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## Atonement and Apocalyptic in the Book of Hebrews

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My purpose in this article is to present reasons for believing that the classical view of atonement underlies the theology of Hebrews and that this view is expressed in essentially apocalyptic terminology.

The book of Hebrews cannot, of course, be consigned to traditionally defined apocalyptic literary categories. It is by no stretch of the imagination an apocalypse. On the other hand, it is not so devoid of apocalyptic content as its almost complete neglect in standard discussions such as Schmithals,<sup>1</sup> Russell,<sup>2</sup> and Danielou<sup>3</sup> might suggest.

Russell argues in his *Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic* that four features characterize the literature of the apocalyptists.<sup>4</sup> These all may be found to some extent in the book of Hebrews. It is, first of all, **esoteric** in its treatment of the angels and Melchizedek, as well as the liturgy of the tabernacle. Second, it is **literary** in its identifying form. Third, it is **symbolic** in much of its language, identifying Christ as the sacrificial lamb,<sup>5</sup> the veil in the tabernacle,<sup>6</sup> the high priest who passed through the heavens,<sup>7</sup> the great shepherd of the sheep,<sup>8</sup> etc. And fourth, although it is not **pseudonymous**, it is of course anonymous.

<sup>1</sup>Walter Schmithals, *The Apocalyptic Movement: Intro 'action and Interpretation* (New York: Macmillan, 1975).

<sup>2</sup>D. S. Russell, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964).

<sup>3</sup>Jean Danielou, *The Theology of Jewish Christianity* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1964).

<sup>4</sup>Russell, pp. 106ff.

<sup>5</sup>Hebrews 9:14.

<sup>6</sup>Hebrews 10:20.

<sup>7</sup>Hebrews 4:14; cf. Philip Hughes, "The High Priestly Sacrifice of Christ," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 130 (1973), 195-212.

<sup>8</sup>Hebrews 8:20.

Again, I point out that no argument is being made that the book is apocalyptic in the traditional understanding of that term but that an awareness of apocalyptic expression is presupposed on the part of the audience. One might even say that in the deeper sense of what apocalyptic authors were really trying to do with their sense of the bizarre and the esoteric, Hebrews conveys apocalyptic thought. After listing a dozen characteristics of apocalyptic suggested by Lindblom, Russell adds another dozen of his own and then comments:

These various "marks" belong to apocalyptic not in the sense that they are essential to it or are to be found in every apocalyptic writing, but rather in the sense that, in whole or in part, they build up an impression of a distinct kind which conveys a particular mood of thought and belief.<sup>9</sup>

Walter Schmithals, in his book *The Apocalyptic Movement* repeatedly returns to the one mood of thought that to him characterizes true apocalyptic, that is, the perception that one is currently living in the end-time of history.<sup>10</sup> No notion is more fundamental to Hebrews than that expressed in the beginning of the book: "God has at these last days spoken to us by a Son."<sup>11</sup>

Jacob Neusner in a recent article, "Judaism in a Time of Crisis," dealing with four responses to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., argues that whether the book of Hebrews was written that early or not "the letter explores the great issues of 70, the issues of cult, temple, sacrifice, priesthood, atonement, and redemption."<sup>12</sup> These issues, however, are not discussed merely in the cultic context of Old Testament religion. They are dealt with in language and idea much more reminiscent of apocalyptic than prophetic literature.

Echoes of apocalyptic thought resound from every quarter of Hebrews. God has spoken to us at the end of these days (1:2). Jesus has appeared once for all at the end of the age (9:26). He is the Son of God (1:2, 5), who is superior to the angels because he may be worshipped by them (1:6), a function reminiscent of the angels in the sixth heaven in the Testament of Levi (3:5). The nature and work of the Son is described in seven phrases, a number of supreme importance in apocalyptic literature (1:2-4).<sup>13</sup> Christ does not change, but the angels become winds (1:7), a thought expressed in Hebrews from the language

<sup>9</sup>Russell, p. 105.

