

What are They Saying about the Letter to the Hebrews?

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The Letter to the Hebrews continues to be relatively neglected among both academic and more popular works on the books of the New Testament. A glance through any issue of *New Testament Abstracts* will indicate that, while it garners more interest than, say, the Petrine Epistles or Jude, it receives far less attention than any of the Pauline Corpus, the Gospels or the Apocalypse, whether absolutely speaking or relative to its length.

The explanations for this are no doubt the same as has always been the case: in a word, obscurity. In the first place, the authorship, date, place of origin and addressees and occasion of the Letter continue to elude scholars – no very specific answers to any of these questions have been proposed which are anything more than plausible, although there are certainly some intriguing new proposals to which I shall presently come. Secondly, the thought-world of Hebrews remains, with the possible exception of the Apocalypse, the most alien to the modern reader of all the New Testament. The combination of what looks like a certain kind of Platonism with Levitical notions of priesthood and sacrifice, the juxtaposition of what we might call vertical themes of exaltation into the heavenly sanctuary with ‘horizontal’ notions of pilgrimage and entry into the Promised Land continue to render the argument extremely difficult to follow, as does the linguistic form of the book, with its complex syntax and use of rhetorical tropes.

Yet at the same time one is conscious that there is a single argument being made, that there is a brilliant mind behind this text with profoundly important things to say about the significance of Christ’s death and subsequent exaltation. The modern reader of Hebrews feels that he is rather a dunce, missing the point of the Letter because he is at such a distance from the writer and those to whom he wrote, simply not living in the same world of ideas and symbolic imagination. In other words, no

book of the New Testament cries out more for the assistance of historical-criticism, and yet none is more resistant to its dissecting work.

Two Recent Commentaries

Indeed, this is the point with which Alan C Mitchell begins his recent (2007) commentary in the *Sacra Pagina* series:

The task of any biblical commentary is to attempt to explain the text in a cogent and coherent manner. Hebrews, by its own admission, sets the bar for this task rather high, as it contains many things that are difficult to explain (5.11). Still, the ambiguities and anomalies of Hebrews make that endeavour not only challenging, but interesting as well (p. 1).

Or, to quote another recent English language commentary, that of Luke Timothy Johnson (*New Testament Library*, 2006), 'Hebrews challenges the capacity of the historical-critical approach to do what it does best' (p. 1). These two commentaries react somewhat differently to the difficulty, with Johnson largely setting aside the standard historical-critical questions of date, authorship and so on in preference for presenting a vision of the Letter as a whole within a fairly broad First Century Hellenistic Jewish milieu, and with a particular emphasis on the peculiar form of Platonism that, in Johnson's view, is critical to understanding the Epistle. Indeed, he suggests that Hebrews plays a crucial role in the development of Western thought, representing a Hegelian synthesis, almost, between the Platonism of the Greeks and the non-dualistic thought-world of Judaism:

The Platonism of Hebrews is real – and critical to understanding its argument – but it is a Platonism that is stretched and re-shaped by engagement with Scripture, and above all, by the experience of a historical human saviour... Hebrews shows us what Philo might have written had he been a Christian, and contributes to the transformation of Hellenism that, with the Christian Platonists Clement, Origen, and Augustine, fundamentally affected the shape of Western philosophy (p. 21)

Of course, Johnson would recognise that the exact historical reality in which the Letter emerged must have been more complex than this stylised view: Hebrews was not, after all, written to be the representative of a stage of the development of Christian thought; we cannot be sure that it shows the impact of the Jewish Scriptures upon Platonic thought and not the reverse, for example. But Johnson succeeds in locating Hebrews within an intellectual conversation, as it were, in a way that simultaneously illuminates the details of the text and makes the text illuminate the development of Christian ideas. Johnson is, as we have come to expect from him, very interested also in the history of the

reception of the text he is dealing with. The disadvantage of Johnson's approach is that if one disagrees with his overall vision, if one does not accept that Platonism, albeit 'stretched and re-shaped' Platonism, is the key to Hebrews, then one is likely to reject many of his specific conclusions about the meanings of various passages.

