THE STRUCTURE OF HEBREWS 1,1 — 3,6[1]

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Among the many challenges offered interpreters by the Epistle to the Hebrews, the structure is far from being the easiest to confront. One has only to consult three of the most recent commentaries to become aware of the matter.[2] The present article concentrates on the crucial initial chapters of the epistle — crucial, because they establish the perspectives for everything which follows.

A key passage from the standpoint of discovery ("*via inventionis*") with regard to Heb 1,1 - 3,6 is Heb 3,1-6, at least at the present stage of research on the epistle. For this passage is often regarded as exposition[3] which faces forward.[4] But the vocabulary points rather to paraenesis building on what has preceded: *hothen, adelphoi hagioi* (the first time the author speaks directly to the addressees), the use of the imperative *katanoēsate* with direct reference again to the addressees.

The content of 3,1-6 supports the interpretation that the passage looks primarily backwards rather than forwards, for these verses speak of faith, and thus link up with what has gone before (cf. the use of *pistos* in 3,2 and 3,4 in the light of 2,13a and 2,17). Further, if 3,1-6 is interpreted as looking primarily

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2 Cf.: H. W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Philadelphia 1989) 13-21; H.-F. Weiss, *Der Brief an die Hebräer* (Gottingen [15]1991) 42-51; W.L. Lane, *Hebrews 1-8* (Dallas 1991) lxxxivxcviii.

3 The term "exposition" is used in contrast to "paraenesis" in the present article. Both terms require further study and perhaps even modification.

4 Cf., for example, Attridge, *Hebrews*, 19, and C.H. Guthrie (who has recently devoted a detailed study to the structure of Hebrews), cited by Lane, *Hebrews*, xcvi. Cf. also A. Vanhoye, *La structure littéraire de l'Épitre aus Hébreux* (Paris [2]1976) 86-92. Weiss (*Hebräerbrief*, 49) is an exception, as is Lane, who offers references to others who hold that 3,1-6 looks primarily to what precedes (Lane, *Hebrews*, 73).

backward rather than forward, the first parts of the epistle begin to assume a symmetrical configuration:

1,1-4, exordium
1,5-14, exposition, followed by paraenesis in 2,1-4
2,5-18, exposition, followed by paraenesis in 3,1-6

Symmetry in configuration of itself is no sure sign that one is on the right track with regard to discerning the author's intentions. It is necessary to see if the symmetry of form is objectively matched by symmetry of content.[5] An initial matching of the form by the content would seem to be offered by the New Testament meaning-pattern visible in the juxtaposition of Ps 110,1b at the end of the first exposition (1,13) and Ps 8,7b at the beginning of the second (2,6b-8a). The pairing of the two psalm passages constitutes a *gezerah shawa* which is attested elsewhere in the New Testament, at 1 Cor 15,25-27, Eph 1,20-23, and 1 Pet 3,22.[6] The use of *gezerah shawa* indicates that the two expositions are meant to be mutually illuminatory, and hence in some way parallel in content. Thus there is a *prima facie* confirmation of the symmetry outlined above from the standpoint of content as well as of form.

The common element to be illumined by the *gezerah shawa* with regard to the sections 1,5-14 and 2,5-18 is indicated at 1,4, the verse which introduces the expositions: the name inherited by the son. This name is precisely "son", as 1,5.8a suggests for the first exposition (1,5-14). The fact that at 2,10 God leads *many* "sons" to glory suggests that the name discussed in the second exposition is also "son", especially in view of the link between the "sons" and Christ indicated at 2,11 through the use of the word "brothers".[7]

The exposition of 1,5-14 concerns the resurrection-exaltation.[8] The imagery of clothing at 1,11-12 helps clarify the "anointing" at 1,9b: there is question of a definitive change in the risen son.[9] The son at his resurrection is "clothed"

5 Divorcing form and content in this way is an artificial but unavoidable method of attempting to arrive at the meaning of a text no longer directly accessible because of historical circumstances of time and place. The goal of exegesis is to see the two aspects of the text firmly reunited in an organic whole.

6 Cf. J. Swetnam, *Jesus and Isaac: A Study of the Epistle to the Hebrews in the Light of the Aqedah* (Rome 1981) 146-149. For a use of *gezerah shawa* elsewhere in Hebrews cf. 4,3-4 (cf. Attridge, *Hebrews*, 128-131).

