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The Exegetical Method of the Epistle to the Hebrews

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I HAVE chosen my theme in the face of a formidable display of learned discouragement. For whatever the commentators may think to be the permanent contribution of the author of Hebrews to Christian theology, most of them have been agreed about one thing—that it is not to be found in his exegesis of the Old Testament; and many of them would be prepared to add that the abiding value of his message is actually obscured by the scriptural argument in which it is embedded. “Far-fetched Old Testament exegesis and obscure Old Testament characters, like Melchizedek, have little or no interest for us today.”¹ “This new doctrine, based on an exegesis which to us may appear frigid and artificial, has come to him by a divine illumination and bears the authentic marks of Gnosis.”² “Our author is true to his training in his employment of the allegorical method of exegesis so characteristic of Philo.”³ “The exegetical methods which the author took over from the Alexandrian school are not ours.”⁴ “The whole forms a close piece of reasoning which, given the premisses, is valid for its time. Assuming the correctness of the Alexandrian methods of exposition, the writer offers convincing proofs of his thesis that Jesus is at once the ‘ideal’ High Priest and the Supreme Sacrifice.”⁵

Underlying these criticisms is the assumption that the author is a member of the Alexandrian school of Jewish Platonists and that his use of Scripture has close parallels to that of Philo. “The philosophical element in his view of the world and God is fundamentally Platonic. Like Philo and the author of Wisdom, he interprets the past and the present alike in terms of the old theory that the phenomenal is but an imperfect, shadowy transcript of what is eternal and real.”⁶ Now it is not to be denied that Hebrews has some Alexandrian affinities, for there is a quotation from the Book of Wisdom in the first paragraph; but even some of the most vehement exponents of its Alexandrian origin have been ready to admit that the dependence of the author on Philo was too superficial to be a dominant influence on his theology. Alexander Nairne put his finger on the fundamental difference between the two writers when he wrote: “Philo deals with allegories, the Epistle with symbols.”⁷ Both writers believe in the existence of two temples:

1. W. Neil, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, p. 22.
2. E. F. Scott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, p. 38.
3. H. A. A. Kennedy, *The Theology of the Epistles*, p. 193.
4. J. Moffatt, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, p. xlvi.
5. T. H. Robinson, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, p. xviii.
6. J. Moffatt, *op. cit.*, p. xxxi.
7. *The Epistle of Priesthood*, p. 37.

but, while in Hebrews it is the literal, earthly temple which is the shadowy symbol of the real temple in heaven, Philo is thinking allegorically of "two temples belonging to God, one being the world in which the highpriest is his own Son, the Logos, the other being the rational soul" (*De Somn.* i, 37). Both writers make use of the figure of Melchizedek: but to Philo he represents the Logos or Reason ("Reason is a priest, having the Self-existent as his portion, and entertaining high and sublime and magnificent thoughts about him," *Leg. Alleg.* iii, 82), and in Hebrews he is an historical figure who foreshadows the equally historical Christ as highpriest. Further examples of these contrasts have been collected by C. K. Barrett in his contribution to the C. H. Dodd *Festschrift*, in which he draws the thoroughly justified conclusion "that certain features of Hebrews which have often been held to have been derived from Alexandrian Platonism were in fact derived from apocalyptic symbolism."⁸ The two worlds of the epistle are the two worlds not of idealism but of eschatology.

During the last ten years there have been others besides Barrett who have been helping to undermine the traditional estimation of Hebrews as a work written under the influence of Alexandrian philosophy. In his Baird Lecture William Manson argued strongly that the theology of Hebrews had its roots in the Hellenistic mission of the church which was inaugurated by Stephen and which in its widest development remained for long untouched by Pauline thought.⁹ He lists no fewer than eight parallels between the epistle and Stephen's speech in Acts, the most important of which is the idea of God's call as a call to continuing pilgrimage. C. H. Dodd has given us excellent reasons for believing that many of the Old Testament quotations in Hebrews were used in accordance with a "principle of selection and interpretation" which was commonly accepted throughout the whole of the early church. And other writers, such as G. W. H. Lampe and K. J. Woollcombe,¹⁰ have undertaken to distinguish between the allegorical exegesis of Alexandria and the typology which is commonly employed by all New Testament writers.

I do not propose to go in any detail into these recent developments. I mention them simply because they have emboldened me to reopen what at one time appeared to be a closed question. The scriptural exegesis of Hebrews has been described as Alexandrian and fantastic. If, as now appears possible, the critics are wrong with the first epithet, is it possible that they are wrong also with the second? I should like to suggest that, so far from being an example of fantastic exegesis which can be totally disregarded by modern Christians, Hebrews is one of the earliest and most successful attempts to define the relation between the Old and New Testaments, and that a large part of the value of the book is to be found in the method of exegesis which was formerly dismissed with contempt.