Mitchell's approach is a little more conventional, taking a balanced and well-informed view on individual sections and seeking, as far as possible, to allow these to point towards an overall message that he hopes will emerge from the detailed reading. His brief introduction gives an excellent survey of the latest critical research and proposals, and he does not attach himself to any idiosyncratic approach. One can hardly do better than to engage with this introduction in order to present in orderly fashion some recent proposals and debates concerning the historical-critical questions; it is in filling in some of the gaps, and noting some more recent contributions, that I will hope to point readers beyond what they will find in these two generally excellent commentaries.

Only God Knows

Let us begin, then, with authorship. It continues to be obligatory, apparently, to quote Origen's remark, cited by Eusebius (*Church History* 6.25.14) that 'only God knows' who wrote the Epistle, though in fact – as Mitchell correctly points out – Origen did in several places defend the Pauline authorship of Hebrews (see e.g. *Letter to Africanus* 8, *Contra Celsum* 3.35 and 7.29). It is surprising, though, that Mitchell spends as long as he does dealing with the only recent serious defence of Pauline authorship, by D.A. Black in *Faith and Mission* 18 (2001). Some of Black's arguments are seriously flawed, and every modern commentary offers a long and convincing list of reasons for thinking that, while there are intriguing parallels between Hebrews and some Pauline theology – and of course the reference to Timothy at the end of the last chapter – this Epistle simply cannot be of Pauline authorship in any meaningful sense. One can talk of it as belonging to a 'Pauline school' only in such a broad sense that the expression is really emptied of any significance. Mitchell is also perhaps over-generous in the space he gives to Ruth Hoppin's *Priscilla's Letter* (1997) that repristinates Harnack's 1900 suggestion that it was Paul's female co-worker who wrote Hebrews. Harnack's was the supreme example of the hermeneutics of suspicion, and Hoppin adds to this a frankly tendentious paradigm of femininity which she claims Hebrews exemplifies.

Tertullian's suggestion of Barnabas, which gathered some support in the first half of the twentieth century, appears now to have no advocates, and

the only named individual with any significant following continues to be Apollos, originally Luther's suggestion. He is favoured by Ellingworth, Hagner and Pfitzner in their fairly recent commentaries, and is the least improbable candidate for Attridge and Johnson, who enunciates nine features of the Apollos outlined by Acts 18 and 1 and 2 Corinthians which between them amount, he tells us, to 'a significant list of qualities, which cannot be applied with the same precision to any other early Christian figure' (p. 43).

Nevertheless, Johnson also points out three difficulties with this speculative hypothesis: there is no evidence in either Acts or 1 Corinthians for many of the features of the readers' situation seemingly implied by Hebrews, such as public afflictions, imprisonment, danger of falling away and various others; more importantly, Johnson acknowledges as many do not that our knowledge of the personages of early Christian communities is extremely partial: Apollos may be the least unlikely, or even the most likely, of those whose names we know, but that is all, and we should have the humility to recognise this. But finally, and quite rightly, Johnson tells us that it doesn't really matter: whoever the author was, what we do know is that 'another remarkable mind beside Paul's was at work in interpreting the significance of the crucified and raised Messiah' (p. 44).

It is, I would think, the fact that Johnson can be as dismissive as this of the significance of the question of the authorship of Hebrews that is of most interest – along with the fact that he relegated discussion of it to a few brief pages at the end of his introduction – that is most important. It is symptomatic of the fact that finding some tenuous association with Paul, or the Pauline churches or 'school', is no longer of importance for those scholars who are interested in Hebrews. For some, its importance comes from its canonicity or its later impact upon Christian thought, and for others it is, as it were, self-authenticating, due to its innate theological excellence. One does not need to justify taking it seriously by associating it with 'The Apostle'. Having said that, I must remind readers of my opening remark that it remains among the more neglected books of the New Testament, and perhaps this has something to do with the failure to link it more closely to St Paul.

When and Why?

