

## THE HERMENEUTICS OF THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS

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As the author of a "word of exhortation" (Heb 13:22) to a discouraged community, the writer of Hebrews appeals to the OT more consistently than any other writer of the NT, thus becoming one of the first writers to establish the meaning of the OT for the church. Indeed, Hebrews consists largely of a series of reflections on a variety of texts that are contemporized for the sake of the recipients. As the literature on Hebrews indicates, one may examine the hermeneutics of Hebrews from more than one perspective. Most studies of the author's hermeneutics have focused on the intellectual environment. James Moffatt<sup>1</sup> and C. Spicq,<sup>2</sup> for example, argued that the author of Hebrews employs the allegorical method of Philo of Alexandria. L. Goppelt, in *Typos*, argued that the author's exegetical work is most dependent on typology.<sup>3</sup> S. Kistemaker, in *The Psalms Citations in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, suggested that Hebrews employs the pesher style of interpretation that was characteristic of the Dead Sea Scrolls. According to Kistemaker, "Nearly every chapter of Hebrews reveals the peculiar features of midrash pesher."<sup>4</sup> Otto Michel also argued for the similarities in the exegetical method of Hebrews and the Dead Sea Scrolls.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> James Moffatt, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1924) xlvi, "The exegetical methods which the author took over from the Alexandrian school are not ours."

<sup>2</sup> C. Spicq, *L'Épître aux Hébreux* (Paris: Lecoffre, 1952) 1.330-50.

<sup>3</sup> Goppelt maintains: "It is significant that Hebrews, the NT book that has the most quotations from the OT, makes the most intensive use of typology." *Typos* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 176.

<sup>4</sup> S. Kistemaker, *The Psalm Citations in Hebrews* (Amsterdam, 1974) 174.

<sup>5</sup> O. Michel, *Der Brief an die Hebräer* (KEKNT; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1966) 76.

F. Schröger has written the most detailed study of the exegesis of Hebrews. Schröger analyzes each citation of Hebrews in order to determine what methods of exegesis were employed. Schröger concludes:

In Hebrews one finds the interpretation of the OT passages according to rabbinic rules, according to the method of midrash pesher employed by the Qumran people, according to the perspective of promise-fulfillment with the view that the Old Testament includes an imperfect hint of the events which have taken place in Christ. . . . In a few cases the allegorical method is also to be found.<sup>6</sup>

The major concern of those who have examined the use of the OT in Hebrews is reflected in Schröger's conclusion. Most studies have approached the exegesis of Hebrews in an attempt to identify it with Alexandrian (i.e., allegorical) or apocalyptic (i.e., typological, promise-fulfillment) methods. While this emphasis may be helpful at some points, it has major flaws. By raising the questions in this restrictive manner, most studies have not given sufficient attention to the particular nuances in the approach of the author of Hebrews. Furthermore, the author does not use the categories of typology, allegory, or promise and fulfillment. Thus his interpretive work is not likely to fit neatly into this category.

### The Author's Commentary on the Hermeneutic Task

Studies of the hermeneutics of Hebrews have given insufficient attention to the author's own comments about the word of God and the task of hermeneutics. The author, who describes his work as a "word of exhortation" (13:22), is one in a series of leaders who have "spoken the word of God" (13:7) to this community, thus confirming the word which was originally spoken by the Lord (2:1-4). To speak a "word of exhortation" is to address the community with the word of God, the *λόγος* of Scripture, which speaks to the readers of the author's own time. Thus Hebrews consists of a series of interpretations of the Bible.

Observers have often noticed the pervasiveness in Hebrews of terms for speaking, which suggest the author's role in speaking the word of God. Indeed, the first major unit of the book begins with the reference to the God who has spoken "in a son" and concludes with a reference to the "word of God," which is living and active. At 5:11 the author introduces

<sup>6</sup> F. Schröger, *Der Verfasser des Hebräerbriefs als Schriftausleger* (Regensburg: Pustet, 1968).

his readers to a "word" which is "difficult to explain." This term refers to the central section of the epistle, 5:1-10:18. Near the end of the book the author refers to the one "who is speaking" (12:25). These references indicate the significance of the author's work in the task of hermeneutics. This "word of exhortation" is based on words which continue to speak through the author's own voice.

### *Hebrews 1:1-3*

The opening lines of Hebrews, which have been described as the "overture" or exordium to the entire sermon,<sup>7</sup> introduce the problem which will occupy the author throughout this "word of exhortation": the relationship between God's word in the past and in the "last days." This programmatic statement implies both the continuity and discontinuity of the two periods.<sup>8</sup> Continuity is suggested by the identification of the recipients of the former revelation as "fathers" (1:1; cf. *πρεσβύτεροι* in 11:1) and by the fact that the same God initiates the action in 1:1 and 1:2. Furthermore, both in the present and in the past "God has spoken." The emphasis on God's speaking, a major emphasis of the entire epistle (cf. 2:1; 4:1-2; 12:25), provides the point of continuity between the present and the past. The church, like Israel, has received the "*λόγος* of hearing" (4:2). The prophets were, according to 1:1, the instruments of God's word. The institutions and words of the OT have their origin in the words of God. Consequently, the author consistently cites the OT as the word of God.

