

# The book of Hebrews and the Reformed view of Scripture: Hebrews echoed in Belgic Confession Articles 2–7



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This article argues that the view of Scripture found in the book of Hebrews is echoed in Belgic Confession (BC) Articles 2–7. The article endeavours to prove this hypothesis by indicating how Hebrews and BC Article 2–7 overlap. Articles 2–7 of the BC are discussed successively by summarising what each article says, investigating the conviction of the writer of Hebrews concerning the specific topic and comparing the two. The article finds that the view of Scripture found in BC Articles 2–7 can indeed be traced to the book of Hebrews. The article concludes by drawing some implications from this comparison for the (reformed) church today.

**Keywords:** Hebrews; Belgic Confession; Belgic Confession Articles 2–7; Reformed view of Scripture; Reformed Confessions.

## Introduction

The book of Hebrews is a sermon with the Old Testament as the primary background. Such a bold statement, of course, requires nuanced elaboration. Nonetheless, finding your way through the quagmire of questions regarding the precise genre of the book of Hebrews leads to the conclusion that a considerable amount of scholars view Hebrews as some form of oral address, most probably a sermon with a letter ending (Coetsee 2014:32–38; cf. Cockerill 2012:15; Koester 2001:80). Moreover, while various backgrounds for the book of Hebrews have been proposed throughout its scholarly investigation (cf. Hurst 1990; Punt 1997), almost all scholars agree: the numerous quotations and references to the Old Testament leave no doubt that it is the primary background of the book (cf. Cockerill 2012:41; Lane 1991:c xv).

This conclusion makes it possible to deduce various matters concerning the unknown author's view of Scripture, specifically the Old Testament. A number of excellent studies on this topic have been conducted (e.g. Griffiths 2014; Lewicki 2004; Wider 1997; cf. Coetsee 2014). This article would like to add to this array of studies by arguing that the view of Scripture found in the book of Hebrews is echoed in the Reformed Confessions, especially the Belgic Confession (BC) Articles 2–7.

The BC (or *Confessio Belgica*), which originated in Belgium in 1561 with Guido de Brès as the chief author, is one of the oldest Reformed Confessions, accepted and used by many Reformed churches around the world.<sup>1</sup> Originally written in French, it was soon translated into Dutch and, in the centuries that followed, into various languages of the world (cf. Gootjes 2007:161; Heyns 1988:38).<sup>2</sup> The confession was written in a time of persecution, aiming to give a clear and comprehensive statement of Reformed faith.<sup>3</sup>

One of the first subjects the BC touches on is the Reformed view of Scripture. Articles 2–7 (of 37 in total) contain succinct statements about the means by which we know God, focusing on the Bible. It is these articles that this article wants to focus on.

Of course, the argument that BC Articles 2–7 echo the view of Scripture found in the book of Hebrews would not and should not be strange, because the confessions of the church are written

1. Together with the Heidelberg Catechism and the Canons of Dort, these confessions are generally referred to in Reformed circles as the 'Three Forms of Unity'. The BC is the oldest of the three.

2. For the early history of the BC, its author, authority and revision (and also its adoption at the Synod of Dort in 1618–1619), see Gootjes (2007).

3. The Christian Reformed Church (2011:n.p.) aptly summarises the BC's context of origin on its webpage by stating that the confession 'takes pains to point out the continuity of Reformed belief with that of the ancient Christian creeds, as well as to differentiate it from Catholic belief (on the one hand), and from Anabaptist teaching (on the other)'.

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to echo or summarise what Scripture says. The argument, however, that the nucleus of BC Articles 2–7 can be found in a single biblical book, namely, the book of Hebrews, is striking.<sup>4</sup>

This article endeavours to prove this hypothesis by indicating how Hebrews and BC Articles 2–7 overlap. For the sake of structure, the successive articles of the BC are used as departure point for the comparison. Each section starts by quoting the words of the specific article of the BC and briefly summarising what the article says.<sup>5</sup> This is followed by stating the conviction of the writer of Hebrews concerning the specific theme or topic, which is deduced by tracing the theme or topic throughout the 13 chapters of the book. After this, the writer's conviction and the content of the relevant article of the BC are compared, indicating how the two overlap and what the difference in nuance is.

The article concludes by drawing some implications from this comparison for the (reformed) church today.<sup>6</sup>

## God makes himself known by Scripture (Belgic Confession Article 2b)

We know him by two means: Firstly, by the creation, preservation and government of the universe, because that universe is before our eyes like a beautiful book in which all creatures, great and small, are as letters to make us ponder the invisible things of God: his eternal power and his divinity, as the apostle Paul says in Romans 1:20. All these things are enough to convict men and to leave them without excuse. Secondly, he makes himself known to us more openly by his holy and divine Word, as much as we need in this life, for his glory and for the salvation of his own. (BC Article 2)

Belgic Confession Article 2 discusses two means by which we know God: (1) the creation, preservation and government of the universe and (2) his holy and divine Word. While the word 'revelation' is not used here, it is implied by the phrases 'we know' and 'he makes himself known' (cf. Heyns 1988:62). Although not part of the wording of the BC Article 2, various systematic theologians refer to the universe as God's 'general revelation' and his Word as his 'special revelation' (cf. Bavinck & Bolt 2011:68–81; Beeke & Smalley 2019:185–189; Van Genderen & Velema 2008:42–56).<sup>7</sup>

4.I do not suggest that the BC is based on the book of Hebrews solely. Various quotations and references to Scripture in the Confession make this clear. My argument is rather that traces of what is confessed in BC Articles 2–7 can be found in Hebrews. I would go as far as to argue that the heart of all of the articles of the BC could in some way be traced to the book of Hebrews. In my view, this argument is not untenable because the book of Hebrews is such a rich and diverse book of theology.