7 This interpretation is based on the supposition that there is an intrinsic relation between the sonship of Christ and glory (cf. 1,2-3); 2,10 reflects this relationship.

8 On the link between the glorification of Christ and his resurrection-exaltation as expressed by the use of Ps 2,7 cf. A. Vanhoye, *Situation du Christ. Hébreux 1-2* (Paris 1969).

9 Cf. Vanhoye, *ibid.*, 188-192, and Swetnam, *Jesus and Isaac*, 143.

with a body and blood which are no more subject to death (cf. 2,14 — the *gezerah shawa* legitimizes the transfer of predication from one section of exposition to the other). The glorified state is explicitly referred to at 2,9.[10] The first exposition (1,5-14), then, concerns Christ as "son" insofar as he was made like God in glory with regard to his physical body.[11]

The nature of the sonship which is the subject of discussion in 2,5-18, given the enigmatic nature of the use of Ps 8 at 2,6b-7a, has to be inferred from the only slightly less enigmatic use of *heis* at 2,11: the son who is called the "originator of salvation" (*archēgos tēs sotērias*) for the sons is said to be "of one" (*ex henos*) with them.[12] The allusion is a classic crux.[13] But a suggestion based on the relevance of Heb 3,1-6 for the exposition at 2,5-18 may help resolve it: Heb 3,1-6 is concerned with faith. So is Gal 3,15-29, where the unqualified numeral *heis* (Gal 3,16) figures in the argumentation.[14] By making a triangulation of Heb 2,11, Heb 2,16, and Gal 3,16, a triangulation induced by the catalysis of Heb 3,1-6, one can produce a suasive hypothesis that the phrase *ex henos* at 2,11 alludes to the seed of Abraham. The emphasis on faith in Heb 3,1-6 suggests that "seed of Abraham" (*sperma Abraam)* is being understood with some connection with faith. But "blood and flesh" (*haima kai sarx)* are also emphasized (cf. 2,14), so that "seed of Abraham" could well refer to Abraham's physical descendants. In other words, the Gal 3,16 part of the triangulation could be

10 The enthronement imagery which seems indicated in 1,8 (cf. Swetnam, *Jesus and Isaac*, 142-145) is continued with the use of *stephanoō* in 2,7 and 2,9. This predication is again justified by the *gezerah shawa*.

11 The precise force of the word "son" will be discussed below. The word is based on Semitic usage, and does not indicate formally the ontological status of the son with regard to God, though the ontological status is implied.

12 Much of the difficulty involved in this crux comes from trying to assess the force of the *gar* at 2,11. The author of the epistle assumes a close link between the sufferings of Christ (*pathēmata*) and his glory (*doxa*); this link is expressed in 2,9. The glory is associated with the "perfecting" (*teleioō*) of Christ as expressed in 2,10. The "salvation" (*sotēria)* of the sons is connected in such a way with the perfecting of Christ in his role of "originator" (*archēgos)* of salvation that it was "appropriate" *(prepō)* that God lead them to glory by achieving Christ's perfecting (i.e., "glory") through suffering. The ground for the appropriateness is some kind of unity between Christ as sanctifier (*hagiazō*) and the sons as "sanctified" (*hagiazomenoi*). It is the ground of this appropriateness which the phrase "from one" (*ex henos*) seeks to establish.

13 For recent discussions cf.: Attridge, *Hebrews*, 88-89; Weiss, *Hebräerbrief*, 212-213; Lane, *Hebrews*, 58-59.

14 Other points of similarity between Gal 3,15-29 and Heb 3,1-6 are: 1) oblique reference at 3,19-20 to the deficiency of the Mosaic Law in relation to the "oneness" of the Christian dispensation; 2) stress at 3,27-28 on the unity of Christians; 3) use at 3,16 of the name "Christ" to refer to Abraham's seed; 4) explicit mention at 3,16.29 of the seed of Abraham; 5) overriding importance of the context of faith, as seen from 3,22-25. Cf. Swetnam, "Structure of Hebrews", 28-29.

invalid as regards the use of *heis*, no matter what other relevance the passage in Galatians may have.