<sup>10</sup>Schmithals, pp. 206, 207.

<sup>11</sup>Hebrews 1:2; 9:26.

<sup>12</sup>*Judaism* 21 (3, 1972), 320.

<sup>13</sup>Cf. Russell, p. 195.

of 2 Esdras (8:21) rather than Psalm civ 4, where neither the Hebrew nor the LXX conveys the notion of change, and, in reverse, it might be added of the Dead Sea Scroll Thanksgiving Hymn (1:10), where the winds become angels (of holiness). Background for this notion can be found in Exodus (3:2), where an "angel of God appeared to Moses in a fire." The assertion in Hebrews 2:5 that the world to come was not subjected to angels is much clearer if coming from a background of apocalyptic thought.

One of the more interesting notions of Hebrews, the comparison of Christ's high priesthood to that of Melchizedek, is probably best understood against an apocalyptic background. The Ebionite doctrine of Christ as the "first of the archangels" (Recog. II:42), identifying him with Michael, is a fusion of the apocalyptic and the Essene traditions employing the same understanding as mainline Jewish Christianity but with different theology.<sup>14</sup> Christ is thus portrayed in Hebrews as neither Michael nor Melchizedek but as superior to both the angels and Melchizedek. In a fragmentary midrashic document from Qumran<sup>15</sup> Melchizedek is portrayed as a superior angel who has a special relation to the law of jubilee and a special function of caring for the people of God. Thus he is somewhat like Michael in the Old Testament in his functions. But more important, his role is not unlike that ascribed to Jesus in Hebrews. The elaborate argument at the beginning of Hebrews showing Jesus to be greater than the angels perhaps has as its corollary his superiority to Melchizedek, who, great as he is, is only a "copy" of the Son of God (Heb. 7:3).<sup>16</sup> Professor Yigael Yadin has recently argued that the unique heavenly position occupied by Melchizedek at Qumran explains his appearance in Hebrews to convey most decisively the author's conception of the uniqueness of Jesus.<sup>17</sup> Although Professor F. F. Bruce has denied a Qumranic destination to Hebrews,<sup>18</sup> Strugnell recently published fragments of a work from cave four at Qumran which is more consistently concerned with the angels and the heavens than any other surviving work from Qumran and which must, as he argues, "represent the original theology of the sect."<sup>19</sup> "The Essenes are already, in these fragments, showing interest in the heavenly

<sup>14</sup>Danielou, p. 144.

<sup>15</sup>"11Q Melchizedek," A.S. van der Woude, *Oudtestamentische Studien* 14, (1965), 354ff.

<sup>16</sup>A. S. van der Woude and M. de Jonge, *New Testament Studies* 12 (1965-66), 301ff.

<sup>17</sup>"A Note on Melchizedek and Qumran," *Israel Exploration Journal* 15 (1965), 152ff.

<sup>18</sup>"'To the Hebrews' or 'to the Essenes'?" *New Testament Studies* 9. (1963), 217-232.

<sup>19</sup>J. Strugnell, "The Angelic Liturgy at Qumran—4Q Serek Sirot O<sup>1</sup>nt Hassabbat,"

sacrificial cult, the priestly quality of the angels and the structure of the heavenly Temple."<sup>20</sup> I point out again I am not arguing that Hebrews is an apocalypse or that the book was written to Qumran Hebrews. I am suggesting that the background against which the atonement is discussed in Hebrews is of an apocalyptic type; i.e., the audience which received the letter was assumed to have been acquainted with apocalyptic thought.

Phrases like "we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens" (4:14), "we have such a high priest . . . exalted above the heavens" (7:26), "we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in Heaven" (8:1) are best explained in the light of the multiple heavens discussed in the *Testament of Levi* (2:3), *II Enoch* (3:20), and the *Ascension of Isaiah* (7-9).