5.The English translation of the BC used in this article is the one used by the Reformed Churches of South Africa (RCSA n.d.) and the United Reformed Churches in North America (URCNA 2019), which is based upon the official French text approved by the Synod of Dort. The only difference in wording of BC Articles 2–7 between these two are found in Article 4, which is discussed below. In the case of Article 4, the words of the RCSA are followed.

6.This article is gratefully and thankfully written for the 150 year jubilee of theological training by the RCSA (1869–2019), celebrated with an academic conference on 18–20 September 2019 in Potchefstroom.

7.By means of wordplay, Francis Bacon (2010:22) refers to 'the book of God's word' and 'the book of God's works'.

The scope of the current article draws our attention to the second part of Article 2. However, this focus should not create the impression that Hebrews does not touch on the issues found in the first part of Article 2. In fact, Hebrews contains evidence of the writer's theological convictions regarding the creation, preservation and government of the universe (cf. Coetsee 2018):

- *Creation*: The writer's conviction is that God created the universe by his word (Heb 11:3), which refers to God's creative words in Genesis 1. This is indirectly supported by the writer's references to God or Christ<sup>8</sup> laying the foundation of the earth in the beginning (Heb 1:10 = Ps 102:25), God's creation of man (Heb 2:6–8 = Ps 8:4–6), God as the builder of all things (Heb 3:4), 'the foundation of the world' (Heb 4:3; 9:26) and God's rest on the seventh day (Heb 4:4 = Gen 2:2). More specifically, the writer's conviction is that God created the universe through his Son (Heb 1:2), namely that the Son was God's agent of creation.
- *Preservation*: The writer of Hebrews is also convinced that God preserves the universe, as evidenced in his theologically rich reference to the Son continually 'upholding' (or 'sustaining', 'maintaining') 'all things', namely the universe, 'by his powerful word' (Heb 1:3). God's preservation of the universe is further underscored by the doxological reference to God as the one 'for whom and by whom all things exist' (Heb 2:10; cf. Ellingworth 1993:159).
- *Government*: Various references throughout Hebrews reveal the writer's conviction of God's sovereignty, especially evidenced through Christ. Apart from the reference to God's preservation of creation in Hebrews 1:3, references to God's government of creation can be found in two texts that refer to God's consummation of all things: God will 'roll up' the earth and heavens like a robe (Heb 1:12), and he will shake the earth and the heavens (Heb 12:26 = Hag 2:6) at Christ's return.<sup>9</sup>

Putting it all together, it seems like the writer of Hebrews was convinced that God created, sustains and will consummate the universe through or because of his word (cf. Coetsee 2018:12).

Coming back to the scope of this article, our attention is drawn to the second part of Article 2, which states that God makes himself known to us 'more openly by his holy and divine Word'. The comparison between the universe and the Word as means of revelation emphasises that the Word is God's 'clearer', 'fuller' or 'more complete' revelation. However, God's 'holy and divine Word' does not merely refer to the Bible, as indicated by the distinction between the spoken and written Word of God in BC Article 3 (Van Bruggen 1980:24).

Belgic Confession Article 2's confession that God makes himself known 'by his holy and divine Word' can be traced to

8.By introducing this quotation of Psalm 102:25–27 in such a way that God says these specific words 'of the Son', the writer is affirming that Jesus is both the Lord and the Creator.

9.See Coetsee (2018:8–12) for a more detailed discussion of these images.

the book of Hebrews. Hebrews contains numerous references to God's speech. In fact, God's speech could be considered as one of the primary themes of the book (Lane 1991:cxxvii; cf. Coetsee 2014:281; Guthrie 1994:91–92). These references reveal that it was the writer's conviction that God makes himself known, especially through Scripture.

Unlike the Pauline or General Epistles of the New Testament (excluding 1 Jn), Hebrews does not start with the standard indication of author and addressees, and benediction. Scholars argue that this was a common way to start an oral address, namely with the main theme the speaker wants to emphasise (Guthrie 1994:45; cf. Cockerill 2012:86; Lane 1991:lxv). Hebrews 1 starts with a profound statement about God's speech:

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.... (w. 1–2a)<sup>10</sup>

Focusing on the verbs of these verses, the writer's conviction becomes clear: God speaks! He spoke in the past, and he continued to speak recently (relative to the writer's position) through his Son. God reveals himself.

Elsewhere I have argued that these words reveal the writer's conviction of the unfolding of God's revelation (cf. Coetsee 2016). These words contain a striking parallelism, as shown in Table 1.

The writer's argument in Hebrews 1:1–2a is as follows (Coetsee 2016:6): while God has revealed himself in segments and by a variety of means ('at many times and in many ways') over a long period of time ('long ago') to several believers in previous generations ('to our fathers') through various agents ('by the prophets'), he recently, during the transitional period from the old to the new era ('in these last days'), revealed himself personally to the addressees ('to us') through his Son.