The only possible solution to this problem is to enter more profoundly into the meaning of the text. The unusual triple citation of Scripture at 2,12-13 is one way to effect this entrance. There a quotation of Is 8,17-18 is oddly divided following a quotation from Ps 22,22.[15] The clue as to how this arrangement is meant to be interpreted seems to be given at Heb 10,30, where Dt 32,35-36 is also oddly divided. At 10,30 reflection shows that the verses are divided because Dt 32,35 is meant to refer by way of summation to what precedes, whereas Dt 32,36 is meant to refer by way of summation to what follows.[16] Similarly, at Heb 2,12-13 Ps 22,22 is meant to refer by way of summation to what precedes, while Is 8,18 is meant to refer by way of summation to what follows. That leaves Is 8,17 isolated in between: *egō esomai pepoithōs ep' autōi*. The arrangement suggests that the words in between refer neither exclusively to what precedes nor exclusively to what follows, but that they are thematic for the entire passage 2,5-18.[18] This inference squares well with the other indications about faith in the passage (*pistos* at 2,17) and in the subsequent paraenesis (*pistos* at 3,2 and 3,5). Hence it seems reasonable to conclude that the "seed of Abraham" at 2,16 refers not to Abraham's physical descendants, but to his "spiritual" descendants, i.e., those who share in his faith-trust.[19]

The hypothesis that 2,5-18 is concerned with "seed of Abraham" in a spiritual sense makes possible an interpretation of the role of the word "son" in the parallel expository passages 1,5-14 and 2,5-18: the word is to be taken in the general Semitic sense of similarity.[20] The one in whom God spoke as in a "son"

15 For current discussions of this striking phenomenon cf.: Attridge, *Hebrews*, 90-91; Weiss, *Hebräerbrief*, 215-216; Lane, *Hebrews*, 59-60.

16 The first part of 10,30 (*emoi ekdikēsis, egō antapodōsō*) refers to the negative section which precedes (10,26-29), and the second part of 10,30 (*krinei kyrios ton laon autou*) refers to the positive section which follows (10,31-39). Cf. Swetnam, "Structure of Hebrews", 32.

18 Cf. the presentation by D. Hamm, "Faith in the Epistle to the Hebrews: The Jesus Factor", *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 52 (1990) 280-281. Hamm's correction of the present writer so that the words are taken as being spoken by Jesus during "the days of his flesh" and not by him as exalted Lord is well taken.

19 On the meaning of *pistos* in Heb 2,17 as "faithful" (to God) cf. Hamm, "Faith in the Epistle to the Hebrews", 282. On this meaning as a transition to the meaning "trustworthy" in Heb 3,2, cf. ibid.

20 "*huios m. Gen. der Sache*, um den zu bez., der dieser Sache teilhaftig od. würdig ist od. sonst in enger, sich oftmals aus dem Zshg. ergebender, Beziehung zu ihr steht, ist wohl überwiegend Hebraismus" (W. Bauer — K. Aland — B. Aland, *Griechisch-deutsches Wörterbuch* [Berlin-New York ^{6}1988], "huios", I.c.δ. [col. 1664]). The importance this definition gives to the context should be noted. Among the New Testament examples given are: Mt 9,15; 13,38; 23,15; Mk 2,19; 3,17; Lk 5,34; 16,8; 20,34.36 (the relevance of this last text for Heb 1,5-14

(1,2) is "son of God" because he was made like God with regard to glory at the resurrection, and he is "son of Abraham" because he was like Abraham with regard to faith-trust. This is the basic semantic parallelism which seems to underlie the formal parallelism in the *gezerah shawa* as found in Hebrews, based on the phrase "under your feet" common to Ps 110,3 and Ps 8,7. This semantic content is indirectly conveyed by the word "name", *onoma*, at Heb 1,4: the "son" has "inherited" the name "son" in two separated but related contexts.

