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John Dunnill

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INTRODUCTION

HEBREWS AND HISTORICAL CRITICISM

Though perennially popular as devotional reading, the Letter to the Hebrews has always been problematic for interpreters. It is interesting to compare the epithets with which commentators of quite different viewpoints describe it: a ‘riddle’,¹ an enigma’,² a ‘lonely and impressive phenomenon’,³ ‘as solitary and mysterious as Melchizedek upon whom its argument turns’;⁴ but also ‘a little masterpiece of religious thought’⁵ which ‘rises like a massive column, a soaring grandeur of faith in the edifice of first-century Christianity’;⁶ ‘an unknown text’ which yet discloses ‘the beating of a Jewish-Christian heart’.⁷ Contradictory and unignorable, there is about the book something complete, ‘perfect’ in its own sense of the word, and therefore enigmatic: standing somewhat apart from the New Testament as a whole and contriving to treat even common New Testament topics in its own terms; combining anonymity with an unquestionable air of authority; seeming always to be concealing more than it discloses. Perhaps that is why, though widely read in the early church, it did not receive clear recognition in the canon till the fourth century.⁸

The aim of this study is to demonstrate that ways into an understanding of this book with all its strangeness may be provided by the social sciences, especially structuralist methods as they have been developed in linguistics, literary theory and, most particularly, anthropology. To this end, the argument of these introductory pages

¹ E. F. Scott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Edinburgh, 1922), p. 1.

² W. Manson, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (London, 1951), p. 1.

³ J. Moffatt, quoted by A. Nairne, *The Epistle of Priesthood* (Edinburgh, 1913), p. 7.

⁴ Scott, *Hebrews*, p. 1.

⁵ J. Moffatt, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Edinburgh, 1924), p. xiii.

⁶ Manson, *Hebrews*, p. 3.

⁷ E. Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Christian Experience in the Modern World* (ET London, 1980), p. 238.

⁸ Cf. F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Edinburgh, 1964), pp. xlv–xlvii.

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will move freely between the two, identifying some characteristics of Hebrews which call for special treatment and setting them alongside some corresponding features of structuralism and the sociology of religion, to point to their potential usefulness in interpreting Hebrews.

Interpretation is certainly called for. The last two centuries of scientific criticism have done remarkably little to dispel the air of mystery which surrounds the letter. The ancient question of its authorship has been reopened and new candidates proposed (Montefiore lists twelve⁹), without any consensus emerging. On the question of the book's date, scholars are equally divided between those who think an origin before the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 'impossible'¹⁰ and those who think an origin after AD 70 'inconceivable'.¹¹ Intriguing speculations about the location and situation of its addressees abound.¹² Even if no single hypothesis can command full support, all these arguments are able to aid interpretation by reminding us that both the author and the readers had a very definite identity (whether or not we know it, or need to know it). Indeed, the writer is plainly a person of such marked individuality as to be problematic for those who attempt to discern trends and parties in New Testament theology: does Hebrews belong to Jewish or Hellenistic Christianity? Does it lean towards Paul or John or Luke? Is it part of 'Deutero-Paulinism' or 'Emergent Catholicism'?¹³

With the failure of these critical questions to achieve any assured results, the commentator is reduced to reading the text. Given that this is the most self-consciously artistic book in the New Testament, it might seem that literary criticism would shed more light, but here too debate has settled fruitlessly in introductory questions which, finding no clear answer, are unable to act as steps to higher matters. Much discussion has taken place on the question of the book's genre: should it be regarded as a letter (as its end, though not its beginning, suggests), or as a sermon, or as some other form?¹⁴ What, in this

⁹ H. W. Montefiore, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (London, 1964), pp. 1–12.

¹⁰ N. Perrin, *The New Testament: An Introduction* (New York, 1974), p. 137.

¹¹ Montefiore, *Hebrews*, p. 3.

¹² See, for example, Manson, *Hebrews*, pp. 25–45; Montefiore, *Hebrews*, pp. 11–29.

¹³ See, for example, the evident discomfort which the book causes to Perrin, whose carefully defined categories break down at this point. He is reduced to discussing Hebrews in his chapter on Deutero-Paulinism 'because it was ascribed to Paul in the early church' (Perrin, *New Testament*, p. 137). The second edition admits that this is done 'for convenience'.