If an early date for Hebrews could be established – say, before the fall of the Jerusalem temple in AD 70 – then perhaps this would pique greater interest in the Epistle, but there has been as little progress on date as on authorship. It is, in fact, whether Hebrews is to be dated before or after

this watershed moment that continues most to exercise scholars, and the arguments have not changed: Johnson is persuaded, on balance, by the view that the absence of any mention of the *fall* of the temple is a strong argument for an earlier date, albeit an argument from silence: ‘given the entire structure of the argument, silence on the point of the actual historical fate of the Jewish cult demands of the author an almost incredible delicacy, if in fact that temple had been destroyed’ (p. 39). It should be pointed out, though, that the destruction of the temple clearly did not obviously and necessarily mean that the sacrificial cult had come to an end once and for all, as if on the morning of the next day the Jewish people as one woke up and said ‘what shall we do instead?’ Johnson adds the sense that Hebrews has of imminent eschatology, the lack of concern conversely with the delay of the parousia, and the lack of concerns typical – supposedly – of later New Testament writings such as ecclesial hierarchy and the preservation of a set tradition of teaching, and makes a cumulative case for a date between AD 50 and 70. But none of these arguments are new.

Mitchell, equally tentative, goes for a post-70 date: as is typical, the principal reason is the lack of reference to the Jerusalem temple! Following Raymond Brown’s *Death of the Messiah* (1994), he also notes the number of parallels between Hebrews’ description of Christ’s suffering and the passion in Mark, and concludes that ‘it seems reasonable to assume that the author of Hebrews knew some form of Mark’s gospel’ (p. 11). He goes further, though, in suggesting that Hebrews can be read as a development of the Markan tradition, a conclusion to the Gospel, almost. Partly, Mitchell is here dependent on the tradition that Mark is a Roman gospel and Hebrews is also addressed to Rome. It is certainly an intriguing possibility, though, to see Hebrews as the result of a profound reflection upon the Markan passion, without getting bogged down in hypothetical historical specifics.

Mitchell comes closer than Johnson to wanting to pin down the situation to which Hebrews is addressed. There are famously precious few specifics – references to hardships in 10:32f, 12:4 and 13:3, and the closing farewell are really all we have, apart from criticisms, explicit or implicit, of the audience’s lack of faith or understanding or endurance (4:11, 5:12 etc.) which allow no firm conclusions to be drawn. Indeed, given how little we know of the circumstances of particular Christian communities in the First Century, and that we do not know where Hebrews was written to (though Rome remains most critics’ best guess) or from (Alexandria?), it seems ill-advised to assign the limited, vague

and perhaps misleading references to persecutions to any particular historical episode.

There is one much more specific proposal, though, which is worth noting, in an exciting collection of essays published in 2005 by Brill: *Hebrews: Contemporary Methods – New Insights*, edited by Gabriella Gelardini. This is that of Ellen B. Aitken, who in ‘Portraying the Temple in Stone and Text: The Arch of Titus and the Epistle to the Hebrews’ notes the many suggestive parallels between Hebrews and the *Arcus Titi* in Rome. This magnificent arch depicts the triumphal procession of Vespasian and his son Titus in AD 71 following the fall of the temple, and was erected following Titus’s death ten years later by Vespasian’s younger son Domitian, the third of the Flavian emperors whose public image was so dependent upon their victory in Judaea. Parallels include questions of sonship, succession and universal rule, linked to glory, honour and the subjection of enemies; the offering of sacrifice as the fulfilment of divine demands – for the one given the triumph did so at the end *qua* priest of *Jupiter Capitolinus* – and an interest in the accoutrements of the Jerusalem temple, which are detailed in Hebrews 9 and portrayed on the arch.