The relevance of the paraenetical section 2,1-4 with regard to the text on which it is presumably based, 1,5-14, is not immediately evident.[21] Because of indications in various parts of the epistle, the present writer would argue that the "salvation" which had its "beginning of being spoken through the Lord", and which was "confirmed by those who heard even to us" (2,3), and which is parallel to the Law (2,2), is the Christian eucharist.[22]

The parallel paraenetical section 3,1-6 is characterized by a sustained comparison between Moses and Jesus, who is described as "apostle and high priest" (*apostolos kai archiereus*). The expression "high priest" seems to allude to the same expression at 2,17.[23] But the word "apostle" remains a puzzle. Given the division of 2,6-18 into two parts as described above, and presuming that the expression "high priest" is relevant to the part in which it is found (2,13b-18), the word "apostle" would seem to be relevant to the other part (2,10-11). By hypothesis, these verses involving the announcing of God's name to his brothers (2,12). Given the relevance of 3,1-6 for what precedes, and the prominence of Moses in 3,1-6, the allusion hiding in the word "apostle" is Jesus' announcing God's name to Christians, just as Moses announced God's name to his fellow Israelites after being "sent" (*apostellō* — cf. the Septuagint at Ex 3,13.14.15). This explanation of "apostle" explains why Moses is introduced at 3,2 with no apparent preparation. There is preparation, but it is achieved by allusion. Actually this preparation seems to have begun with the exordium of the epistle (1,1-2), where God's "speaking" in a son (cf. 2,3 and 12,24) is seen as a terminus of his "speaking" in the "prophets", who, judging from the entire context of the epistle, are probably best taken as being summed up in Moses (cf 3,5; 7,14; 9,19

should not be overlooked); Jn 12,36; 17,12; Acts 3,25; 4,36; Col 3,6; Eph 2,2; 1 Th 5,5; 2 Th 2,3. In Hebrews the context supplies the genitive of the normal usage. (Cf. below, n.27.) Cf. 1,5 and 1,8, especially in the context of 1,2-3; and 2,10 and 2,12 in the context of 2,16 and 2,11.

21 That is to say, not immediately evident for the reader of today who has no access to the traditions which had shaped the community of faith of which the author and addressees of Hebrews were a part.

22 Cf. J. Swetnam, "Christology and the Eucharist in the Epistle to the Hebrews", *Biblica* 70 (1989) 74-95, especially 86-87.

23 Cf. Weiss, *Hebräerbrief*, 244-245.

— the only other personage of the past associated with "speaking" [*laleō*] in Hebrews is Abel [11,4 and 12,24]).[24] This allusion to Moses and hence to Jesus as "apostle" in the exordium at 1,1-2 is matched by the allusion to Jesus as high priest at 1,3 through the reference to the son's having effected "purification from sins".

Just as Moses announced to his fellows in Egypt that "I am" had sent him, so Jesus announces to his brothers the name of "Father". That "Father" is the name which Jesus announces seems indicated by the citation of 2 Sam 7,14 at 1,5 (cf. also the allusion to God as Father at 12,9).[25] The circumstances surrounding the introduction and use of the term "Abba" for God among the first Christians would seem to be relevant here.

The second half of the exposition at 2,13b-18 seems to be concerned with Jesus as high priest and with his expiatory death (cf. 2,14.17). The figure of Moses is not applicable here by way of prefiguring, as in the first half of the exposition: cf. the title "servant" (*therapōn)* at 3,5.[26] And no person is mentioned in the paraenesis at 3,1-6 who could be construed as prefiguring Jesus as high priest. The reason for this would seem to be that 2,13b-18 has two prefigurations in mind, Abraham and Isaac, both of whom find fulfilment in Jesus. Abraham seems to be a prefiguration of Jesus insofar as Abraham was "tested" (*peirazō*) at the time of his being called on to sacrifice Isaac (Gen 22) — cf the use of *peirazō* at Heb 11,17 (Abraham) and 2,18 (Jesus). But it is Isaac who was designated to be the sacrificial offering alluded to in Heb 2,13-18 (cf. Heb 11,17 again, and the use of *parabolē* in 11,19). In fact, the summary verse at 2,13b, with its unexpected attribution of "children" to Jesus, suggests that the author envisages Jesus' aid to his "brothers" (cf. 2,17) who are being "tested" (cf. 2,18) as consisting in his assuming the role of Abraham: it is Jesus' "help" (cf. 2,18) which from now on will be decisive in the drama of salvation (cf. 2,3), a drama

24 On an allusion to Moses in the exordium of Hebrews cf. P.R. Jones, "The Figure of Moses as a Heuristic Device for Understanding the Pastoral Intent of Hebrews", *Review and Expositor* 76(1979) 97-98. "*prophētai* [sc., in Heb 1,1] heissen nicht bloss die Propheten im engeren Sinn des Wortes (11,32), wie sie von Samuel an in langer Reihe während der Geschichte Israels aufgetreten sind (AG 3,24), sondern alle Träger göttlichen Geistes, welche als solche Sprecher Gottes gewesen sind, mit Einschluss eines David (AG 2,30) und insbesondere Moses, des ersten und grössten aller Propheten cf 3,5; AG 3,22; 7,37; Deut 34,10" (E. Riggenbach, *Der Brief an die Hebraer* [Leipzig-Erlangen ^{3}1922] 4).