¹⁴ Bruce, *Hebrews*, pp. xlviif; F. V. Filson, *'Yesterday': A Study of Hebrews in the Light of Ch. 13* (London, 1967), pp. 16ff; Manson, *Hebrews*, pp. 3–5; Moffatt, *Hebrews*, pp. xxviiiif; Nairne, *Priesthood*, pp. 9f; Scott, *Hebrews*, pp. 8ff.

respect, is the status of chapter 13? If an appendage, was it added by the same author or by another; and, in either case, was this an attempt to imitate Paul's style and therefore borrow his authority?¹⁵

Moving on from these concerns, it would seem that analysis of the powerful imagery of the book would enable us to enter more deeply into the text, but this has received little consistent attention. Because the imagery is never decorative but always fully integrated with the theological argument, study of the imagery falls swiftly into examination of its sources in the Old Testament, Philo and elsewhere.¹⁶ This is perfectly proper, but it fails to capitalise on the strong impression of the unity of its imaginative world which any reading of Hebrews communicates, and leaves unexplored the question whether the theological sources and imaginative effect can be treated simultaneously. This question is the more pressing since it is generally agreed that Hebrews exhibits also a marked theological coherence: studying the book's theology or its intellectual background in piecemeal fashion – whether general topics like eschatology, or specific themes such as Melchizedek or the high-priestly Christology – the parts so abstracted somehow fail to add up to the observable whole. There is here no suspicion of provisional or *ad hoc* conclusions on even the least central topics; rather the theological viewpoint seems to spring forth, like Athene from the side of Zeus, fully armed.

This brings us back to the perceived 'completeness' referred to at the start, and implies that we shall learn at least as much about Hebrews by reading it in isolation as a unity as by attempting to establish cross-references to other New Testament theological and historical data. This is not to suggest that Hebrews stands in any final sense outside the historical and theological context of the church in the middle of the first century; nor is this a pretext for dismissing the detailed and difficult critical questions, which will be dealt with as appropriate below; it may be thought of rather as a Coleridgean argument that it is the property of a complex unity to alter the very nature of its constituent parts in the process of unifying them.¹⁷

¹⁵ Bruce, *Hebrews*, p. 386; Filson, 'Yesterday', ch. 2 *passim*, pp. 13ff; Montefiore, *Hebrews*, pp. 237f; Moffatt, *Hebrews*, p. xxix. On Heb. 13, see further below, pp. 45f and ch. 1, n. 27.

¹⁶ See, for example, Montefiore, *Hebrews*, pp. 6ff; Moffatt, *Hebrews*, pp. xxxiff; Nairne, *Priesthood*, pp. 98ff; Scott, *Hebrews*, pp. 50ff.

¹⁷ This is to apply to the object the power attributed by Coleridge to 'the poet, described in ideal perfection', who 'diffuses a tone and spirit of unity that blends and (as it were) fuses, each into each, by that synthetic and magical power... of imagination'

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Thus Hebrews' Christology and its concept of 'faith', for instance, are both continuous with those found elsewhere; but both are also distinctive and belong, distinctively, to the ambience of Hebrews. The relation of 'faith' as found here to 'faith' in the New Testament in general is through the argument, assumptions and symbolism of Hebrews as a whole; to abstract themes and concepts without taking account of their place in that whole is to run the risk of distorting both the concepts and the arguments we build upon them.

The fact that most of the New Testament literature is openly addressed to particular groups and specific situations, and the past success of scholarship in adding internal to external evidence to build up an increasingly complex picture of Christian life in the first century – and especially of certain elements within that (such as the situation in Corinth, and Christian attitudes to scripture) – cause us to overestimate the interpretative value of such factual knowledge, inclining us to assume that a book is easier to understand if we know a lot about the situation it addresses, and that therefore we need to provide plausible guesses in this direction where too little is known. The traditional view of Hebrews, that it was a letter of warning to Jewish Christians in danger of returning to Judaism, was an attempt to provide the book with a recognisable place within the familiar debates and problems of the New Testament church as currently reconstructed.¹⁸ There is plenty of food for speculation, though little unambiguous evidence; but, whether or not hard facts would be desirable, they are not necessary.¹⁹ Hebrews' addressees are subject to a temptation to 'drift away' (2:1), a temptation which is, in several places, characterised but not identified – for we do not know what they are drifting towards, or why, or what form this 'drifting', as the writer sees it, takes in practice. But the book's theological impact is unharmed by our ignorance, for its positive theological content stands as a sharply delineated shadow of this object, this situation 'out there' which we cannot get into focus.

Thus, to return to the example named above, we can say a good deal about the author's conception of faith: the strongly future-orientated and eschatological flavour it gains by appearing to be

(S. T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* (ed. G. Watson, London, 1956), pp. 137f).

¹⁸ See discussions in Bruce, *Hebrews*, pp. xxiiiif; W. G. Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament* (London, 1966), pp. 279ff; Manson, *Hebrews*, pp. 10ff; Moffatt, *Hebrews*, p. xvi; Scott, *Hebrews*, pp. 14ff; B. F. Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 2nd edn (London, 1892), pp. xxxvff. See further chapter 2 below.

¹⁹ Hughes also attempts to deduce the letter's life-situation from the theological thrust, rather than vice versa: see p. 119 below.