The parallelism in Hebrews 1:1–2a has elements of both continuity and discontinuity. The writer's primary argument is one of continuity: the same God who spoke in the past has now spoken by his Son. Moreover, this parallelism makes it clear that God's revelation is progressive; his revelation progressed from his Old Testament revelation to his New Testament revelation in his Son.<sup>11</sup> Although the writer's primary argument is one of continuity, the contrasts between verse 1 and verse 2a emphasise that God's revelation through his Son is superior, climactic, final, personal and urgent (Coetsee 2016:7).

Taking the above into account, BC Article 2b correlates with the opening words of Hebrews: God makes himself known to us by his holy and divine Word; God speaks through Scripture.

In my view, Hebrews makes more of the progression of God's revelation than BC Articles 2–7. Although it is clear that the BC

10. All quotations from Scripture are from the English Standard Version (ESV).

11. The writer's conviction of the unfolding of God's revelation is also evidenced in other statements in Hebrews (e.g. Heb 7:11–12; 8:13; 10:1; 11:39–40).

**TABLE 1:** The parallelism in Hebrews 1:1 and 1:2a.

Hebrews 1:1	Syntax	Hebrews 1:2a
At many times and in many ways	Manner	-
Long ago	Indication of time	In these last days
God	Subject	(God)
Spoke	Verb	Has spoken
To our fathers	Indirect object	To us
By the prophets	Instrument	By his Son

Source: Coetsee, A.J., 2016, 'The unfolding of God's revelation in Hebrews 1:1–2a', *HTS Theological Studies* 72(3), 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v72i3.3221>

agrees with the progression of God's revelation in Scripture (see, e.g., Article 25 on the fulfilment of the law), this departure point is much clearer in Hebrews. This is also the case when it comes to Hebrews' conviction that the Old Testament witnesses to Christ. Although it is clear from the BC as a whole that this is also the conviction of the Confession, it is not emphasised nearly as strongly as in Hebrews. This is made clear in Hebrews by the fact that the writer confirms his Christological assumptions by quoting from and referring to the Old Testament, especially the Psalms (Guthrie 2007:921). In quoting these words, the writer sometimes makes smaller stylistic and theological changes to emphasise the greater meaning of the text as fulfilled in Christ (Docherty 2009:196). Even the writer's use of the 1st century exegetical techniques implements and gives legitimacy to his Christological interpretation of the Old Testament Scriptures (Cockerill 2012:56–57). Throughout the sermon it becomes clear that the writer was convinced that the Old Testament witnesses to Christ. In a sense, the writer of Hebrews viewed the Old Testament as one great prophecy that shows to the Christ that was to come (Peterson 2002:123). The writer interprets Christ in the light of the Old Testament and the Old Testament in the light of Christ.

Coming to the final clause of BC Article 2b, the parallels between the BC and Hebrews are clear once more. Belgic Confession Article 2b's emphasis on God making known to us 'as much as we need in this life', namely (1) 'for his glory' and (2) 'for the salvation of his own', is clearly found in Hebrews. The primary concern of the writer of Hebrews was to warn his addressees against flirting with apostasy in the midst of hardship and persecution. For this reason, he once more reminds them of the essence of their faith. He refers to salvation throughout his sermon (Heb 1:3; 2:3, 9, 17; 5:9; 6:9; 8:1; 9:12, 24, 26, 28; 10:17–18), especially the magnitude and wonder of salvation in Christ, and how the addressees should take the utmost care not to neglect and despise this salvation. In the same breath, the writer refers to time and again to the glory of God (Heb 2:9; 9:14; 10:7, 31; 11:5–7; 12:29; 13:21). While Hebrews does not explicitly say that God reveals to us what is necessary for his glory, reading the sermon as a whole makes it clear that it is implied (see especially Heb 13:21).

## The divine inspiration of Scripture (Belgic Confession Article 3)

We confess that this Word of God was not sent nor delivered by the will of men, but that holy men of God spoke, being moved by the Holy Spirit, as Peter says. Afterwards our God – because of the special care he has for us and our salvation – commanded his

servants, the prophets and apostles, to commit this revealed Word to writing. He himself wrote with his own finger the two tables of the law. Therefore we call such writings holy and divine Scriptures. (BC Article 3)

Belgic Confession Article 3 is about the written Word of the God. The article starts with a reference to the 'spoken' Word of God, and how God later ('afterwards') commanded his servants to write it down. The article's emphasis concerning both the spoken and written Word falls on its origin or inspiration: *God* through his Spirit 'moved' (inspired) the 'holy men' (agents of his revelation in Scripture) to say what he wanted to say (the spoken Word; made clear by the quotation of 2 Pet 1:21),<sup>12</sup> and *God* commanded his servants to write it down (the written Word).<sup>13</sup> Neither the act of speaking God's Word nor writing it down is the result of human doing; God initiated it (cf. Heyns 1988:82). Although the content of BC Article 3 does not contain the word 'inspiration', it is clearly implied.