25 Cf. the use of "Father" (*patēr*) and "send" (*apostellō*) in conjunction with the manifestation of God's "name" at Jn 17,16 and 17,24-26. But cf. especially the use of Ps 22,22 at Jn 20,17: "Go to my brothers and say to them, 'I ascend to my father and your father, to my God and your God'", and note Jn 20,21 with its use of *apostellō* in regard to Christ.

26 Attridge (*Hebrews*, 111) takes this "service" of Moses as that of "witnessing to what will be spoken" (*eis marturion tōn lalēthēsomenōn)*. On the possible eucharist relevance of this phrase cf. Swetnam, "Christology and Eucharist", 85-86

which in a certain sense can be seen as having a new beginning with him (cf. 2,3.10).[27] And all this is verified within the framework of the faith-trust which is proper to those who are members of Abraham's spiritual "seed" (cf. the unifying theme indicated at 2,13a). In brief, Jesus takes over the roles of both Abraham and of Isaac in the drama of salvation.[28]

The analysis of 2,10-18 as understood above enables one more set of identifications crucial for understanding Hebrews to be made. The centrality of spiritual descent from Abraham which is common to both parts of the exposition in 2,10-19 prompts the question about the object of the faith-trust: what specifically are the "sons of Abraham" to trust and believe in as their spiritual father Abraham trusted and believed? The answer would seem to be: in the promises made to Abraham. The promises made to Abraham figure prominently in the text of Hebrews even on a superficial level (cf. 4,1; 6,12.13.15.17; 7,6; 9,15; 10,23.36.39; 12,26), so there is ample reason for thinking that they played a prominent part in the author's fundamental suppositions. All the more reason to assume that they are at work in a text in which so much weight is placed on having faith and trust as Abraham had. Specifically, inasmuch as 2,10-12 speak

27 Although Lane (*Hebrews*, 60) does not state that Jesus has assumed the role of Abraham, his remarks go to the heart of the texts: "Jesus is now the representative head of a new humanity which is being led to glory through suffering...".

28 The interpretation of Heb 2,13b-18, which sees Jesus as taking over the roles of Abraham and Isaac, opens the way for a possible hypothesis (more cannot be claimed) regarding the interpretation of Heb 2,5-9 with relevance for 2,10-11. The rejection of "angels" at 2,5 seems to carry with it for the author the implication that the "world to come" is being subordinated to the "seed of Abraham" (cf. 2,16 in context). Then comes the citation of Ps 8,5-7. As was stated above, the semantic parallelism of the two psalm quotations involved in the *gezerah shawa* seems to focus on the word "son". This is important for trying to decipher the full import of the citation of Ps 8,5-7. Inasmuch as part of this psalm is interpreted midrashically by the author of Hebrews at 2,10-11 and not according to the original synonymous parallelism, it would seem reasonable to suppose that the entire psalm is being interpreted by him in this way (cf. Swetnam, *Jesus and Isaac*, 160-161). The *Midrash on the Psalms* interprets the "man" of Ps 8 as Abraham, and the "son of man" as Isaac (cf. ibid. for a discussion). It is impossible to know, at least in the present state of research, if this interpretation was already being given at the time Hebrews was written, and, if so, if the interpretation was available to the author of Hebrews. But what does seem possible is the statement that this midrashic interpretation fits in with the interpretation of Heb 2,5-18 being advanced here, with Jesus being taken as the fulfillment of a prefiguration given in Isaac. This would explain the use of *prepō* at 2,10: it was "appropriate" to have Jesus enter into glory through suffering because Jesus brought to fulfillment the *parabolē* of the Aqedah, when Isaac was destined to die but did not (cf. Heb 11,17-19). And it is with regard to Isaac that his spiritual descendants assume their identity (cf. Heb 11,18). The identification of the "son of man" of Ps 8 with Isaac would explain Heb 2,11b: Jesus' "brothers" are all those who belong to Abraham's spiritual seed, i.e., have faith-trust in God as he did. Thus Abraham and Isaac are introduced at Heb 2,6b-8 by an illusion to Scripture interpreted midrashically, just as Moses is at 2,12. In the light of this interpretation of the citation of Ps 8,5-7 at the beginning of Heb 2,5-10, one is tempted to infer that the author of Hebrews was thinking of Jesus above all as "son of man", i.e., son of Abraham, in his presentation of the passage.