8. *The Background of the New Testament and its Eschatology* (ed. W. D. Davies and D. Daube), p. 393.

9. *The Epistle to the Hebrews*.

10. *Essays in Typology*.

Let us then lay aside the weight of traditional scholarship and the pre-suppositions which cling so closely to us, and come with an open mind to ask what the epistle has to tell us about the Old Testament.

1. THE VALIDITY OF THE OLD ORDER

In the first place the author believed that the old covenant was a valid revelation of God. It had been superseded and fulfilled but not abrogated. It contained a genuine foreshadowing of the good things to come, not a Platonic illusion of ultimate reality. God spoke to the fathers by the prophets (1:1); Moses was faithful in all God's house (3:5); Aaron was called by God to his priestly office (5:4); "the message spoken by angels was valid and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution" (2:2); these same angelic guardians of the old order had their part to play in the working out of God's purpose of redemption, for they were "ministering spirits sent forth to serve, for the sake of those who were to obtain salvation" (1:14); and throughout the whole of Old Testament history there were men who, although they lived too soon to see the realization of the promises of God in which they had put their trust, nevertheless obtained a good report through that faith which secured for them the assured possession of the unseen objects of their hope (11:39), and which made them, even in the midst of their earthly pilgrimage, inhabitants of the heavenly Zion that was to become their eternal home (12:22-4).

There is nothing here of the Pauline contrast between the transitory régime which brought condemnation and death and the permanent régime of justification and life, between Mount Sinai in Arabia whose children are slaves and Mount Zion whose children are free. For in Paul's experience the law was not merely incomplete; it had claimed completeness, claimed to be a way of salvation and to give that life which in fact it had no power to give, and just because it had exceeded its God-given function it had become a demonic agency which enslaved its adherents. But in Hebrews part of the validity of the old order is its constant disclaimer of finality. Throughout the Old Testament period men were constantly being warned not to think more highly of their present religious status than they ought to think, and, if they were men of faith, they confessed themselves to be strangers and sojourners to whom the old covenant offered no abiding city.

It has often been remarked that, when the author of Hebrews quotes from the Old Testament, he quotes it as the voice of God. The Old Testament retained its validity for him because in it God had spoken to the fathers, so that those who read it could hear in it the living and abiding word of God. They could not, indeed, hear in it the full and final word of salvation, spoken only in Christ, by which alone they could be led on to their destined perfection, but they could hear anticipations of the gospel and the call of God to live by faith in that better thing which he had reserved for the latter days. In this connexion it is worthy of note that the opening statement of the

book, that God spoke by the prophets, is not meant to be taken in any narrow sense, as though the prophetic corpus were being singled out from the rest of the Old Testament for special mention. Of the twenty-nine quotations in the epistle, twelve are from the Pentateuch, five from the prophets, eleven from Psalms, and one from Proverbs. Of the fifty-three allusions, thirty-nine are to the Pentateuch, eleven to the prophets, two to Psalms and one to Proverbs. This can only mean that the author regarded the whole of the Old Testament as a prophetic work, both because God spoke in it to his people and because in it he everywhere directed their attention to the eschatological future.

2. THE SELF-CONFESSED INADEQUACY OF THE OLD ORDER

We come, then, in the second place to the main argument of the epistle, which has all too often been misstated. It is not the purpose of the author to prove the superiority of the New Covenant to the Old, nor to establish the inadequacy of the old order. His interest is in the confessed inadequacy of the old order. His ultimate purpose, of course, is pastoral, for he has been appalled at the spiritual lethargy, the slackening of morale, which has overtaken his friends, and he writes to summon them to that constant striving towards maturity of faith which Christianity demands and makes possible. To this end he attempts to show them that they are living in the day of grace and opportunity to which the whole history and education of the people of God have been directed. His argument falls into four sections, each having as its core an Old Testament passage which declares the ineffectiveness and symbolic or provisional nature of the Old Testament religious institutions. All other scriptural references are ancillary to these four (Pss. 8, 95, 110, and Jer. 31), which control the drift of the argument.

Of these four passages the one which is most readily adaptable to our author's purpose is the last one, Jeremiah's prophecy of the new covenant. "Christ has obtained a ministry which is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion for a second. For he finds fault with them when he says: 'The days will come, says the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel . . . ' In speaking of a new covenant he treats the first as obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away" (8:6-13). Here is a perfectly sound piece of exegesis. Jeremiah predicted the establishment of a new covenant because he believed the old one to be inadequate for the religious needs of sinful men. The sacrifices of the old covenant were a perpetual reminder of sin and of man's need for atonement, but what men needed was the effective removal of sin, so that it could no longer barricade the way into the inner presence of God.

