesus is compared.

It is important to note, first, that in the argument of Hebrews the comparisons between Jesus' sacrifice and the inauguration of the new covenant—on the one hand—and Jesus' sacrifice and the Day of Atonement—on the other hand—are of different natures. The first builds upon the *similarities* between both events to establish their *identity* while the second emphasizes the *differences* between them to establish their different *worth*. Let me explain.

It is clear that the purpose of Hebrews' comparison of Jesus' death and ascension to Moses' sacrifice for the inauguration of the first covenant (9:15-23) was to *identify* Jesus as the “mediator of the new covenant” (8:6; 9:15; 12:24) and his sacrifice as the “blood of the covenant” (10:29; 13:20; cf. 7:22). The comparison between Jesus' death and ascension with the Day of Atonement on the other hand is of a different nature. Let's review the explicit references to the Day of Atonement ritual in this section.

He [Jesus] does not have to offer himself again and again, as the high priest goes into the sanctuary year after year [katv evniauto .n] with the blood that is not his own. (9:25 NJB)

It can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered year after year [katv evniauto .n], make perfect those who approach. (10:1)

But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sin year after year [katv evniauto .n]. For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. (10:2-3)

These explicit references to the Day of Atonement emphasize three aspects of the

Day of Atonement ritual: (1) its yearly repetition, (2) the fleshly nature of the sacrificial offering, and (3) its inability to provide forgiveness or perfection. (In fact, the Day of Atonement is considered an annual “reminder” of sins [10:2].) These negative characteristics of the Day of Atonement are the same characteristics the author has critiqued from the first covenant. In the first place, the first covenant was not able to bring perfection (7:11, 19; 9:9). In the second place, the sacrifices of the first covenant consisted of the blood of animals (9:12, 13, 19); thus, the regulations of the first covenant are characterized as “regulations for the body” (*dikaiw, mata sarko, j*, 9:10). Finally, as a result of their ineffectiveness, it was necessary that its sacrifices be repeated “day after day [*kaqV h`me, ran*]” (7:27). (Note that the sacrifices of the first covenant are always referred to in the plural.)¹⁰ See table 8.

The Day of Atonement, then, epitomizes the weaknesses of the first covenant. Hebrews, on the other hand, underlines the opposite characteristics in Jesus’ sacrifice and ascension.

First, the uniqueness of Jesus’ sacrifice is clearly emphasized: Christ did not enter

Table 8. The First Covenant and the Day of Atonement in the Argument of the Letter to the Hebrews

First Covenant Sacrifices	Day of Atonement Ritual
They are repeated “day after day”	It is repeated “year after year”

¹⁰ Heb 9:9, 12, 13, 19, 23, 25, 26-28; 10:1, 4, 6, 9-10, 11-12. When sacrificial animals are mentioned, they appear in pairs (9:12, 13, 19, 10:4). Note that if the reading “*kai. tw/n tra, gwn*” in 9:19 is not original, this would be an exception. (For a short discussion of the text, see Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 599.)

(Heb 7:26; cf. 10:11)	(Heb 9:25; 10:1, 3)
They consist of the blood of animals (Heb 9:12, 13, 19)	The high priest offers the blood that is not his own (Heb 9:25; 10:4)
They cannot provide perfection (Heb 7:11, 19; 9:9)	It cannot provide perfection (Heb 10:1, 2)

heaven “to offer himself again and again” (polla, kij, 9: 25) nor “to suffer again and again” (polla, kij, v. 26), but he was “offered once to bear the sins of many” (a [pax, v. 28). The terms a [pax or evfa, pax (once for all) are used to characterize Jesus’ sacrifice 6 times in Hebrews (7:27; 9:12; 9:26, 27, 28; 10:10; cf. 10:14). The contrast reaches its climax in 10:11-13 where the first covenant priests *stand* (e [sthken) “day after day . . . offering again and again the same sacrifices,” while Jesus is *seated* (evka, qisen) waiting the fulfillment of the Father’s promise after having “offered for all time one sacrifice.”

Second, the author contrasts the sacrifices of “bulls and goats” (10:4; cf. 9:12, 19) to the offering of Jesus’ body and “will” to obey (10:5-10). In other words, Jesus’ sacrifice includes two dimensions, the flesh and the conscience. (These two dimensions of Jesus’ sacrifice are condensed in the assertion that Jesus “offered himself” [7:27; 9:14, 25, 26].) The dimension of the conscience is important for the argument of Hebrews. The word *sunei, dhsij* appears for the first time in Heb 9:9 as part of the antithesis between the first and second covenants. It refers to the individual’s *internal* awareness of sin and always appears in opposition to flesh (sa, rx). After Heb 9:9, it shows up again in 9:14; 10:2, 22. This antithesis strikes the core of the argument of Heb 8-10. The

inefficacy of the old covenant and its cultus resided in its external nature. It consisted only of “regulations for the body” (*dikaiw, mata sarko, j*, 9:10) that purified only the flesh (9:13); thus, its sacrifices could not cleanse the conscience (10:2). In fact, these sacrifices reminded of sins (v. 3). There was a need, then, for a better sacrifice (9:23) because “it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (10:4).