The formulation in 1:1-2 indicates that the author does not speak in terms of promise and fulfillment. He employs the framework of continuity and discontinuity, as the antithetical parallelism of "in the past" and "in these last days" indicates. The old revelation was *πολυμερῶς και πολυτρόπως*, "partial and piecemeal."<sup>9</sup> The introduction here anticipates the argument of the rest of the book, for the author consistently indicates the superiority of the work of Christ. Unlike the Old Testament institutions, which are regularly described as incomplete and partial (cf. 7:11, 27; 10:1-4), God's work in the son is final. Thus the word in the son

<sup>7</sup> E. Grässer, "Hebräer 1,1-4. Ein exegetischer Versuch," in *Text und Situation* (Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1973) 187.

<sup>8</sup> Graham Hughes, *Hebrews and Hermeneutics* (SNTSMS 36; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979) 35.

<sup>9</sup> Hughes, *Hermeneutics*, 6

both corresponds to and surpasses the fragmentary and incomplete words of the past.

The exordium of 1:1–3 anticipates the arguments which are developed in the remainder of the epistle. It provides the hermeneutical key to the author's work, for the author consistently demonstrates the continuity and discontinuity of the revelation of God. The OT is obviously the word of God, for the author appeals to it regularly. It provides the author's points for comparison, and its people are the church's predecessors in hearing the word of God (cf. 4:2; ch. 11). At the same time, the author argues consistently that God's word in the son surpasses his words of the past. In the remaining references to God's activity in speaking, the author indicates more precisely what is meant by "in a son."

#### *Hebrews 4:12–13*

The first major unit of Hebrews concludes, after a series of reflections on OT texts, with a hymnic meditation on the word of God. This meditation recalls the overture to the epistle. The opening line of the book and 4:12–13 thus begin and end with reflections on the word of God. Although 4:12–13 appears at first to be an isolated unit, the context of Hebrews suggests the author's meaning. Γάρ in 4:12 indicates that these reflections grow out of the author's commentary on Psalm 95, which has been the subject of 3:7–4:11. In the author's reading of the wilderness story, the disobedience of Israel was total, and "all" who left Egypt failed to enter the promised land (3:16–19).<sup>10</sup> Israel, a "model" (ὑποδείγμα) of disobedience,<sup>11</sup> did not enter the promised rest. The Psalm citation "They shall never enter my rest" (Heb 3:11; Ps 95:11) is understood as evidence that the rest was never attained. The author employs the well-known rabbinic hermeneutic rules, *gezera shewa*, to show that the "rest" of Ps 95 and Gen 2:2 ("God rested" on the seventh day) was the transcendent world (cf. 3:1; 11:14, 16; 13:14).<sup>12</sup>

The words of the psalmist, understood within the framework offered by Gen 2:2, now become "sharper than any two-edged sword" for the church. A hermeneutical principle, which the author uses twice elsewhere

<sup>10</sup> Paul likewise recalls the wilderness period as a time of failure.

<sup>11</sup> The OT offers both positive (6:12; cf. chap. 11) and negative (cf. 12:15–17) examples for the church.

<sup>12</sup> The *gezera shewa* argument was one of the seven hermeneutical rules attributed to Rabbi Hillel. Cf. H. L. Strack, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (New York: Athenaeum, 1969) 94.

(7:11; 8:7), allows him to conclude that the full benefits of salvation were never attained in the OT. Hence the OT texts reflect an awareness of imperfection and a lack of fulfillment and imply "another day" (4:8). For the author of Hebrews, the "today" of the psalm is the time of the church (3:12–13, 15; 4:7, 8). The OT text addresses the church with both warning (3:12) and promise (4:1–11). The church has heard the same "word of hearing" (4:2), and stands under the same promise which was heard by Israel (4:1). The author does not claim that the promise has been fulfilled in the church. Instead, the psalm now functions as God's oath to the church ("I swore in my wrath . . ."), providing both warning and assurance that "there is a sabbath for the people of God" (4:9).