Reading through the book of Hebrews, it becomes apparent that the writer was convinced that the Old Testament was divinely inspired. This is evident when one takes a closer look at the way the writer quotes from the Old Testament. In an article on the theme of God's speech in the introductory formulae of Hebrews, Jordaan and I indicate the following (Coetsee & Jordaan 2015):

- Hebrews has 38 direct quotations from the Old Testament which the writer introduces with some form of introductory formula. In 37 of these, the writer introduces the direct quotation with a form of a verb of 'saying'. This means that, with the exception of the introductory formula in Hebrews 10:37 (which contains no verb), the writer of Hebrews does not introduce any Old Testament quotation without using a verb of 'saying'.
- When the grammatical subjects of the introductory formulae are coupled with this, it produces even more striking results. In 34 of the 38 introductory formulae ( $\pm 89\%$ ), a person of the Trinity is the subject and subsequent speaker of the Old Testament words.
- When one investigates the original Old Testament context of the quoted words, it becomes clear that the writer of Hebrews does not hesitate to place the words of poets or prophets in the mouth of God or Jesus. Consequently, the writer's first interest was not with the human writers; he deliberately avoids them in his introductory formulae to indicate the Old Testament as the words of God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit.
- Furthermore, there is only one reference in Hebrews to the original author or source of an Old Testament

12. Strictly speaking, 2 Peter 1:21 says that the prophecies in Scripture are inspired by God, and not the Old Testament as a whole or the New Testament. Consequently, some argue that BC Article 3 does not take the process of the formation of the canon into consideration, and runs the danger of reading Scripture anachronistically (cf. Scheffler 1987:72). In the Reformed view of Scripture, however, the words of 2 Peter 1:21 can be applied to Scripture as a whole by means of synecdoche.

13. Various commentators correctly stress that the scope of God's spoken Word is much bigger than his written Word (cf. Heyns 1988:79; Van Bruggen 1980:27), as is evidenced by references in Scripture (e.g. 1 Ki 4:32; Jn 20:38; 21:25).

quotation, namely the writer's reference to David in Hebrews 4:7. But even this reference to David is not without reason. The writer of Hebrews refers to David to substantiate his argument of elapsed time. Moreover, the reference emphasises the fact that David was merely the agent through whom God spoke. In addition to this, the writer's placement of the words of Genesis 2:2 (which is a narrative) into the mouth of God indicates his conviction that God speaks through the events recorded in the Old Testament (Heb 4:4).

From this, it is clear that the writer of Hebrews emphasises the verbal nature of the Old Testament throughout his sermon. The writer is convinced that the whole Old Testament comes from the mouth of God and is divinely inspired. This links closely to the words of BC Article 3, which states that the 'Word of God was not sent or delivered by the will of men'.

This conviction is not limited to the writer of Hebrews himself; his hearers share his conviction. This is clear from the scope of the sermon as a whole. The writer exhorts his hearers from the Old Testament in such a way that one cannot but conclude that they shared his conviction. He expected them to submit themselves completely to the authority of the Old Testament (cf. Ellingworth 1993:23). He also claims that the only source of the previous leaders of the congregation's authority was the fact that they preached the (inspired) Word of God to the hearers (Heb 13:7a), exemplifying its content (Heb 13:7b).

All of this explains why the writer could convincingly affirm his Christological assumptions from the Old Testament (Isaacs 1992:69). As his hearers have the same conviction regarding the divine inspiration of the Old Testament, and consequently the same Messianic hope, the writer had no trouble to show from the Old Testament that Jesus is the Christ.

The conviction of the divine inspiration of the Old Testament probably also explains why the writer remains anonymous throughout his sermon. The writer deliberately remains anonymous in order to emphasise the fact that he is not the main speaker in his sermon – God is (Lewicki 2004:124).

To conclude, BC Article 3 and Hebrews share the conviction that the Old Testament is divinely inspired. The inspiration of the New Testament, however, which is clearly assumed in BC Article 3 (as elaborated in BC Article 4), cannot be traced to Hebrews for the simple reason that the New Testament canon was still in the making. However, as the writer viewed his preaching of Christ, which has numerous parallels with the Christian tradition reflected in the New Testament books, as authoritative, one can argue that the heart of a New Testament canon can be seen in Hebrews.

The concluding words of BC Article 3, namely that God had his Word written down 'because of the special care he has for us and our salvation', can once more (as in the case of BC Article 2b) be found in the overall message of Hebrews.

## The canonical books of Scripture (Belgic Confession Article 4)

We include in the Holy Scripture the two volumes of the Old and New Testaments. They are canonical books with which there can be no quarrel at all. In the church of God the list is as follows: In the Old Testament, the five books of Moses – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy; the books of Joshua, Judges, and Ruth; the two books of Samuel, and two of Kings; the two books of Chronicles, called Paralipomenon; the first book of Ezra; Nehemiah, Esther, Job; the Psalms of David; the three books of Solomon – Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song; the four major prophets – Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel; and then the other twelve minor prophets – Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi. In the New Testament, the four gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John; the Acts of the Apostles; the fourteen letters of Paul – to the Romans; the two letters to the Corinthians; to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians; the two letters to the Thessalonians; the two letters to Timothy; to Titus, Philemon, and to the Hebrews; the seven letters of the other apostles – one of James; two of Peter; three of John; one of Jude; and the Revelation of the apostle John. (BC Article 4)

Belgic Confession Article 4 gives a list of the 66 canonical books of the Reformed canon. These books are viewed as the divinely inspired written Word of God referred to in BC Article 3. The reference to the two parts of Scripture, namely the Old Testament and New Testament, is aimed against the Anabaptists who tended to neglect or downplay the Old Testament, and the reference to the 66 books of the canon is against the Roman Catholic Church that includes the apocrypha in their canon (Bosman 1987:55; Van Bruggen 1980:28).