These parallels are intriguing indeed, though as Aitken herself admits they do not prove anything; but happily it is not her intention to pin down the historical location of Hebrews, but rather to draw our attention to how the Epistle might have functioned in the ears of an audience whose eyes and ears had already been subjected to this kind of Flavian propaganda, an ancient form of political ‘spin’ that may have left Jewish Christians – indeed, any Christians – feeling alienated, and to whom Hebrews would offer an alternative model of priestly kingship and an alternative ‘ethic of solidarity’ (p. 145). She very tentatively suggests that the implicit critiques of the pretensions of the Roman *Principes* evoked by these parallels give good reason for thinking that Hebrews may have been written with this in mind, therefore perhaps in the early 80s. But she insists that this would at most be one motif in a ‘highly multivalent text that contains numerous interwoven ways of constructing and defining the identity and ethic of its audience’ (p. 132); it is not *the key* to understanding the Epistle. Even if on other grounds we doubted that Hebrews should be dated so late as this, her thesis still holds water as an analysis of how it might have been read by among the very earliest readers, and of the way in which the text as a homiletic work rather than one purely of doctrinal exposition functions not just to assert theological ideas but to construct the identity of its audience.

An Effective Sermon?

In line with trends in biblical studies more generally, there is an increasing interest among scholars of Hebrews in such questions: not so much ‘what was the theology of the author of Hebrews?’ as ‘what was (or is) the effect of Hebrews upon its readers or audience?’ A particularly important study in this area is that of Kenneth Schenck in the SNTS Monograph Series, *Cosmology and Eschatology in Hebrews: The Settings of the Sacrifice* (2007). It is by no means an ahistorical work, one of those that seek to insulate themselves from objective criticism by professing no interest in the state of affairs in the first century; rather, it acknowledges the fruitlessness of a search for certainty about the author and his intention in respect of ‘the situation’ or ‘the problem’ his audience was facing, while at the same time recognising that ‘we cannot avoid the matter of Hebrews’ “background of thought” in interpretation’ (p. 2).

Having noted that trying to situate Hebrews in one of several possible monolithic thought-worlds (is Hebrews Platonic *or* apocalyptic, and so on) is happily no longer a fashionable approach, he suggests that it is better to begin by seeking to discern the overall *rhetorical* agenda of the text: we should ‘let the text generate its own world of thought in terms appropriate to its own categories, and ... take the rhetorical agenda of the whole text of Hebrews into account rather than a particular literary section or a specific topical theme’ (p. 10). Here Schenck is reacting against a still-prevailing general tendency for Protestant interpreters to privilege the ‘horizontal’ eschatological motifs of wilderness wandering and entry into the Promised Land that dominate the paraenetic sections while Catholic scholars place much greater emphasis on the ‘vertical’ cultic motifs more prevalent in the expositional passages. Schenck is right that Hebrews creates for its audience a single ‘rhetorico-narrative’ thought-world in which these two dimensions are inseparable, even if we are able to distinguish them. Our attempts to delineate this thought-world can and should be informed by our knowledge of first-century rhetorical techniques and more broadly of first-century thought, the possible meanings and connotations of words and phrases, but must also allow the text to speak with its own voice.

Schenck’s conclusion is that the eschatological framework is primary within Hebrews and the spatial metaphors are just that, subordinate to the eschatological reality in which the present world is passing away, and the abiding realities have been inaugurated through Christ’s earthly ministry. Ultimately, the abiding reality is the heavenly dwelling of God, access to which is granted to the audience who in this world are, as it were,

pilgrims in a foreign land, and are being exhorted to continue their journey towards a sure destination.

The weakness of Schenck's approach, though, is that his methodology to some extent determines his conclusions: because he has sought out the underlying *narrative* of Hebrews, he discovers a controlling world-view which is indeed a narrative one, i.e. one with a beginning, a middle and an end! The timeless and spatial is metaphorical, the temporal and eschatological is real. It is not obvious to me that a plausible first century audience, even if the inheritors of a Jewish sensibility and profoundly imbued with the language and symbology of the Jewish scriptures, would necessarily have understood that the spatial was to be thus subordinated.