But since the entire notion of Jesus as high priest entering into the heavenly sanctuary is rooted in the classical view of atonement associated with apocalyptic thought, it is difficult to understand how a series of articles on "The Blood of Jesus and His Heavenly Priesthood in Hebrews"<sup>21</sup> could recently appear without considering this viewpoint.

It is a commonplace of apocalyptic thought that the devil who rules this age will be overcome by God and the new age ushered in at that time.<sup>22</sup> Gustaf Aulen has shown in his *Christus Victor* that the classical view of atonement, with Christ as the conqueror of the demonic forces which control mankind, was the view predominantly held by Christian authors of the earliest centuries.<sup>23</sup> The book of Hebrews does not argue or explain the classical view; it presupposes it and proceeds to set its picture of the high priestly work of Christ against this apocalyptic background. This is clear from the early statement in 2:14 that Christ "through death destroyed him who has the power of death, that is, the devil." The rest of the book presupposes this assertion, which occurs in the midst of the author's discussion of Christ's superiority to angels.

<sup>20</sup>Strugnell, p. 335.

<sup>21</sup>Philip Hughes in *Bibliotheca Sacra*: "The Significance of the Blood of Jesus," 130 (1973), 99-109; "The High Priestly Sacrifice of Christ," 131 (1973), 195-212; "The Meaning of 'the True Tent' and 'the Greater and More Perfect Tent,'" 130 (1973), 305-314; "The Present Work of Christ in Heaven," 131 (1974), 26-33.

<sup>22</sup>Cf. Danielou, p. 187ff.; Russell, p. 254ff.; Schmithals, p. 42.

<sup>23</sup>Gustaf Aulen, *Christus Victor* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), pp. 16-80.

It is in this light that the discussion of the heavenly sanctuary in chapter 9 must be understood. The work of Christ in conquering the demonic forces is portrayed in terms of the high priest functioning in the sanctuary. The holy of holies in 9:11, 12, 24 may be assumed to correspond to the seventh heaven, where God's throne is in *Levi*, *Enoch*, and *Ascension of Isaiah*. Christ entered the seventh heaven only after passing through the sixth heaven, where in *Levi* the angels are busy making propitiation for the ignorances of the **righteous** (3:5-6), not the wicked; i.e., they are performing a service for the righteous who because of their ignorance of God give themselves over at times to demonic purposes, thus perpetrating religious division and idolatry. In early literature ignorance is a synonym for idolatry and rejection of God. The fragments published by Strugnell from Qumran's cave four include a reference to "the servants of the presence of the Glory in the tabernacle of the godly ones of knowledge."<sup>24</sup> When Christ entered the seventh heaven (9:24) and opened the veil which is his flesh (10:20) he, unlike the high priest of Judaism, put a stop to what was being done in the holy place (i.e., the sixth heaven) because he had put a stop to what was causing the problem—demonic deception leading to idolatry—and thereby he ended the necessity of angelic service in the sixth heaven to atone for such "ignorance." Perhaps such angelic service is a part of the work of those described in Hebrews 1:14 as "angels who are ministering spirits sent forth to do service for those who await salvation."

Christ entered the realm of Satan, which in *Ascension of Isaiah* 7:9 is the firmament below the first heaven, and by his resurrection conquered him. This firmament corresponds to the "lower air" of Ephesians 2:2 and the "lower parts of the earth" of Ephesians 4:9. Typologically this is expressed in Hebrews 9:26 as "putting away sin once for all at the end of the age by the sacrifice of himself." This is why Christ is described as going bodily into the "heavenly sanctuary" (9:12) taking also his own blood. The typology of blood is understood against the temple-priesthood imagery of the Old Testament, while his resurrected body is understood against the descension-ascension motif of apocalyptic literature.<sup>25</sup> Thus Jesus' high priestly work in conquering Satan may be understood as beginning with the resurrection from the tomb where he conquers death (2:14). "Passing through the heavens" (4:14), he enters the seventh heaven, where he sits at the right hand

<sup>24</sup>Strugnell, p. 337.