A number of critical comments can be made regarding the words of Article 4 (Bosman 1987:55):

- Modern scholarship doubts that Moses was the (sole) author of the Pentateuch, David of (most of) the Psalms,<sup>14</sup> Solomon of (all of) Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs, while some scholars doubt that Paul was the author of all of the letters attributed to him.
- In the Jewish canon and in modern scholarship, Daniel is viewed as part of the Writings (Ketuvim), and not as one of the Major Prophets.
- Belgic Confession Article 4 refers to the books of Chronicles as 'Paralipomenon', which could be translated as 'omission' or 'supplement', referring to the view that the books of Chronicles supplement what is left out, skipped or omitted from the books of Samuel and Kings (cf. Heyns 1988:95). This view is correctly rejected by

14.The amended version of BC Article 4 used by the URCNA does not refer to 'the Psalms of David', but 'the Psalms'.

modern scholarship, which views Chronicles as an independent source which re-interprets the history of Israel after the Exile.<sup>15</sup>

- Belgic Confession Article 4 includes Hebrews as one of the 'fourteen' letters of Paul. Except for a handful of scholars, most modern scholars are convinced that the book of Hebrews was written by someone other than Paul (cf. Coetsee 2014:14–15).<sup>16</sup>
- The book of Lamentations is not mentioned in BC Article 4. It is probably not deliberate (i.e. saying that the book is not canonical). The book is probably included in the reference to the book of Jeremiah (see Christian Reformed Church 2011).<sup>17</sup>

These critical observations, however, should be read in the light of the time in which the BC was composed. All of the above was the generally accepted view of the time (Heyns 1988:95). Moreover, these smaller details concerning the authorship or categorisation of certain books do not influence the core message of the article, namely that this is a list of the canonical books of Scripture.

Coming to the book of Hebrews, it is striking to make a list of the sources the writer quotes. The 38 quotations in Hebrews come from the following corpora of the Old Testament (cf. Coetsee 2014:86–87):

- *The Torah*: 10 quotations are from the Pentateuch: three from Genesis (2:2 [Heb 4:4]; 21:12 [Heb 11:18]; 22:17 [Heb 6:14]), two from Exodus (24:8 [Heb 9:20]; 25:40 [Heb 8:5]) and five from Deuteronomy (9:19 [Heb 12:21]; 31:6 [Heb 13:5]; 32:35a [Heb 10:30a], 36a [Heb 10:30b], 43b [Heb 1:6]).
- *The Prophets*: Eight quotations are from the prophets – one from the Former Prophets (2 Sam 7:14 [Heb 1:5b]), five from the Major Prophets (Is 8:17 [Heb 2:13a], 18 [Heb 2:13b]; 26:20 [Heb 10:37–38]; Jr 31:31–34 [Heb 8:8–12], 33–34 [Heb 10:16–17]) and two from the Minor Prophets (Hab 2:3–4 [Heb 10:37–38]<sup>18</sup>; Hag 2:6 [Heb 12:26]).
- *The Writings*: By far the most quotations in Hebrews are from the writings, especially the Psalms. The writer quotes Proverbs once (3:11–12 [Heb 12:5–6]) and the Psalms 20 times (Ps 2:7 [Heb 1:5a; 5:5], 8:5–7 [Heb 2:6–8a], 22:23 [Heb 2:12], 40:7–9 [Heb 10:5–7, 8, 9], 45:7–8 [Heb 1:8–9], 95:7b–11 [Heb 3:7–11, 15; 4:3, 5, 7], 102:26–28 [Heb 1:10–12], 104:4 [Heb 1:7], 110:1 [Heb 1:13], 110:4 [Heb 5:6; 7:17, 21], 118:6 [Heb 13:6]).

The writer of Hebrews clearly quotes from a wide range of books and from each of the three divisions of the Jewish canon

15.This is probably why the amended version of BC Article 4 used by the URCNA leaves out the reference to 'Paralipomenon'. In any case, the use of the name 'Paralipomenon' in the years that followed after the publication of the BC did not stick (Heyns 1988:95).

16.This is also reflected in the amended version of BC Article 4 used by the URCNA, which refers to the 'thirteen' letters of Paul, listing Hebrews separately.

17.The amended version of BC Article 4 used by the URCNA includes a reference to Lamentations directly after the reference to Jeremiah.

18.The quotation of Habakkuk 2:3–4 is in combination with Isaiah 26:20, which explains why the number of quotations in this list is 39 and not 38 (see the section 'The divine inspiration of Scripture' above).

(Steyn 2011:4). For the purposes of this article, however, it is striking that all of the quotations in Hebrews come from the books found in the Jewish canon, which is accepted in BC Article 4 as the Old Testament canon. Hebrews does not quote from the Old Testament apocryphal books (cf. Cockerill 2012:43; Karrer 2006:335; Peterson 2002:120). Although this cannot be used as evidence to conclude that the writer of Hebrews did not view the Old Testament apocrypha as canonical, it is interesting, and possibly even suggestive.

As could be expected, there are no New Testament quotations in the book of Hebrews. There are, however, some possible allusions:

- Hebrews refers to Jesus' temptation, humiliation and crucifixion, which some scholars trace to the Gospels.
- Some link Hebrews' reference to the priestly ministry of Christ to the Gospel of John.
- Based on a number of parallels, a few scholars view Stephen's speech in Acts 7 as the background of Hebrews (cf. Hurst 1990:131–133).
- There are various parallels between Hebrews and the letters of Paul (cf. Ellingworth 1993:3–12) and Peter (cf. Koester 2001:57–58).