The exegesis of the other three passages is almost exactly parallel to that which we have examined. Ps. 110 describes the enthronement of a king who

is also to be priest in perpetuity according to the order of Melchizedek. The psalm was written at a time when the temple cultus was in the hands of the levitical priests. Why should anyone dream of a new order of priesthood unless he felt the present order to be deficient? "If perfection had been attainable through the levitical priesthood . . . what further need would there have been for another priest to arise after the order of Melchizedek, rather than one named after the order of Aaron? . . . On the one hand, a former commandment is set aside because of its weakness and uselessness (for the law made nothing perfect): on the other hand, a better hope is introduced, through which we draw near to God" (7:11-19). It is important to recognize that throughout his treatment of Melchizedek our author is concerned solely with the exegesis of Ps. 110. He carries us back to the story of Genesis 14 not to compose a fanciful and allegorical *midrash* on that chapter after the manner of Philo, but rather because he wishes to answer the very modern question: "What did the words 'priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek' mean to the psalmist who wrote them?" He clearly believed (and had dominical authority for believing) that the Psalm was a messianic prophecy and that the Psalmist, feeling the need of a new priesthood to mediate between God and man, found the prototype of that priesthood in the shadowy figure of Melchizedek who, at the dawn of Israel's history, had stood on the Godward side of Abraham, so that through him Abraham was enabled to draw near to God.

Still proceeding backwards, we come to that section which deals with Ps. 95, which summons the people of God to seize *today* the opportunity forfeited through unbelief by their fathers, the opportunity of entering into God's rest. Here again the same exegetical method is followed as we have seen in the later sections. The whole elaborate argument arises out of the question: "What did the Psalmist mean by entering into God's rest?" This rest was clearly first offered to Israel in the wilderness, since it was their disobedience then that caused God to swear in his wrath that they should not enter it. Does this then mean that the rest which they forfeited is to be equated with cessation from earthly wanderings and entry into Canaan? No! because a later generation entered Canaan under Joshua and, if that had been what was meant by God's rest, there would have been no need for the Psalmist later still to renew the offer of rest and the warning not to lose it through hardness of heart. This rest, then, must be a spiritual rest of which the entry into Canaan was only a symbol. It is in fact to be identified with God's own rest on which he entered at the end of his labours of creation. And the offer of this rest to man remains an unfulfilled promise until the coming of Christ. "If Joshua had given them rest, God would not speak later of another day. So then, there remains outstanding a sabbath rest for the people of God; for whoever enters God's rest also ceases from his labours as God did from his" (4:8-10).

These three sections of the argument are stylistically linked by an unfulfilled condition: "if Joshua had given them rest . . ."; "if perfection had

been attainable through the levitical priesthood . . ."; "if that first covenant had been faultless. . . ." All three passages, in fact, have to do with the unfulfilled promises of the old régime. The opening section lacks this device, but in other respects it follows the same pattern. It is concerned with the exegesis of Ps. 8, with its picture of man, humbled for a season but destined for glory, honour and universal authority. Here again the Old Testament expresses an aspiration and a vision to which it was unable to furnish the fulfilment. For, as our author remarks, "We do not yet see everything in subjection to man" (2:8). The psalm is quoted only at 2:6-8, but it controls the argument of the preceding chapter, for from the first mention of angels at 1:5 throughout the formidable catena of texts in ch. 1 the author's one aim is to illustrate the theme of the psalm that man has been destined by God to a glory excelling that of the angels and that this destiny has been achieved by Christ, both individually and representatively, as the pioneer of man's salvation who came to lead many sons into their destined glory.

By these four arguments the epistle seeks to establish its main thesis, that the Old Testament is not only an incomplete book but an avowedly incomplete book, which taught and teaches men to live by faith in the good things that were to come. It had a doctrine of man which remained unfulfilled until the coming of Jesus, an offer of divine rest which remained outstanding because there was no way by which God's message of grace could be mixed with faith in those who heard it. It had a priesthood and looked for a better one to draw men near to God. It had sacrificial ordinances and knew them to be ineffective in dealing with sin.