Third, the sacrifice of Jesus perfected him (2:10; 5:9; 7:28) and brings perfection to the believers (7:19; 10:14; 12:2) because it is able to purify their consciences (9:14; 10:22; cf. 13:18). The underlying reasoning is that the blood of animals, since it belongs to the realm of the flesh, purifies only the body. Jesus’ sacrifice is superior in this respect because it belongs to both realms: flesh and conscience. Hebrews 10:5-10 explains that Jesus’ sacrifice included his body—“a body you have prepared for me”—as well as his will—“See, God, I have come to do your will.” Hebrews concludes that it is the volitional nature of Jesus’ sacrifice that cleanses our conscience: “By this will [that is, Jesus’ determination to obey] we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.”¹¹

There is a transition here from the external efficiency of the old covenant to the internal cleansing power of Jesus’ blood. This transition is essential in the new covenant passages of the OT. They expressly indicate that the difference between the first covenant and that which God will institute is that God will transform the inner selves of the people,

¹¹ I take issue here with the NRSV translation: “And it is by God’s will . . .,” which makes univocal what is ambivalent in the text. The phrase *evn w-| qelh, mati* explains the phrase *tou/ poihsai o` qeo.j to. qe, lhma, sou* (v. 7). In other words, Jesus’ will is to do God’s will. Therefore, there are two wills involved in the passage, not only one as NRSV would make us believe. Cf. Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, 265.

enabling them to obey. It is the inward thrust of God's action that is new in the new covenant (cf. Jer 31:31-34; Ezek 36:24-28). See table 9.

The Day of Atonement, then, works as a foil that provides the appropriate contrast to gauge the greatness of Jesus' sacrifice and ascension.

To some extent, the Day of Atonement plays the same role that the angels and the

Table 9. Jesus' Sacrifice and the Sacrifices of the Day of Atonement and First Covenant in the Argument of the Letter to the Hebrews

First Covenant Sacrifices	Day of Atonement Ritual (epitome of the first covenant)	Jesus' Sacrifice
They are repeated "day after day" (Heb 7:26; cf. 10:11)	It is repeated "year after year" (Heb 9:25; 10:1, 3)	Jesus died "once for all" (Heb 7:27; 9:12; 9:26, 27, 28; 10:10, 14)
They consist of the blood of animals (Heb 9:12, 13, 19)	The high priest offers the blood that is not his own (Heb 9:25; 10:4)	Jesus offered his body and will (Heb 10:5-10; cf. 7:27; 9:14, 25, 26)
They cannot provide perfection (Heb 7:11, 19; 9:9)	It cannot provide perfection (Heb 10:1, 2)	Jesus' sacrifice brings perfection (Heb 7:19; 10:14; 12:2; cf. 2:10; 5:9; 7:28) Jesus' sacrifice purifies the conscience (Heb 9:14; 10:22; cf. 13:18)

Levitical priesthood played in earlier moments of the argument. The author did not introduce the angels to explain the nature of Jesus' exaltation in heaven but as a

background that brings into focus by contrast the significance of his enthronement. The angels, though considered powerful beings in the world of 1st century C.E., are introduced as servants, created, and transient (1:5-14). On the other hand, Jesus is the enthroned Son, creator of all things, and eternal (1:1-14). It is, instead, the “son of Man” of Ps 8 (Heb 2:5-10) who explains the nature of Jesus’ exalted status.¹²

Similarly, the Levitical priesthood does not explain the heavenly priesthood of Jesus. The author of Hebrews emphasizes that the Levitical priests appointed through the law of descent are mortal (therefore, the multiplicity of priests), and sinful (7:11-28). Jesus, on the other hand, was appointed through the oath of God, lives for ever, and is sinless (7:11-28). It is, instead, the priesthood of Melchizedek that explains the nature of Jesus’ priesthood. Melchizedek is a priest who “remains for ever.” His name suggests righteousness. And, he was not appointed through the law of descent; in fact, he does not have a genealogy.

There are, then, at least two types of comparisons in Hebrews.¹³ One builds upon *similarities* in order to identify the nature and purpose of Jesus’ work. The other emphasizes *differences* in order to stress the superiority of Jesus’ achievements. The first identifies Old Testament persons and institutions as *patterns* for the work of Jesus. The

¹² It should be remembered that the Son of man of Ps 8 is not a type of Jesus. Instead, Ps 8 is understood in Hebrews as the expression of God’s purpose for humanity which is finally fulfilled in Jesus. See above section “Enthronement as the Basis for Exhortation: The Son’s Exaltation Prefigures and Makes Possible the Glorification of the Sons.”

¹³ The comparison between Jesus and Moses in Heb 3:1-6 is complex and needs further study. On the one hand, the faithfulness of Moses prefigures the faithfulness of Jesus. On the other hand, Moses contrasts with the Son; for example, Jesus is Son while Moses is servant and Jesus is builder of the house while Moses is part of the house. For a study of the relationship between Jesus and Moses in the argument of Hebrews, see D’Angelo, *Moses*.

second identifies Old Testament persons and institutions as *foils* that bring into focus the greater reality of the new covenant. See table 10.