However, none of these parallels indicate literary dependence. Most parallels can be explained as the result of the same milieu within which the various writings arose, namely the influence of the same Christian tradition. It is, however, impossible to link the list of New Testament canonical books found in BC Article 4 to the book of Hebrews or to prove which New Testament books the writer of Hebrews viewed as canonical. While the dating of the books of the New Testament remains a matter of scholarly debate, some of the New Testament books were probably not written yet by the time Hebrews was composed.<sup>19</sup>

Coming back to the Old Testament canonical books, it is clear that the writer of Hebrews viewed the Old Testament books he quoted from as authoritative. He clearly expected his hearers to agree with the content of his quotations and to obey what it says. This could be linked to the words of BC Article 4 which states that 'there can be no quarrel at all' with these books.

Finally, the question can be asked whether the author of Hebrews viewed his own composition as canonical. While this is impossible to prove, the scope of the sermon gives the impression that the writer viewed his interpretation and preaching of the Old Testament as a vehicle of divine communication (Smillie 2004:275–276; cf. Peterson 2002:127) and 'that he believes his interpretation of the OT is the Word of God' (Smillie 2004:292–293; emphasis original).

## The authority of Scripture (Belgic Confession Article 5)

We receive all these books and these only as holy and canonical, for the regulating, founding, and establishing of our faith. And

<sup>19</sup>In my view, Hebrews was probably written before 70 AD (more specifically 60–64 AD).

we believe without a doubt all things contained in them – not so much because the church receives and approves them as such but above all because the Holy Spirit testifies in our hearts that they are from God, and also because they prove themselves to be from God. For even the blind themselves are able to see that the things predicted in them do happen. (BC Article 5)

Belgic Confession Article 5 contains the Reformed confession regarding the authority of Scripture and why these books are viewed as authoritative (Van Bruggen 1980:31). It starts by stating that 'these books and these only', namely the books listed in BC Article 4, are 'holy and canonical', namely that they are divinely inspired. As such, these books alone form the foundation of Reformed faith, and regulate and establish it. These books alone are authoritative.

The article continues by giving the reasons why these books are viewed as authoritative. Three reasons are given, of which the first is not a reason in a sense, but the foundation of the remaining two. The church is not the deepest and most decisive warranty for the authority of Scripture, but the Holy Spirit is (Heyns 1988:99). He convinces man that these books are from God. Moreover, these books have self-convincing (or 'obvious') authority in themselves (*autopistia*).

The writer of Hebrews' conviction of the divine inspiration of Scripture naturally leads to his conviction of the authority of Scripture. In his view, Scripture remains God's always relevant words; God still speaks from Scripture. That which God previously said in the Old Testament, he continues to say with equal authority today to each new generation (Lewicki 2004:141). This conviction is confirmed by the following (Coetsee & Jordaan 2015:5–7):

- *The tense of the verbs of 'saying' that the writer uses in his introductory formulae:* The writer introduces the vast majority of his Old Testament quotations as statements of the past expressed lively in the present, as statements of which the effects still persist in the present, or as statements made at this very moment. God spoke in the Old Testament in the past (aorist tense), but from the Old Testament he now speaks in the present (present tense), or the consequences of his words in the Old Testament are now a reality (perfect tense).
- *The writer's choice of Old Testament quotations:* The writer deliberately chose Old Testament quotations that consist of direct speech. Of the writer's 38 direct quotations, 37 are part of direct or quoted speech in the Old Testament. This deliberate choice of direct speech quotations gives the impression that God is saying these words *at this very moment* to the hearers (cf. Koester 2001:116). In their new context, these quotations speak with the same immediate impact it had in its original context. To this can be added a small number of Old Testament quotations that contain explicit references to God's speech (e.g. Ps 40:7–9 [Heb 10:5–9]; 95:7b–11 [Heb 3–4]; Jr 31:31–34 [Heb 8:8–12; 10:16–17]).

The writer of Hebrews' conviction of the authority of Scripture leads to another conviction, namely that man should listen

obediently and reverently to (God speaking from) Scripture. From the beginning to the end of the sermon, it is clear that the writer of Hebrews expected his hearers to submit themselves completely to the authority of Scripture. This conviction is seen especially in the paraenetic material of Hebrews, in which the writer repeatedly warns and exhorts his hearers to listen faithfully and obediently to God's superior revelation in his Son (cf. Heb 2:1–4; 3:7–4:13; 5:11–6:12; 10:19–39; 12:14–29). This he urges them to do with the greatest urgency imaginable. The reason for this urgent call has to do with the background of the sermon. The addressees were beginning to be apathetic towards God's revelation in his Son. Through their negligence, they ran the risk of becoming apostate. In order to counter this behaviour, the writer sketches in horrifying detail what the catastrophic consequences of their reckless rejection of God's Word entails. This warning increases in intensity throughout the sermon and reaches its climax in 12:25 where the writer explicitly exhorts his hearers not to reject God's final revelation openly and deliberately (Coetsee 2014:279). The unfolding of God's Old Testament revelation to his New Testament revelation in his Son implies that the hearers have a greater responsibility to respond with obedience to God's superior speech through his Son.

Consequently, the words of BC Article 5 which state that the books of Scripture are 'holy and canonical', and that they are 'for the regulating, founding and establishing of our faith', nicely link on to the writer of Hebrews' conviction of the authority of Scripture and the necessity of man to listen to God's Word with the greatest reverence possible. While it is safe to say that Hebrews and BC Article 5 share this conviction, the necessity of submission to God's authoritative Word is expressed much more urgently in Hebrews.