about Jesus leading many "sons" to glory, this section would seem to be concerned with the promise of the land to which the addressees are called. And the second half of the exposition, 2,13b-18, is concerned with the promise of progeny, as indicated by the thematic verse 2,13b.

In the Epistle to the Hebrews, both of the promises made to Abraham, of land and of progeny, have, of course, been "spiritualized". The "land" to which the Christians are headed is eternal rest.[29] Jesus's announcing the name of God as "Father" in parallel with Moses' announcing the name of God as "I am" implies that Jesus is pictured at the beginning of the epistle as at the beginning of an exodus. This implication seems to be borne out subsequently, for just as Moses leads the people out of Egypt (cf 3,16), so Jesus leads his people to the land of true rest (cf. 4,8). The land of true rest is heavenly glory, the promise of the land having yet to be fulfilled (cf. 4,1). The promise of progeny has been transformed into spiritual progeny for Christ, into which the spiritual progeny of Abraham has been subsumed. The foundation of this progeny is the expiation of sin achieved through Jesus' death (cf. 2,14.17 — the use of the word "people" (*laos*) in the latter verse is to be noted, and compared with the use of the same word in 4,9; 5,3; 7,11.27; 8,10; and 13,12).[30]

There remains the paraenesis at 3,116. At 3,6 the sonship of Christ is mentioned explicitly as a fitting finale to 2,5 — 3,6. The addressees are said to be God's "house", i.e., dynasty, thus picking up the theme of the progeny in 2,13b-18. The stress on Moses sets the stage for the immediate introduction of the theme of the journey to the promised land (cf. 3,7 — 4,11) under the leadership of Jesus as "apostle" (3,1). But it is the promised progeny under Jesus as priest (3,1) which will take up the major part of the epistle (cf. 4,14 — 13,19), even if the promise of land is occasionally alluded to (cf. 11,9-10.13-16.29). The negative warning of the paraenesis at 2,3 is balanced by the positive encouragement of the paraenesis at 3,6.[31]

Much of the above reasoning about the epistle seems impossibly contrived. But this is the accidental result of living in a time and place vastly removed from the time and place of the original author and addressees. The interpretation which is the result of the above reasoning is not impossibly contrived for one who was attuned to the tradition in which the author and the addressees obviously shared. An exordium of four verses as an introduction, in which the

29 Cf. Swetnam, *Jesus and Isaac*, 90-91.

30 For a presentation of how the promise of progeny seems to be worked out in the body of the epistle cf. Swetnam, "Structure of Hebrews", 34-46, and idem, "Hebrews 11", *passim*.

31 On the eucharist relevance of the paraenesis at 3,1-6 to match the eucharist relevance of the paraenesis at 2,1-4 cf. above, n.26.

themes of land and progeny are ever-so deftly introduced, along with clear allusions to the divinity of the chief protagonist, Jesus Christ. Then a section setting forth the effect of the resurrection-exaltation on the earthly Jesus so that he becomes even corporally fully "son of God", followed by a paraenesis to be based on this resurrection-exaltation. Next, a parallel section setting forth the effect of the earthly life of the earthly Jesus (if one will, the "son of man") as spiritual descendant of Abraham, heir to the promises of land and progeny, and substitute for Abraham as the example to inspire his spiritual brothers who have become his spiritual children. Finally, a paraenesis based on the life of the earthly Jesus, detailing his new role over the dynasty of God as leader and priest. The author has thus established the perspectives which will enable him to convey his message in the body of the epistle, an epistle which is at once simple and profound if one can but master the keys which open it to the heart and to the head.

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