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inseparable from hope, endurance and inheriting the promises; the communal overtone it acquires from its function in the sketch of Israel's history in chapter 11 and by contrast with the tale of Israel's disobedience in chapter 3; and its objective character as a state of living appropriate to the church, rather than an individual frame of mind or a mental act, as conveyed through its narrative presentation in terms of a public event. What more could new historical information enable us to say about the book's doctrine, or about the only church-situations finally relevant to us as readers, those which the author projects as false and true within the terms of the theology expounded here?

Of course, we make use of whatever information we have, from whatever source. But the advantage of a 'situation' which happens to be wholly or almost wholly internal to the text is the demand it makes on the reader to locate the book's centre within the book, to allow it to set its own questions as well as to draw its own conclusions, rather than assuming we can use the book as solver of questions we frame independently. For this reason, this book begins, in part I, with an approach to such 'introductory' questions, not in the form of an historical investigation of the identity of these readers or the author who addresses them, but in the context of a sociological analysis of the community and the situation presupposed within the text.

The aim of the sociological chapter is to root this work in historicity, but it leaves us still facing the problem of the interpretation of symbolism. The story is told of the shepherd 'who, when asked why he made, from within fairy rings, ritual observances to protect his flocks, replied: "I'd be a damn' fool if I didn't!"'²⁰ A gulf commonly exists between the power of symbols and symbolic actions and our ability to understand them, and those closest to participation in the symbols seem to be the least well placed to 'explain' what is happening. The main argument begins from this point, and asks whether there is a connection between the unsatisfactory nature of writing about the Letter to the Hebrews and the centrality it gives to the symbolism of bloody sacrifices, as well as to other symbolic figures and events. Just as Leviticus, though preserved as a 'book', makes sense only when treated as rules for sacrificial actions, perhaps the mistake we make with Hebrews is in treating it as a 'book',

²⁰ Dylan Thomas, *Collected Poems* (London, 1953), prefatory note (n.p.).

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examining its ‘argument’, its ‘imagery’, the ‘intention’ of its ‘author’, and providing piecemeal exegesis of its surface meaning.

The preceding pages have illustrated a general failure of modern criticism to come to grips with the text as a whole and the theological vision it presents. It is a failure which arises, in large part, from the separation of religious and non-religious ways of reading Biblical literature, characteristic of the post-Enlightenment period. In their recent contribution to the methodological debate, Morgan and Barton argue for the necessity of a ‘theological interpretation’ which combines rational and scholarly exegesis with a religiously committed reading. They suggest that, to provide the middle term between critical explanation and religious appropriation, some ‘theory of religion and reality’ is needed,²¹ and this is the strategy which will be adopted here. The substance of the study which follows is an attempt to offer an holistic reading of Hebrews through the medium of its sacrificial symbolism, a reading which draws extensively on the work of scholars outside the field of Biblical studies, in particular, from social anthropology. Recent developments in techniques of structural analysis have contributed fresh insights into the meaning of ritual and myth, and some attempts have been made by Biblical scholars to apply these insights to the study of the Old Testament, especially to the Pentateuch, in both its narrative and its legal portions. We shall see that they can also shed light on the meaning of this material as it is used in, and interpreted by, Hebrews.

Among the many factors which hinder the reading of Hebrews, the greatest, it will be suggested, is the use of sacrificial terminology and symbolism, which strikes the modern reader as both difficult and irrelevant. Sacrificial categories are often deeply obscure and even repulsive for the modern reader – the emphasis on blood, on priestly action, on the element of the numinous with its wonder and its shuddering – yet they are expounded in this text without explanation, laying down as axioms statements that are far from self-evident – for example: ‘without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins’ (9:22) – and equally bizarre necessities – the need to offer sacrifice (8:3), the need to purify even the heavenly sanctuary (9:23). Such axioms and necessities seem to spring from a whole world of compulsions we either do not feel at all or, it may be argued, have repressed with a partial success which makes dwelling on such themes psychologically painful and dangerous.

²¹ R. Morgan with J. Barton, *Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford, 1988), p. 227; cf. pp. 185–9, 269–96.