As stated above, the second part of BC Article 5 gives various reasons why the canonical books are viewed as authoritative. Both primary reasons given in the Confession can indirectly be linked to Hebrews:

- *The Holy Spirit testifies that these books are from God:* Hebrews contains three introductory formulae where the Holy Spirit is indicated as the speaker (Heb 3:7, 15; 10:15). An analysis of these introductory formulae makes it clear that according to the writer of Hebrews, the Holy Spirit takes the existing words of Scripture (as fulfilled in Christ) and directs it dynamically and relevantly to the addressees in their concrete situation at the present moment (Coetsee & Jordaan 2015:7). Moreover, in all three cases, the Holy Spirit's speech has to do with man's responsibility to respond correctly to God's superior revelation in his Son (Coetsee & Jordaan 2015:7:8). This conviction of the work of the Holy Spirit is also supported by the words of Hebrews 9:8, in which the writer argues that the Holy Spirit explains to the addressees the inability of the Old Testament cult to provide access to the presence of God (Coetsee 2014:228). While these references to the Holy Spirit in Hebrews do not explicitly say that the Holy Spirit convinces man that the books of Scripture 'are from God',

it supports the conviction that Scripture is authoritative and that the Holy Spirit still 'speaks' from Scripture, which indirectly supports the confession that the Holy Spirit testifies that these books are from God.

- *These books prove themselves to be from God:* Both the writer of Hebrews and the addressees view the books of Scripture the writer quotes from as divinely inspired and authoritative. While the date for the formalisation of the Jewish canon is a matter of scholarly debate,<sup>20</sup> it was probably after Hebrews was composed. Even if it was before the writing of Hebrews, it is quite probable that the addressees did not have a specific canon list. Rather, it is likely that they viewed the books of Scripture the writer quoted from as authoritative because of tradition and the conviction that these books were from God. If this is correct, it could be argued that these books 'proved themselves' to the addressees 'to be from God'.

## The difference between canonical and apocryphal books (Belgic Confession Article 6)

We distinguish between these holy books and the apocryphal ones, which are: the third and fourth books of Esdras; the books of Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, Jesus Sirach, Baruch; what was added to the Story of Esther; the Song of the Three Children in the Furnace; the Story of Susannah; the Story of Bel and the Dragon; the Prayer of Manasseh; and the two books of Maccabees. The church may certainly read these books and learn from them as far as they agree with the canonical books. But they do not have such power and virtue that one could confirm from their testimony any point of faith or of the Christian religion. Much less can they detract from the authority of the other holy books. (BC Article 6)

Belgic Confession Article 6 distinguishes between canonical and apocryphal books by first listing the (Old Testament) apocrypha<sup>21</sup> and then explaining their value and worth. The list of apocrypha contains books that are not found in the Jewish canon, but in the Septuagint, and eventually in the Roman Catholic canon. During the Reformation, the inspiration and authority of these books were doubted, and a unanimous return to the Jewish canon for the Old Testament was advocated (Heyns 1988:103).

Regarding their value, BC Article 6 says that the apocryphal books may be read by the church and that the church may even learn from them as far as they agree with the canonical books. But, according to BC Article 6, they are clearly not on the same level as the canonical books. Despite the confession's qualified description of the value of the apocrypha, in practice few Reformed churches make any use of them (cf. Bosman 1987:56).

20.The traditional view is that the Jewish canon was formalised at the Council of Jamnia or Synod of Yavneh (c. 70–90 AD). This view, however, has been challenged by modern scholarship. For a discussion of the history of formation of the Jewish canon, see Barrera (1998:148–207).

21.New Testament apocrypha were never as popular in the canon of the church as their Old Testament counterparts. For a discussion on the history of formation of the New Testament canon, see Barrera (1998:236–257).

As indicated above (see the discussion of BC Article 4), Hebrews contains no quotations from the Old Testament apocrypha, which is suggestive of the writer's possible non-canonical view of these books. However, the writer alludes to the Old Testament apocrypha. The clearest example is his summary of the hardship and persecution of some heroes of faith in Hebrews 11:35b–38, which various scholars correctly view as an allusion to 2 Maccabees 6:18–7:42 (cf. Cockerill 2012:591). Although some scholars argue that the writer of Hebrews alludes to the apocrypha elsewhere in his sermon (e.g. Wis 7:25–26 in Heb 1:2–3), the question whether the writer deliberately alludes to these texts is a matter of debate.

It would probably be going too far to argue that the fact that the writer of Hebrews never quotes from the apocrypha, but only alludes to it, found its way into the formulation of BC Article 6, namely that the apocryphal books may be read and learnt from, but that they are not on the same level of inspiration and authority as the canonical books. However, as with the discussion of BC Article 4 above, the fact that the writer only alludes to the apocryphal books is suggestive of his view of these books.