Another extremely interesting, though less ambitious, rhetorical approach to Hebrews is to be found in the volume edited by Gelardini, 'The Intersection of Alien Status and Cultic Discourse in the Epistle to the Hebrews' by Benjamin Dunning. This article draws intriguing parallels between the rhetorical effect of the sojourning/pilgrimage motif in Hebrews (and also similarly in *1 Clement*) and examples of nineteenth-century Mormon literature which similarly 'put this discourse to work in order to construct and maintain their distinctive religious identity in a confusingly pluralistic universe' (p. 178). Once again our knowledge of the first-century Roman world allows us to see the parallels between that world and the historical situation of the early Mormons, so that this work is properly grounded in objective reality, but again also Dunning is more interested in the likely *effect* of the use of language than in the conscious purposes of the unknown author.

An additional important advantage of Dunning's work is that he is able to show how the links forged rhetorically between the audience's cultic life and outsider status (here he tentatively follows Käsemann) extend into the final chapter of the Epistle. When many readings of Hebrews have viewed chapter 13 as something of an afterthought – though less so, and certainly less explicitly so, in recent years (see especially Johnson pp. 336f.) – it is good to see an interpretation that places the proper emphasis on Hebrews 13.13: 'let us go to him outside the camp'. Dunning considers this to be a 'key hermeneutical turn [that] transform[s] the text's paraenesis. How is the audience to hold fast, approach, and enter? These are metaphors steeped in the language of insider status – yet they must now be appropriated through identification with the margins... It is strangers and sojourners who will experience entrance into the city that is to come' (p. 191). One can see possibilities here for some sort of liberationist reading of Hebrews.

Before leaving the subject of rhetorical approaches to Hebrews, it should be noted that Schenck's book and Dunning's article both use 'rhetoric' in a broad sense of the persuasive impact of language upon readers or hearers, rather than that of a narrow and technical study of classical rhetorical techniques. A brief article following Dunning's in the same volume by Hermut Löhr, 'Reflections on Rhetorical Terminology in Hebrews', tentatively suggests a number of places in which the author might be revealing a good classical rhetorical education, and knowledge of *termini technici* of the ancient rhetorical schools or handbooks. This might give us cause to re-examine these handbooks, to re-immense ourselves, Löhr implies, in a particular way of thinking quite alien to our own, rather than risk too quickly reading into the text 'a very logical, rational and even modern kind of argumentation, which is repeatedly expressed in the secondary literature' (p. 210). Löhr does not go as far as some rhetorical-critical readings – not so much of Hebrews but certainly of the Pauline corpus – and suggest that the Epistle cannot rightly be understood, and could never have been understood, without a good rhetorical education, but his warning is a sensible one. We would have to say, though, that any modern person reading Hebrews for the first time would surely come to the realisation that here is a logic, a way of thinking and arguing, that is not entirely like his own.

Intertextuality

An increasingly popular area of study among New Testament scholars is that of 'intertextuality', and in particular the literary relationship between the Old Testament and the New. Vast amounts have been written, focusing especially on the Pauline corpus, following ground-breaking work by Richard Hays (*Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*, 1989) and on the synoptic Gospels. At the end of 2007, G.K. Beale and D.A. Carson produced a 1,280 word *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* which will be wonderfully useful for scholars and preachers alike. Considering the extent to which so much of the Epistle to the Hebrews is explicit exegesis of the Old Testament, it is surprising how little and how late this approach has spread to that letter, but it has begun to do so, and represents an important new way of entering into the theological world of Hebrews. I shall end this brief survey by considering three studies that, on different scales, shed light on Hebrews by looking at the way in which it interacts with the world of the Old Testament.

On the broadest scale, one can trace a particular theme or symbol in the Old Testament and see whether a trajectory can be traced through the Jewish scriptures, into intertestamental literature and then leading us into