<sup>25</sup>Hughes fails to discuss this—*Bibliotheca Sacra* 131 (1974), 26-33.

of God (8:1), exalted above the heavens (7:26). He thus brings to an end the intermediary work of angels in the sixth heaven, typified in the earthly tabernacle by the holy place (9:1). The need for priestly service in the holy place ceases when the veil in the temple is torn apart and the holy of holies made available to man. "Therefore we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way, which he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh." (10:19, 20).

We similarly understand 9:23, 24: "It was necessary for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these rites, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. For Christ has entered, not into a sanctuary made with hands, a copy of the true one but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. By "heavenly things" the author does not mean Christian as opposed to Jewish, but the real, "heavenly" service that is being performed in the upper heavens as opposed to the copy (tabernacle-temple) which was made from this heavenly pattern shown Moses on the mount (8:5). Thus the heavenly reality is called a *tupos* in 8:5 and the copy of it, i.e., the tabernacle, an *antitupos* in 9:24. Both the tabernacle and the church with their corresponding elements (table of showbread and Lord's supper, laver and baptism, minora and Word of God, etc.) are antitypes of the reality in the heavens and depict the atoning work of Christ in the conquest of Satan, the Old Testament pattern anticipating it and the New Testament pattern predicating it.

Thus when the author of Hebrews observes that the Old Testament priests "serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly sanctuary" (8:5) he refers to the tabernacle-temple-church symbolism by the term "copy" and to the Mosaic Law by the term "shadow." In chapter ten (vs. 1) he remarks that the "law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities." Even the law belongs to these physical categories which only imperfectly reveal the truth of monotheism and along with the copies must give way eventually to the light of reality.

It follows then that the church reveals the reality of atonement not in baptism and Lord's supper, which like the laver and showbread are visible signs, but in the invisible high priestly work of Christ in the heavenly sanctuary, i.e., his conquest of death, hell, and the devil. The confirmation of this truth is to be seen in the exorcisms performed by Christ, his own resurrection from the dead, and the widespread establishment of monotheism for the first time in recorded history.

Christ "holds his priesthood permanently" (7:24) because he has

been "exalted above the heavens" (7:26), which is to say that his conquest of Satan is absolute and final. It cannot and will not be repeated; hence there is no need to offer sacrifices repeatedly (7:27). He has appeared "once for all, at the end of the age to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself" (9:26).

In a brilliant article which appeared in *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*<sup>26</sup> in 1965 James Swetnam explores what he considers the central theme of Hebrews. He describes the author of Hebrews as "a master of language and a master of his ideas: he knew precisely what he wanted to say and he knew precisely how to say it."<sup>27</sup> Based upon this assumption Swetnam proceeds to point out that in some way which is not clear in Hebrews the author argues that the new covenant effectively removes sin, bestows a positive and unequivocal blessing upon the community at large rather than the individual, and through the death of Christ provides an objective change in the relationship between man and God, independent of man's reaction. Man is released from the servitude associated with the law, for Christ saves not from sin which was committed under the Law but from sin which was associated with the Law.<sup>28</sup> He removes the curse provisions of the Law through removal of their cause, which results in positive blessing for man because, by its very nature, a testament may impart only good—never evil.<sup>29</sup> Whereas under the first covenant there were two options which lay before the people as a whole, (fidelity/blessings or infidelity/curses), in the new covenant there is provision only for blessings because Christ took upon himself the curse stipulations.<sup>30</sup>

The striking thing about Swetnam's article is that he sees the argument made by the author of Hebrews and lays it out convincingly, but in the final analysis he is not able to positively assert why or how the argument runs as it does. I would suggest that this is because Professor Swetnam has not observed that the classical view of atonement (stated in 2:14) underlies the entire argument of the book. When the apocalyptic elements inherent in that view are supplied to Swetnam's arguments, his discussion lends support to my own thesis. The positive removal of sin, resulting in an unequivocal blessing, is thus the conquest

<sup>26</sup>"A Suggested Interpretation of Hebrews ix 15-18," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 27 (October 1965), 373-390.