Table 10. Patterns and Foils That Explain the New Covenant Realities

Pattern	Jesus	Foil
	The Son is ruler (Heb 1:3, 13, passim)	Angels are servants (Heb 1:7, 14)
	The Son is creator (Heb 1:3, 10)	Angels are created beings (1:7; cf. 1:2-3)
	The Son is eternal (Heb 1:8, 11-12)	Angels are transient (1:7)
	Jesus is builder of the house of God (3:3)	Moses is part of the house (3:4)
	Jesus is over the house of God as Son (3:6)	Moses is part of the house as servant (3:5)
Levitical priests were chosen and called by God (5:1, 4)	Jesus was appointed by God (5:5)	
To offer gifts and sacrifices (5:1)	Jesus offered prayers and supplications (5:7)	
Understands sinners because of his own weakness (5:2)	Jesus understands sinners because he also suffered (5:8)	
Melchizedek is a priest without genealogy (Heb 7:3)	The Son is appointed priest through an oath (Heb 7:20-22; cf. vv. 13-14)	Levitical priests are appointed through the law of descent (Heb 7:16)
Melchizedek remains a priest for ever (Heb 7:3; cf. v. 8)	The Son has an eternal priesthood (Heb 7:16, 23-25)	Levitical priests are many because they are mortal (Heb 7:23)
Melchizedek's name means "king of righteousness" (Heb 7:2)	The Son is a sinless priest (Heb 7:26-28)	Levitical priests are sinful (7:27-28)
Covenant sacrifices are	Jesus' sacrifice is "once for	Day of Atonement is

inherently “once for all” (Thus, the transgression of the covenant requires the death of the transgressor, Heb 9:16)	all” (Heb 7:27; 9:12; 9:26, 27, 28; 10:10, 14)	repeated “year after year” (Heb 9:25; 10:1, 3)
Moses offered “the blood of calves and goats” (Heb 9:19) ^a	Jesus offered his body and will (Heb 10:5-10; cf. 7:27; 9:14, 25, 26)	The high priest offers the blood that is not his own (Heb 9:25; 10:4)

Table 10—*Continued.*

Pattern	Jesus	Foil
Moses’ inauguration of the covenant purified the people and the sanctuary (Heb 9:18-23)	Jesus’ sacrifice brings perfection (Heb 7:19; 10:14; 12:2; cf. 2:10; 5:9; 7:28)	It cannot provide perfection (Heb 10:1, 2)
	Jesus’ sacrifice purifies the conscience (Heb 9:14; 10:22; cf. 13:18)	It reminds of sins (Heb 10:3)
	Zion is a festal gathering where we have confident access to God	Sinai is a terrifying place that makes people tremble and shrouds God in darkness.

^a Moses’ offering of “the blood of calves and goats” could fit just as well on the side of the foils because it consists of the blood of animals—like the Day of Atonement sacrifices. OT patterns—or types—are limited in nature and therefore cannot express with precision all the aspects of the greater reality of the NT. (For a list of limitations of the sanctuary and the Israelite cult system as a pattern of the NT realities, see Roy E. Gane, *Altar Call* [Berrien Springs, Mich.: Diadem, 1999], chaps. 8-9.) There is, however, an explicit intention to describe the events of the inauguration of the first covenant as a pattern for Jesus’ actions. This intention is clearly indicated by the use of the adverb ο[γεν (hence) in 9:18 and the coordinating conjunction ου=ν in 9:23. More importantly, from the description of the ceremony of inauguration of the first covenant, the author extrapolates that “it was necessary” (avna, gkh) that Jesus’ actions accomplished similar things.

IV. What is the payoff?

The understanding of the nature of the comparisons in Hebrews will help us understand better the nature of its argument. This is specially true the author of Hebrews' views of the ancient institutions of Israel.

In first place we understand that the comparisons are not all negative. Jesus is compared favorably and negatively to ancient Israelite persons and institutions.

The author is ambivalent in the comparison of both Moses and Aaron to Jesus. In some cases they are patterns that help us understand the nature of the ministry of Jesus and in other cases they serve as a foil. At some moments of the arguments Jesus is "like" them and at other places "unlike" them.

This takes us to another thought. Not all comparisons are that bad. I would feel honored if someone when trying to explain the greatness of Michael Jordan abilities at basketball said, "Well, he is like Felix, but better." The comparison would certainly not be denigrating. (Well, I am not sure if Michael Jordan would feel the same way.) What I want to say is that when the comparison implies that the lesser element is in fact a pattern for the greater, probably no denigration is intended.

So, as the inaugurator of the new covenant Jesus is a second Moses. He is both like him and unlike him. Their ministries have the same nature and purposes, but their personal natures are completely different.

This ambivalence of the author of Hebrews toward Moses reflects the complex relationship of the argument of Hebrews toward the cultic institutions of Israel. At some moments he views them favorably at other moments negatively. What is the governing factor that defines which aspects of the ancient institutions are positive and which negative is an intriguing question that goes beyond the limits of this paper.