Hebrews. This is the approach taken by Kiwoong Son in *Zion Symbolism in Hebrews: Hebrews 12:18-24 as a Hermeneutical Key to the Epistle* (2005). The author begins with the sensible caveat that there are many themes in Hebrews and the epistle should not be reduced to just one, and echoing Schenck he recognises the danger of preferring as a ‘background’ whatever best illuminates whatever a particular scholar has decided is *the* key theme of the text. It is as well to keep such a disclaimer in mind when one goes on to read that ‘both the author’s subjects and background thought are derived from Jewish apocalyptic traditions especially concerning [...] Sinai and Zion symbolism, and therefore the whole epistle could be understood against the background thought of those traditions’ (p. 24). What follows is a very detailed exposition of the themes of Zion and Sinai, and the relationship between those themes, in the Old Testament and then into later Jewish literature, with a strong emphasis on the apocalyptic pseudepigrapha. Though he tends to over-conflate Zion with the Jerusalem temple, Son convincingly shows an emerging pattern in which Mount Zion represents a new and superior Sinai, and therefore a new and superior covenant in which YHWH is directly and accessibly present rather than the more distant and terrifying figure of the mediated Mosaic covenant. The shift of the presence of the Lord from Sinai to Zion points towards the renewal of the covenant promised by the prophets, the eschatological hope of redemption.

Son is not so successful in showing – rather he assumes – that Hebrews is picking up on these motifs, so that what he is offering is not *the*, or even *a* *key*, to the epistle but rather a reading that might have been available to a first-century Jewish reader. But it may well be that this is the most that the historically-critical interpreter can and should offer. One of the most important aspects of Son’s contribution is the recognition of the inextricable intertwining of the horizontal and vertical dimensions of Sinai/Zion symbolism within the world-view of (some) late Second Temple period readings of the Old Testament and therefore one can legitimately hold the two dimensions together in a reading of Hebrews also, rather than subordinate one to another: ‘the idea of the heavenly Jerusalem (spatial imagery) is inseparably related to the new Jerusalem (temporal imagery), and thus it is a mistake to understand the traditional Jewish eschatology solely on the basis of either the horizontal or vertical view’ (p. 59). As in ‘traditional Jewish eschatology’ so in Hebrews, is essentially the argument.

As I suggested, one of the difficulties with Son’s approach is that he does not tie Hebrews in closely enough to his putative scriptural background. This is hard to do when tracing macroscopic themes, and easier when

proposing a more specific textual background, as David Allen does in *Deuteronomy and Exhortation in Hebrews* (2008). His proposal, more specifically, is that the Song of Moses (Deuteronomy 32) is not only explicitly cited at 1.6 and 10.30 (twice), but is also echoed many other times, each of which is examined in close and largely convincing detail. Further citational, thematic or rhetorical appeals to the surrounding chapters of Deuteronomy are also explored, and these make a cumulative case for ‘an overarching Deuteronomic reading of the letter’ (p. 6). Like other authors I have considered, Allen is interested in the rhetorical effect of Hebrews, and he demonstrates that this is to locate the audience in, as it were, a Deuteronomic situation, namely on the threshold of the Promised Land. An important part of the argument is that the intertextual echoes that Allen detects are ones that a first-century audience of Hebrews might have been expected also to detect because ‘they represent the focal role Deut 28–34 played within contemporary Judaism in explaining and foretelling the outworking of Israel’s broader story’ (p. 199). Apocalyptic literature especially, though not exclusively, read salvation history in a Deuteronomic historical schema, and in particular pseudepigrapha and other apocalypses that appear to deal with the crisis in history following the loss of the temple in AD 70 often strive after the same effect of locating their readers in a situation parallel to that, or perhaps better *foreshadowed* by that in which the Israelites found themselves at the end of Deuteronomy, as their wilderness wanderings drew to a close.

Allen shows how the many intricately interwoven themes of Hebrews, such as holy mountain, new covenant, entry into rest, priesthood and kingship are all more clearly understood against the background of Deuteronomy, and hints at a Christology of Jesus (*‘Iesous’* = Joshua) as true successor of Moses which merits further consideration.

Gelardini’s Proposal

Our last study takes us back to Gelardini’s volume, and to that editor’s own article within it: ‘Hebrews, an Ancient Synagogue Homily for *Tisha-be Av*: Its Function, its Basis, its Theological Interpretation’. As the title suggests, this is a very specific proposal, and it depends upon the reconstruction of the *Palestinian Triennial Cycle* of synagogue readings proposed by Lee I. Levine and Ben Zion Wacholder. These scholars argue that this cycle of readings, one each from the Torah and the Prophets for every Sabbath day running, like our modern Sunday lectionaries, over a three-year period, was established by the end of the Second Temple period. The actual evidence for this, as Gelardini herself admits (p. 110) is poor, and she is very dependent upon the opinions of

these two experts' best guesses. She also relies on later significantly Rabbinic evidence about the customary forms of synagogue sermons, and it is always problematic to read back into the First Century evidence from many decades, or even centuries, later.