<sup>27</sup>Swetnam, p. 388.

<sup>28</sup>Swetnam, p. 387.

<sup>29</sup>Swetnam, p. 386.

<sup>30</sup>Swetnam, p. 381.

of Satanic power by the resurrection from the dead and the attendant capacity provided man, both Jew and Gentile, to maintain an expression of monotheistic faith as given in the promise to Abraham. The objective change in man's relationship to God independent of man's reaction is this revelation of true monotheism which was given in spite of man's unfaithfulness. God was found true and every man a liar. The promise to Abraham was fulfilled. As a fact of apocalyptic history, Satan and death were conquered regardless of man's response to that fact. This released man from the servitude associated with the Law, when he was enslaved to the weak and beggarly elemental spirits (Galatians 4:8, 9) of the universe, i.e., the demons who turned the light of God's revelation into a mere shadow and deceived men into polytheism, idolatry, and its ethic of immorality. Swetnam argues that the new covenant or disposition effectively removes sin by the perfection of the cultic aspect of the first covenant. But what he does not note is that, since this cultic aspect is considered only a "copy" of the heavenly reality, (1) the author of Hebrews is relying on an apocalyptic awareness on the part of his readers that recognizes the worshipful service of angels as the real type after which the tabernacle cult was patterned, and that (2) Christ perfected the cultic aspects of Judaism by removing the need for continuing angelic propitiation for the righteous, namely, by his final conquest of demonic power and revelation of true monotheism.

The book of Hebrews may very well be a crucial bridge between the fading apocalypticism of the Maccabean era and the peculiar form of Jewish Christianity which developed after the destruction of the temple in 70 A.D., as represented in works like the *Ascension of Isaiah* and the Christian emendations to *Testament of Levi*. A phase of the transition may be observed at Qumran in the fragments of the angelic liturgy of cave four, dated to 60 B.C. by Strugnell. He remarks:

There is no angelic liturgy, no visionary work where a seer hears the praise of the angels, but a Maskil's composition for an earthly liturgy in which the presence of the angels is in a sense invoked and in which—an idea to which there are parallels in Christian and Jewish literature after the Epistle to the Hebrews—the Heavenly Temple is portrayed on the model of the earthly one and in some way its service is considered the pattern to what is being done below.<sup>11</sup>

This angelic service, which Strugnell observes to be "in some way a pattern of what is being done below" and which he leaves totally unexplained, I take to be the apocalyptic explanation of Satan's

<sup>11</sup>Strugnell, p. 320.

conquest, given fullest expression later in the Jewish/Christian view of atonement and called by Aulen the classical view. Such indeed was the theology of Jewish Christianity, as expressed in Danielou's well-known work *The Theology of Jewish Christianity*:

It has been necessary to dwell on this question of the structure of the celestial world, because it was to play an important part in Jewish Christian dogmatic teaching. Indeed the principal dogmas were formulated in terms of cosmology. The Incarnation was presented as a descent of the Word through the angelic spheres: the Passion as Christ's combat with the angels of the air, followed by the descent into Hell; the Resurrection as an exaltation of Christ's humanity above all the angelic spheres; and after death the soul would pass through the various spheres, on its way encountering their guardians, to whom it would have to render an account. All these conceptions are based on a vision of the heavenly spheres which is part of the framework of Jewish Christianity.<sup>12</sup>

In summation, Hebrews was written to a Jewish audience which was so well acquainted with the main tenets of apocalyptic Judaism that the author could set the classical view of atonement against that background and argue it as the Jewish Christian understanding of Jesus's high priestly work.

<sup>12</sup>Danielou, p. 179.