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Hebrews and Hermeneutics: The State of the Question

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Hebrews and Hermeneutics: The State of the Question

My task for the next ten minutes is to summarize the state of Hebrews research in terms of Hebrews and “hermeneutics,” which I will take broadly to include a number of different topics, all of which relate to Hebrews’ engagement with the Jewish Scriptures. I have roughly divided the subject into matters of text, form, and meaning. So I proceed with these three categories in view.

Text

First, we have matters of text. Under this heading, we might include questions such as what text of the Jewish Scriptures Hebrews followed and what texts Hebrews seems to have considered authoritative. Further, within such a “canon,” which books does Hebrews emphasize or favor in particular?

With regard to the text of the Jewish Scriptures there is near unanimous consent: the author of Hebrews functioned on the basis of some form of the Old Greek tradition, which we imprecisely refer to as the Septuagint. This conclusion has long enjoyed a consensus and has recently received confirmation in the work of Radu Gheorgita, *The Role of the Septuagint in Hebrews* (2003). We will all be aware that the author used a Greek text that differed in some ways from the Hebrew textual tradition. Thus the author uses the Greek version of Psalm 40 in Hebrews 10, and his argument on the rest of God is based on the Greek word *καταπαύσις* in the Greek text. One area of further research is the question of which Septuagintal textual tradition the author of Hebrews might have used. But before progress in this area can take place with regard to Hebrews, advances in Septuagintal study will first need to take place.

With regard to what writings the author considered to be witnesses of God's word, he refers to all three sections of the current Jewish canon: the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. Of the Minor Prophets, he uses only Habakkuk, Haggai, and probably Zechariah. With regard to the Writings, he refers only to the Psalms aside from one citation of Proverbs. In addition, he seems to know Wisdom, Sirach, and Maccabean traditions, as well as traditions relating to the death of Isaiah. Among these books, the author especially heard God's voice in the Psalms. A number of studies have explored Hebrews' use of the psalms, chief of which is Simon Kistemaker's 1961 book, *The Psalms Citations in the Epistle to the Hebrews*.

Several other studies have explored Hebrews' use of one or another specific text from the Old Testament. David Hay's 1972 monograph *Glory at the Right Hand* included an early treatment of Hebrews' use of Psalm 110. In the same year, George Buchanan's Anchor Bible commentary attempted to interpret the entire book as a midrash on Psalm 110. More recently, James Kurianal (2000) and David Anderson (2001) have explored Hebrews' use of Psalm 110 in their respective studies *Jesus Our Priest* and *The King-Priest of Psalm 110 in Hebrews*. Other studies that engage with Hebrews' use of specific texts from the Jewish Scriptures include P. Katz's 1958 article, "The Quotations from Deuteronomy in Hebrews," and James Swetnam's 1981 study of *Jesus and Isaac*, which focused on Genesis 22.

Form

Under the heading of form I am including matters relating to how the author refers to material from the Jewish Scriptures. Here I would make a case for four broad categories,

namely, explicit citations, midrashic retellings, allusions, and echoes. Different scholars reckon the number of explicit quotations of the Jewish Scriptures variously, ranging from Richard Longenecker, who gave the number at thirty-eight, to G. B. Caird, who suggested twenty-nine. Pamela Eisenbaum, with a very cautious definition of a citation, identifies 31 in her 1997 book, *Jewish Heroes of Christian Faith*. William Lane concurred with this number in his 1991 commentary in the Word Biblical series.

Eisenbaum's study draws a sharp distinction between the way Hebrews retells biblical narratives and the way it cites Scriptural texts directly. Her observations raise some significant issues that we might profitably pursue in the days to come. In particular, she notes that the author of Hebrews deliberately deemphasizes human agency in relation to the Scriptures. She makes the significant observation that nearly all of Hebrews' direct quotations are citations of direct speech that can be placed on the mouth of God, Christ, or the Holy Spirit. Direct quotations thus take on the character of oracles and, perhaps without even conscious intention, become more authoritative in effect than the biblical narratives that Hebrews simply retells.

Several studies have examined Hebrews' use of one or another character from the narratives of the Jewish Scriptures. Eisenbaum's work of course explores the various heroes of faith in Hebrews 11. Mary Rose D'Angelo's 1979 study examined *Moses in the Letter to the Hebrews*. Fred Horton and Bruce Demarest in the same year (1976) explored not only Hebrews' use of Melchizedek but also the way other interpreters throughout the centuries have understood him. Finally, we have already mentioned Swetnam's 1981 study *Jesus and Isaac*.

When I make a distinction between allusion and echo, I am myself alluding to the distinction well made by Richard Hays in his 1989 *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*. The principal difference between the two is the degree to which the reference is clear and intentional. When the author asks why, if Joshua had brought rest to God's people, the text in David would speak of another day, he is alluding to the story of Joshua's conquest of Canaan. On the other hand, an echo, as defined by Hays, is much more subtle and can even be subconscious on the part of an author. Thus when the author wrote that the *logos* of God was active and sharper than any two-edged sword, was the image of Wisdom 18:15 in the back of his mind, where God's *logos* leaps from heaven carrying a sword and carries out judgment on the firstborn of Egypt. Obviously, it is much more difficult to establish the validity of an echo than that of an allusion.