However, if this evidence and the experts' guesses are correct and valid, then we can say two things about a synagogue homily: first, we know about the rules for the structure of the sermon, that the reading from the Torah (the *Sidrah*), which was continuous over the three years, was not cited in the sermon except for its opening verse, or even the immediately preceding verse, at the end of the introductory section of the homily. Otherwise, the preacher's challenge was to relate to it, by imaginative leaps of association, various *other* biblical passages, especially from the psalms. Then in the middle part of the homily, the *haphtarah* – the prophetic reading, which like our modern first readings on Sundays was not part of a continuous reading – would be quoted *in extenso*. The final part of the sermon then sought to apply these two readings, the relationship between them and perhaps also the liturgical day or season, exhortatively to the readers' lives.

Secondly, we know that one *possible* pair of readings, which in some reconstructions was given for the ninth of the month of *Av*, matches Jeremiah 31:31-4 (cited fully at Hebrews 8:8-12, the longest biblical citation in the epistle) with Exodus 31:18–23:35. This relates the story of the golden calf and the subsequent punishment of this idolatrous faithlessness, the intercession of Moses on behalf of the people, and the subsequent renewal of the covenant. While it is possible to find echoes of these events – faithlessness in the wilderness, intercession, and of course covenant renewal – it is not easy to see how this passage in particular is found in Hebrews; until we discover that immediately preceding this passage, at Exodus 31:17, we read 'it [sc. Sabbath observance] is a sign for ever between me and the people of Israel that in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested, and was refreshed.' So Gelardini argues, Hebrews 4:4, which has always been understood to be citing Genesis 2:2, is in fact citing Exodus 31:17.

What completes Gelardini's intriguing reconstruction of the midrashic thread of Hebrews – a striking example of how historical knowledge can shed extraordinary new light on an ancient text – is the importance of the date of 9th *Av* in the Jewish calendar. Again, her evidence is really dependent upon later Rabbinic texts (although the date is given as a fast day in Zechariah 8):

Tisha be-Av commemorates and mourns over the sins of Israel... According to an early source in the Mishnah... it was on *Tisha be-Av* that God decreed that the desert generation was not to enter the Promised Land [i.e. in Numbers 14] (p. 121).

Moreover, this date and Yom Kippur, of which so much is made in the later part of Hebrews, stood at either end of a liturgical period of especial fasting, and ‘presuppose each other’ (p. 122) – the relationship is not unlike that of Good Friday and Easter Day, though more widely separated – and later sermons for this date typically begin with recalling the sinfulness of the hearers before moving into a more hopeful mode, often including eschatological and messianic expectations.

It seems unlikely that Gelardini can ever be proved right in her very specific reconstruction of the liturgical form and occasion of Hebrews. If one wishes to read more, one must consult her 2006 volume *Verhartet Eure Herzen Nicht: Der Hebraer, Eine Synagogenhomilie Zu Tischa Be-Aw*, published by Brill, a snip at £132 from a well-known internet book seller. Even if one is convinced, many questions are left unanswered regarding authorship, date, and so on, though some possibilities become more likely. And however the text was originally composed, and indeed originally heard, it takes on a life of its own and becomes open to new interpretations. Indeed, if Gelardini is right then perhaps the forming of new, theologically rich associations between Hebrews and other texts, other thought-worlds and sets of symbols, would perhaps be exactly what the original author would have welcomed. It is, at least in part, precisely because the Letter to the Hebrews resists firm conclusions about authorship, date, occasion and suchlike that it continues to stimulate some of the most exciting and theologically fertile ideas in the world of New Testament studies.

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