The fact that the words of the OT address the church "today" suggests that the "word of God" in 4:12 is to be identified with the words which God has spoken in his son. God has previously spoken to Israel, but has now addressed the church (4:2). There is, as 1:1–2 indicates, a continuity in the revelation of God's word. However, the word of God has been spoken with finality in his son (1:1–2; 2:2–3). Consequently the community which hears the word is summoned to pay attention (3:1), to hold on (3:6, 14), to fear (4:1) and to make every effort (4:11) to maintain its fidelity. Indeed, the Christians are to "encourage one another" (3:12–13) and thus to continue the author's own work of providing a "word of exhortation" (13:22). Because of Israel's example (4:11), the community knows that it cannot trifle with the word of God, which both penetrates the inner recesses of the heart and calls for a word in return ("to whom we give an account," 4:13).

If the passages cited in Heb 3–4 are understood as God's word in the son, the other citations of Hebrews are also God's word "in a son." The manner in which the author introduces citations is significant in demonstrating how the OT now functions for the church. The citations are introduced as words of God, of Christ, or of the Holy Spirit, not of a human author. The author of Hebrews does not speak of promise and fulfillment, and his citations are never introduced as Messianic proofs. In the catena of citations in chapter 1, OT texts are addressed to the son (1:5, 8, 10, 13) and to the angels (1:7). The citation of Psalm 8 (Heb 2:5–18) is introduced as God's "witness" about the humiliation and exaltation of Jesus. In the citations introduced in 2:12–13, the son is the speaker, and his language is derived from the OT. Similarly, in 10:5–7, words from Psalm 40:6–8 are quoted as the words of the incarnate son. The words of the OT are in fact God's words to the church in the last days. One may note also that the author's introductory formulae in citing the OT provide a clue to his view of the word of God. Forms of λέγειν are preferred to the

familiar "it is written"; and the author has a decided preference for the present tense (cf. 1:6, 7, 8; 2:12-13; 3:7). The author of Hebrews, as Graham Hughes has said, sees such a close conformity between the OT and the NT forms of the word of God that the former can now be appropriated to give expression to the latter.<sup>13</sup> The community reads its Bible as "God's word in a son," and it reads in Scripture a word of judgment and warning.

*Hebrews 5:11-14*

In 5:11-14 the author makes a third major statement about the word of God in the life of the community. The statement that "there is much to say which is hard to explain" is the opening line of a paraenesis which interrupts the discussion of the high priesthood in 5:1-10. The subject of the high priesthood after the order of Melchizedek is resumed in 6:19. The concern of 5:11-14 is, as Hughes has pointed out, hermeneutics.<sup>14</sup> The accusation against the lethargic church in 5:11-12 focuses on its incompetence in the word of righteousness, its inability to teach and its intellectual sluggishness. The lethargy of the church, which is frequently attested in the epistle, is here related to its lethargy with respect to the word of God.

For such a community, the solid food and word of righteousness is "hard to explain." This "difficult word" is not esoteric, for it should be the property of the whole community. Indeed, just as the whole community is "dull of hearing," the mastery of the "difficult" word is available to all who will exercise their faculties with the solid food (5:14).

The "word that is hard to explain" is the treatment of the heavenly high priesthood, which is developed from the use of Ps 110:4 and other texts in 7:1-10:18. The author is thus aware that Christ speaks a "beginning word" (6:1) and a "difficult" or "sublime" word.<sup>15</sup> A church which has endured into the second generation needs the stability which is derived from the "word that is hard to explain." The texts of the OT, especially Ps 110:4, are also the words of Christ to the community.

<sup>13</sup> Hughes, *Hermeneutics*, 62.

<sup>14</sup> Hughes, *Hermeneutics*, 47-51.

<sup>15</sup> The term *δυσερμηνευτος* was used in antiquity for a sublime message. Origen uses the term *λόγος δυσερμηνευτος*, particularly against Celsus's criticism of Christian belief, to describe the sublimity of the Christian message. Cf. James W. Thompson, *The Beginnings of Christian Philosophy* (CBQMS 13; Washington: Catholic Biblical Association, 1982) 31.

*Hebrews 6:13-10:18*

The hermeneutical procedure of the author of Hebrews is to be seen in the "word that is hard to explain," which is introduced in 6:13-20. The author begins this section by indicating that Abraham is the paradigm of fidelity in attaining the promise (6:12-15). After indicating the importance of oaths in providing assurance (6:16), the author indicates that Christians also have received an oath, which provides the encouragement to seize the hope that has been laid out (6:18). This oath is not, however, the same oath which Abraham received. The oath and the promise, the "two unchangeable things" which offer encouragement to the church, were made available with the exaltation of Christ (6:19-20), when Christ became the high priest after the order of Melchizedek. The oath spoken to the church is apparently connected with God's oath recorded in Ps 110:4: "The Lord has sworn, and will not change his mind, 'Thou art a priest forever'" (cf. 7:21). The author places such a significance on the oath which the church has received that the Christian message is described as "the word of the oath" (7:28). The consistent references to God's oath are to be understood within the larger context of the introductory statement of Hebrews. God's "word in a son" includes both the words spoken by Jesus (2:1-4) and the entire event of the death and exaltation. Indeed, God's deed in the exaltation is also his word of oath to the church, his final and definitive form of the promise.<sup>16</sup>

Unlike Paul, the author of Hebrews never says that "all of the promises of God find their Yes in him" (cf. 2 Cor. 1:20), for in Hebrews God's promise still remains (cf. 4:1). Indeed, Jesus Christ continues to speak to the church through the words of the OT (cf. 12:25). Promises spoken to Israel once more offer hope to this discouraged church (cf. 12:26). God speaks in the event of Jesus Christ, confirming his oath, and the church continues to await the fulfillment of the promise (cf. 12:26), in continuity with ancient Israel.