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William Johnsson has described the way nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholarship has recoiled from this so-called ‘primitive’ aspect of ancient religion as it features in Hebrews.²² We have to go back to the commentary of Westcott to find a work which takes the anthropological accounts of religion seriously as a contribution to understanding Hebrews. But, as Johnsson points out, Westcott’s commentary was published in 1889, the year of Robertson Smith’s *Religion of the Semites* which gave persuasive expression to an evolutionary account of religion.²³ After him, expositors of Hebrews either continued to translate sacrificial terms into doctrinal terms along sectarian lines – thus ‘blood’ has meant the saving death of Christ or the Real Presence in the eucharist – or else such terms were treated Platonically, as material metaphors for spiritual realities, to be swiftly transcended. Always the tendency is to treat sacrificial language as an instance of something else. It will be argued here that this area of sacrifice, with its strange logic and disturbing compulsions has to be understood for its own sake if we are to make sense of the text built around it. The aim will be to show that there is a ‘logic of sacrifice’ which is the source, not only of the axioms and necessities referred to just now, but also of the book’s tendency to generate contradictions: such as the contradictions between its highly intellectualised argument and the sense of crisis it is apparently addressing; between a very high and a very low view of Christology; between the drift of its argument (no Christian priesthood) and the encouragement its symbolism gives to priestly ways of thinking about salvation; between the apparent obscurity of its symbolic materials and the immediate power they have possessed and for some still possess. In all this it will be maintained that it is the use it makes of this logic that is the source of the book’s permanent theological claims.

This argument will form the substance of parts II and III. Chapter 2 develops the argument for preferring an holistic, hermeneutically based approach over conventional historical criticism, and relates the methodology adopted here to other Biblical criticism inspired by structuralism. In chapter 3 the sacrificial symbolism of the Old Testament will be examined in the light of recent anthropological approaches, and some criticisms will be offered, both of the theology

²² W. G. Johnsson, ‘Defilement and purgation in the Book of Hebrews’ (unpublished PhD thesis, Vanderbilt University, 1973), pp. 27–96.

²³ W. Robertson Smith, *The Religion of the Semites* (London, 1889); cf. Johnsson, ‘Defilement and Purgation’, pp. 46ff, 83ff.

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that is mediated by the sacrificial system, and of the limits of the methodology being employed.

Part III takes us to Hebrews itself. In chapter 4 it is argued that Hebrews demands direct participation in its symbolic world, and may be treated as if to read it was to be caught up into a feast in God's presence, a 'Liturgy for the Day of Salvation', an event in which meaning and behaviour are governed by the 'logic of sacrifice'. This idea is then given concreteness, first by showing how, in contemporary Jewish writings, very varied symbols and stories interact in an associative or paradigmatic fashion to form a systematic body of covenant symbolism, and how this text also fuses many ideas around the concept of the covenant and the covenant-renewal rite; and second by showing how the situation of the addressees is given quasi-liturgical characterisation through the categories of 'sacred time' and 'sacred place'.

Chapter 5 goes on to demonstrate the rich interrelation of the Pentateuchal narratives given in the text, including Abel, Rahab and Aaron's Rod, Moses and Joshua, Abraham and Isaac, and the anomalous figure of Melchizedek. It shows how they too circle around covenantal and sacrificial concepts, furnishing the argument, through overt references and subtle allusions, with a complex symbolic sub-structure. One of these motifs, the Akedah or Binding of Isaac, is considered further in chapter 6, where it is presented as the focal expression of a widespread myth of 'Testing', related to major strands in Old Testament theology as well as to the Christian proclamation of Christ. Through this mythological pattern, the Christology of Hebrews is expounded, looking particularly at the importance of Jesus' 'temptation', at the anthropology implicit in the concept of the 'seed of Abraham', and at the function of Jesus' 'flesh' and death.

In chapters 7 and 8 it is contended that the author's interest in expiatory sacrifice is strictly subordinate to the problem of death and the ambivalence this induces in human perceptions of God; expiatory sacrifice is shown to be subsumed within a rich pattern of symbolism of communion and gift, expressing a new covenant theology of the actual presence of God.

Hebrews is a highly integrated and coherent work, and this study will aim to understand it through that coherence, which is fundamental to its theological vision, by means of a broadly structuralist approach. In accordance with this, the text is regarded as a closed

and self-regulating whole, the individual parts having meaning not in themselves, nor in reference to anything outside, but in relation to the whole which they constitute. The historical and exegetical approach (what did the text mean to its author and its first readers?) cannot be separated from the properly interpretative question: what does the text mean now? As Paul Ricoeur argues, the mere fact of being *written* detaches a discourse from its author, its original situation and its first readers, so that they lose their authority as arbiters of meaning: the text then attains a free existence as potential meaning, having to be actualised, given reference, by each new reader in his or her concrete situation, for whom it becomes a 'possible world'.²⁴

Where historical data is in any case deficient, as it is with Hebrews, this approach carries a particular aptness. It is emphatically not necessary, however, to fall into the 'ideology of the absolute text'.²⁵ Structuralism is being adopted here not as a deterministic philosophy but as an heuristic tool, in the hope that it will generate a reading which is itself coherent as well as fruitful. The author of Hebrews can be seen to be a consummate reader of Old Testament texts, and it is in the hope that we may benefit from the method and the content of such reading that this study has been done.

²⁴ P. Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences* (ET Cambridge, 1981), p. 177, and cf. pp. 182–93.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

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PART I

SOCIOLOGY