3. CHRIST, AARON AND MELCHIZEDEK

We have not yet, however, exhausted the significance which the Old Testament had for the author of Hebrews. For between the ineffective institutions of the old Israel and the effective work of Christ there are real and meaningful parallels. Let us begin with the conception of highpriesthood. Christ is our great highpriest, and our author is at some pains to show that there was a real correspondence between his office and that of Aaron. Both were chosen from among men, both were appointed to bring offerings for sin, both were qualified by sympathy to represent ignorant and wayward men, both were ordained to office by God. But it is not enough for us at this point to invoke the magic word typology, as though we explained everything by calling Aaron the type of Christ. For Christ as highpriest is related not only to Aaron but also to Melchizedek, and related in a totally different fashion. The words which the epistle uses to denote these relationships are shadow (*skia*) in the case of the Aaronic priesthood and the cultus for which it was responsible (10:1) and likeness (*homoiotês*) in the case of Melchizedek (7:15).

The Old Testament cultus, we are told, had "but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities" (10:1). The

priesthood had all the outward trappings of true priesthood, but not the essential quality of enabling men to draw near to God. The sacrifices had the appearance of true sacrifice, but not the power to purify the conscience from dead works. What then is the permanent significance of these outworn institutions? "The Epistle describes the sacrifice of Christ in language borrowed from Levitical use, but connects it in no other way with Levitical sacrifices. They were not types fulfilled in His sacrifice. They were shadows which pass away and leave nothing but a picturesque language behind them."¹¹ A picturesque language! A picture of an unknown fruit resembles the real thing in all except reality: it will not satisfy your hunger, but it may help you to recognize the real fruit if you should come across it. Similarly, the Old Testament priesthood and sacrifices were only shadow pictures of reality, but they prepared men to appreciate the reality when it appeared in Jesus Christ. God spoke to the fathers in the cultus in order that they might become familiar with a picture language without which they could neither apprehend nor convey the full scope of his later word of salvation.

It is a very different matter with Melchizedek of whom it is said that "resembling the Son of God he continues a priest for ever" (7:3). His priesthood was no mere shadow, but partook in some degree of the reality of the priesthood of Christ. It was a genuine anticipation. For in Jesus, we are told, "another priest arises in the likeness of Melchizedek, who has become a priest, not according to a legal requirement concerning bodily descent but by the power of an indestructible life" (7:15f.). That is to say, Melchizedek represents a natural priesthood which depends not upon heredity or outward appointment but on the inner, spiritual resources of a man's character. Melchizedek, neither inheriting nor inaugurating any priestly succession, blessed Abraham and through him Abraham drew near to God. I do not believe that our author would wish to claim that throughout the whole Old Testament period Melchizedek was the sole representative of the order of natural priests. He certainly believed that throughout this period there were men of faith who "endured seeing him that is invisible" (11:27). Must we not add that a priest with such faith could have penetrated behind the shadows of the cultus and led others in some measure at least into the presence of God? The point, however, is that in Melchizedek, whether he be one man or a whole order of priests, the Old Testament through Ps. 110 appears to recognize the existence of a priesthood radically different from that of Aaron and to look for its full realization in God's Messiah.

4. THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE OLD TESTAMENT TO CHRISTIAN FAITH AND WORSHIP

What, then, according to the Epistle to the Hebrews is the permanent contribution of the Old Testament to Christian faith and worship? I have been suggesting that the contribution is fourfold.

11. A. Nairne, *op. cit.*, p. 181.

(a) Firstly, the Old Testament provides aspirations to which only Christ supplies the fulfilment, questions to which only Christ furnishes the answers. It offers a vision of man's perfection as the wielder of supreme authority under God, a dream of the day when man will cease from his labours and enter into God's own rest, a longing for free access into the divine presence, a fervent desire to be free of sin's slow stain.

(b) Secondly, it provides picture language for the preaching of the gospel. In this respect Hebrews has something important to say to those who are concerned with the nature of religious language and the problem of communication.

(c) Thirdly, the Old Testament provides partial anticipations of the realities which were fully present in Jesus.

(d) Finally, the Old Testament provides, as we see in the eleventh chapter, models of faith, men and women whose lives were securely grounded in a confidence in the future manifestation of God's redeeming power.

Our author does not, of course, argue from the imperfections of the old covenant to the perfections of the new. He starts from Christ and from the Christian experience of salvation which he shares with his readers. He goes back to the Old Testament with his ears already attuned to the voice of him who has spoken from heaven. But the Old Testament enables him to make his new experience articulate, coherent and reasonable. Above all, it enables him to present Christ as the climax of the ongoing, historic purpose of God, the culmination of Israel's long pilgrimage, in the hope that his readers will return with new zeal to their own pilgrimage and find that it leads them also to him who is the perfecter of their faith.