## The sufficiency of Scripture (Belgic Confession Article 7)

We believe that this Holy Scripture contains the will of God completely and that everything one must believe to be saved is sufficiently taught in it. For since the entire manner of service which God requires of us is described in it at great length, no one – even an apostle or an angel from heaven, as Paul says – ought to teach other than what the Holy Scriptures have already taught us. For since it is forbidden to add to or subtract from the Word of God, this plainly demonstrates that the teaching is perfect and complete in all respects. Therefore we must not consider human writings – no matter how holy their authors may have been – equal to the divine writings; nor may we put custom, nor the majority, nor age, nor the passage of time or persons, nor councils, decrees, or official decisions above the truth of God, for truth is above everything else. For all human beings are liars by nature and more vain than vanity itself. Therefore we reject with all our hearts everything that does not agree with this infallible rule, as we are taught to do by the apostles when they say, 'Test the spirits to see if they are of God', and also, 'If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house'. (BC Article 7)

The main thrust of BC Article 7 is found in its opening sentences: Scripture contains the will of God completely, includes everything one must believe to be saved and describes in length how God should be served. These departure points explain what Article 7 means with the 'sufficiency' of Scripture: Scripture is sufficient not because it provides in-depth answers on every possible subject, but because it contains everything that one needs to believe for salvation (Heyns 1988:107). This links on to the final words of BC Article 2, which states that God reveals himself in his Word 'as much as we need in this life, for his glory and for the salvation of his own'.

The second part of BC Article 7 argues that because Scripture is sufficient, no one should teach the church anything which is not contained in Scripture (alluding to Gl 1:8), add or subtract from Scripture (alluding to Dt 4:12, 12:32 and/or Rv 22:18–19) or consider any human writings, customs or decisions as equal to Scripture (as was done by the Roman Catholic Church during the time of the Reformation). The church, concludes Article 7, is to reject everything that does not agree with Scripture (supporting the argument with quotations from 1 Jn 4:1 and 2 Jn 10).

In brief, BC Article 7 confesses that Scripture is sufficient for knowing three things: the will of God, the way of salvation and how to serve God.

A number of themes in Hebrews allude to the sufficiency of Scripture:

- *God's revelation in his Son is final*: As stated above, Hebrews starts with a statement that the same God who spoke in the Old Testament times continued to speak in his Son. The reference to God speaking 'in these last days' has an eschatological ring to it. Elsewhere I argued that the writer of Hebrews indicates with this phrase that a new era within God's plan of salvation has dawned with Christ's life, death, resurrection and exaltation and that his revelation in his Son is final (Coetsee 2016:4–5, 7; cf. Bruce 1990:46; Peterson 2002:123–124). If this is the case, God's revelation in his Son is sufficient, and no additional revelation is needed.
- *Christ's sacrifice is sufficient for salvation*: Hebrews insists that Christ's sacrifice was sufficient for the salvation of man. This is especially emphasised in the central chapters of Hebrews which elaborate on Christ's high priestly ministry (Heb 7:1–10:18). It states that Christ was sacrificed 'once' or 'once for all' (Heb 7:27; 9:12, 26, 28; 10:10; cf. 10:12, 14), meaning that no other sacrifice will ever be needed (Heb 9:25–26; 10:18). Through his sacrifice, Christ secured 'an eternal redemption' (Heb 9:12). He is able 'save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him' (Heb 7:25).
- *Through Christ man can approach God with confidence*: Taking the sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice as a departure point, the writer of Hebrews emphasises to his addressees that they may now approach God with 'confidence' (Heb 4:16; 10:19; cf. 7:19). The writer argues that because of the perfect sacrifice of Christ, his addressees have fearless access to God.
- *Man must heed God's revelation and salvation in his Son*: The sufficiency of God's revelation in his Son and the sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice explain why the writer urgently and continually warns his addressees against neglecting God's speech (cf. Heb 2:1–4; 3:7–4:13; 5:11–6:12; 10:26–31; 12:14–29). This was a real danger that the community faced. Because the addressees were apathetic towards God's revelation and salvation in his Son, the writer warns them that if they were to become apostate, it is impossible for them to be saved (cf. Heb 6:4–6; 10:26). This once more underlines the sufficiency



of God's revelation and salvation in his Son. Rather than being apathetic, the addressees should serve God by offering 'acceptable worship, with reverence and awe' (Heb 12:28).

Although it is once more impossible to argue that the writer of Hebrews supports the sufficiency of the 66 books of the Reformed canon, it is clear that he was convinced of the sufficiency of God's revelation and salvation in his Son, which forms the heart of BC Article 7.

## Some implications for the (reformed) church today

This article set out to prove that the view of Scripture found in the book of Hebrews is echoed in BC Articles 2–7. By means of summarising BC Articles 2–7 and comparing the nucleus of each article with the book of Hebrews, the article found grounds for its hypothesis. The Reformed view of Scripture can indeed be traced to the book of Hebrews. The writer of Hebrews had the conviction that God makes himself known by Scripture (BC Article 2b), that Scripture is divinely inspired (BC Article 3), that there is a difference between the canonical and apocryphal books (BC Articles 4 and 6), that Scripture is authoritative (BC Article 5) and that Scripture is sufficient for knowing the will of God, the way of salvation and the way in which to serve God (BC Article 7).

Consequently, BC Articles 2–7 can boldly be confessed by the church with the conviction that it is based on Scripture. The implications of this for the (reformed) church in the 21st century are quite simple:

1. Scripture is God's revelation.
2. Christ is the climax of God's revelation.
3. Man should urgently heed God's revelation in Scripture.

When the above is taken as the departure point of the church, it has a profound impact on the church's preaching, catechesis, pastoral work, missions and training of ministers. In fact, it has a profound impact on the ministry of the church as a whole. The church's confession concerning Scripture is the foundation for all its convictions and, consequently, its actions. Although not referring to BC Articles 2–7 in the first place, the words of Hebrews 4:14 summarise the church's calling in this regard: '[s]ince then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession' (Heb 4:14; cf. 10:23).

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