Throughout the "word that is hard to explain" (7:1-10:18), the author reads the OT from the perspective of the "last days" (cf. 1:1-2) which have dawned with the Christ event (cf. 7:11, 28; 9:9; 10:1), the decisive moment in salvation history. Indeed, Ps 110:1, 4, the church's favorite exaltation text, provides the framework for the entire section (cf. 7 *passim*; 8:1, 2; 10; 10:11-14), and Christ is presented as the exalted high priest in the heavenly sanctuary. Other passages, including the Yom Kippur ceremony of Lev 16 and Exod 25:40, are employed to fill the

<sup>16</sup> Hughes, *Hermeneutics*, 53.

portrait of Christ the heavenly high priest. The decisive moment is Christ's entry (cf. 6:19, 20; 9:12, 24) into the heavenly world. The variety of OT texts is read in the light of God's revelation in Christ. The author knows apart from the OT that Christ "died for our sins" and that he is exalted to the presence of God. The OT is then interpreted to illuminate the portrait of Jesus Christ, the exalted one, and to provide the categories for describing him. Although the institutions of the OT are ineffectual, since they are associated with a "fleshly" (7:16) or "earthly" (9:1) sphere, they provide the framework or "parable" for understanding the exalted work of Christ. Thus the OT is the word of God when it is read in the light of the Christian confession even though it describes inadequate institutions.

### Interpreters of Scripture

An essential feature of this reading of Scripture is the work of the Holy Spirit in the church, as the author indicates within the "word that is difficult to explain" in 9:8,9. After describing the furnishings of the tabernacle and the annual entry of the high priest into the most holy place, the author says, "By this the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the sanctuary is not yet opened as long as the outer tent is still standing (which is symbolic for the present age)." Just as the Holy Spirit is earlier cited as the author of Scripture (3:7), the Spirit is now active in the task of interpretation. The reference to the Holy Spirit is not simply an allusion to the divine inspiration of the Scriptural account, but an indication of the contemporary relevance of its message.<sup>17</sup> Forms of  $\delta\eta\lambda\acute{o}\omega$  are used in 9:8 and 12:27 for the task of interpretation. In both instances the present tense is used. The language indicates the continuing activity of the Holy Spirit in the interpretation of Scripture. Otto Michel comments on 9:8:

Here in the order of cult and priestly service lies the intent and the announcement of the Holy Spirit, who speaks to us in signs and parables in a way different from the Jewish understanding of the word. The Holy Spirit is thus the living word of God, who can speak also to us through the word of the law.<sup>18</sup>

The ultimate purpose of the author's interpretation of Scripture is to offer a "word of encouragement," as he indicates at the end of the book.

<sup>17</sup> Harold Attridge, *Hebrews* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989) 240.

<sup>18</sup> Michel, *Hebräer*, 306.

The significance of encouragement in the lengthy interpretation of the OT is also suggested by the fact that the introductory words to this "word that is hard to explain" point to the "encouragement" which is offered to Christian "refugees" as they seize the hope that is set before them (6:18-19). The end of the section also (10:19-39) is a challenge for Christians to hold fast to their hope and to offer encouragement to each other (10:23-25). Thus both the introduction and the conclusion of the section refer to the encouragement and hope that are offered by the Christian interpretation of the OT. A "word of exhortation" (13:22) is thus an exercise in hermeneutics, a demonstration of the fact that ancient words continue to offer encouragement to a weary church.

The author is not the only one who offers a word of encouragement, for his words suggest also that the whole community engages in the task of encouraging each other (3:12; 10:25). Just as encouragement is the task of all, hermeneutics is the task of all, according to 5:11-14, for the author summons all to be teachers, to become "skilled in the word of righteousness," to "train the faculties" with the "word that is hard to explain" and thus to be able to distinguish good from evil (5:14). The task of hermeneutics is not reserved for a special class within the church, for the author appears to be challenging his readers to become teachers of the word of God, in continuity with him and with the past teachers (13:7). This discouraged church can find its encouragement and hope only as the members jointly involve themselves in the hermeneutical task. Only an encouragement that is based on the word that continues to speak to the church will offer a genuine "word of exhortation."