As far as I am aware, there is not as yet any significant treatment dedicated to the echoes of Scripture in the book of Hebrews. Indeed, I know of no book length study that specifically targets the formal features of Hebrews' references to the Jewish Scriptures. As Eisenbaum's work shows, these features seem to have significance in relation to the hermeneutic of the author and the way he found meaning in the biblical text. This area is thus also one that bears further exploration.

Meaning

When we begin to think of the meaning that the author of Hebrews ascribes to the Jewish Scriptures, we can speak both in terms of the mechanism or hermeneutic proper that he employed in its interpretation, as well as of the product of that mechanism in his theology and practice. Further, we can speak of the rhetorical use to which he put the extracted

meaning of those texts both in the surface structure of Hebrews' argument and in its illocutionary intent. If we start with the question of how Hebrews' use of Scripture relates to its rhetorical structure, two works come to mind, George Buchanan's 1972 Anchor Bible commentary and G. B. Caird's brief article in 1959, "The Exegetical Method of the Epistle to the Hebrews." Buchanan suggested that the whole of Hebrews was a sermon based on Psalm 110, while Caird suggested that Hebrews was structured according to four Scriptural texts: Psalm 8, 95, 110, and Jeremiah 31.

Few have followed Buchanan. And while Caird's observations seem to have some validity, it seems highly doubtful that the chief ordering principle of Hebrews' literary structure consists of its citations of Scriptural texts. Indeed, there is no consensus at present on how to break down the literary structure of Hebrews. The question of how citations of Scripture might interplay with the major literary divisions of Hebrews remains a matter for further exploration. I personally wonder whether current discussions on how Philo has structured the individual interpretive segments of his *Allegorical Commentary* might contribute something to our analysis of Hebrews midrashic techniques.

A number of interesting prospects for further investigation arise from the author's rhetorical use of Scripture. I have already mentioned Eisenbaum's sense that the oracular nature of direct citations in Hebrews implicitly enables the author to subordinate various features of the Scriptural narrative in relation to Christ. I myself have further suggested in a 2004 article that the categories of *υπόδειγμα* and *σκιά* in Hebrews 8:5 might relate more to exegetical patterns and copies than to ontological ones. As in Colossians 2:17, the author would thus consider many of the literal practices of the old covenant to be

“shadowy” interpretations of those texts, where the more substantial meaning relates to Christ.

This comment affords a convenient segway into the various levels of meaning that Hebrews ascribes to the text of the Jewish Scriptures, as well as the exegetical methods that the author used to arrive at those meanings. On the one hand, there is nearly universal agreement on most of the exegetical tools that the author used. For example, Hebrews’ scholarship universally agrees on the importance of methods like *qal wahomer* or *gezera shewa* for the author’s interpretation of Scripture. While I disagree with many of his conclusions, I might mention Herbert Bateman’s 1997 study, *Early Jewish Hermeneutics and Hebrews 1:5-13* as one that extensively engages these interpretive techniques in Hebrews 1. I would add the principle of *non in thora, non in mundo* to the list of techniques when we consider the author’s interpretation of Genesis 14 in Hebrews 7. Friedrich Schröger’s 1968 study, *Der Verfasser des Hebräerbriefes als Schriftausleger*, read the entire book of Hebrews against the background of pesharim such as those found at Qumran. While we can commend his study as perhaps the only book length, comprehensive assessment of Hebrews’ use of Scripture, the similarity between Hebrews and Dead Sea Scroll pesharim is probably not strong enough to contribute much to our understanding of Hebrews beyond the general sense that Jews at the time read the Scriptures in the light of their contemporary situations.

We would also find universal assent to the idea that Hebrews read the Jewish Scriptures typologically. Here we should probably mention Goppelt’s 1982 study, *Typos: The Typological Interpretation of the Old Testament in the New*. Hebrews explicitly uses the terms τύπος (8:5) and αντίτυπος (9:24). However, we should also

remember that the meaning and relationship between these words is something that the author of Hebrews must define, not the hermeneutical and theological debates of later centuries. At this point let me note that I find the continued widespread, resistance among some Hebrews scholars to the use of allegory somewhat befuddling. While so much of their work is to be commended, I find wholly unnecessary the concerns in this regard of books like Richard Longenecker's *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* and Dale Leschert's 1994 study *Hermeneutical Foundations of Hebrews*. It is difficult for me to make sense of verses like Hebrews 7:3 or 9:8-9 without resort to allegory, and I make this assertion without any denigration implied.

We finally mention that there is universal consent that Christ, more than any other factor, provides the focal lens for the way the author interpreted the Jewish Scriptures. While I personally take issue with many aspects of Graham Hughes' 1979 *Hebrews and Hermeneutics*, I would agree broadly that the question of how Christ fits with various Jewish institutions was a key element in the author's hermeneutic. But in my opinion, Hughes' study addresses this component in a highly out of focus way. After we have taken the interpretive traditions the author inherited into account, we must address the rhetorical situation and the rhetorical problem behind Hebrews before we can fairly address its theology and rhetoric as presented in this letter. It is arguably the rhetorical situation behind Hebrews that raises the question of Christ in relation to the Levitical cultus and the proper course of the narrative of God's people. Only after we have these purposes and views in mind can we gain a clear perspective of how the author interpreted and appropriated specific Scriptural texts. While not all will agree, I would argue that it is usually the purposes and theology of a person that drive their interpretation, rather than

the interpretation that drives one's purposes and theology. With this point for further discussion in mind, I yield this platform to the question of Hebrews and Theology.