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ENTERING THE 'LORD'S REST': THREAT OR PROMISE?

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BY
LINDA LEICHT
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In many ways, the New Testament book we call the Epistle to the Hebrews is a mystery. Its author, date and audience are all still a matter of conjecture. The hints we have from the book itself and from other writings place it sometime between 60 and 95 CE,[1] likely in Rome or another Hellenized community,[2] by a writer who is well educated, a master of written Greek, likely well acquainted with the writings of Philo of Alexandria.[3] While addressing many of the theories about the writer and the book's audience, this paper will show that the writer, in his attempt to convince the audience to remain faithful to the Christian faith, uses language of Jewish apocalyptic tradition, but reshapes it into a Hellenized philosophy that the audience would have understood

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[1] Among the clearest evidence we have of the date of Hebrews is a non-canonical letter of Clement of Rome to the church in Corinth, generally dated about 95 CE. The letter quotes passages from the epistle, making it clear that Clement had ready access to the epistle. Less clear is the earliest date it could have been written. Some scholars have argued that the epistle's references to activity of the high priest as a current culture and lack of any mention of the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE would place it before that date, yet those references are not related to Temple sacrifices. Instead, they refer to sacrifices during the wilderness tabernacle. One could argue that if the Temple were still standing the writer would have used it as the basis for his argument regarding the role of Christ as the high priest. Perhaps stronger evidence that the letter was written before that date is the apparent Jewishness of the audience. By about 66 CE the relationship between Jews and its Christian sect had become very strained, yet none of that situation is reflected in the epistle, setting its writing perhaps even earlier than 60 CE. Evidence within the epistle itself indicates that the writer heard the Gospel from eyewitnesses to Christ (Heb. 2:3), placing the writer in the second generation of ministers, and it concludes with news of Timothy (Heb. 13:23). If that same Timothy is Paul's companion, it further sets the dating at between 65 and 80, based on church tradition for the dates of Timothy's ministry and death. For a concise explanation of the above arguments, read Fred B. Craddock's introduction commentary to the Epistle to the Hebrews in *The New Interpreters Bible* Vol. XII (Nashville: Abingdon Press,1989), 7-8. Other considerations include: Hebrews anticipates an imminent end of the world and coming of the kingdom, an early theology of the church that is adapted in later writings, such as the Gospel of John, to explain the delay; if Hebrews was written to a congregation of Jews it does not reflect a conflict between Jews and Christians, a situation that was critical after about 66 CE.

[2] Craddock, *New Interpreters*, 10, notes that if we identify the readers as Hellenistic Jewish Christians, it is likely they are located in Rome.

[3] For an indepth discussion of the evidence — linguistic, thematic and scriptural — that the writer of Hebrews was familiar with the works of Philo and repeated them in the epistle, see Ronald Williamson's *Philo and the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1970). Williamson provides insights into and debates of a wide range of Hebrews scholars on the topic.

and embraced. Focusing on chapters 3 and 4, it will contend that the epistle was written to a congregation in crisis, and the language used was intended to strike fear in their hearts then motivate them to respond. In light of a belief that the eschaton is looming, the crisis does not allow for a detailed and lengthy theology; it calls for emergency methods. Relying on two, often conflicting views of death and afterlife, Hebrews attempts to convince the congregation that they face the negative reality of the fate of the rebellious desert generation or the positive Hellenistic view of an immortal afterlife, depending on their response to a call to faithfulness.

The title of the epistle (see discussion of the genre of the book below) indicates it was written to "Hebrews," but the title was given later, and there is no direct reference to its intended audience as being Hebrews or Jews. However, the book's arguments and a heavy reliance on Hebrew Scripture would indicate that the audience would likely have been familiar with Scriptures.[4] Also, the author of Hebrews presupposes the readers/hearers have enough familiarity with the Scriptures that he[5] feels free to use numerous scriptural references to build up the evidence as well as reflecting between two passages to answer posed questions.

What is clear about the audience comes from the epistle itself. From the prologue, it appears that both the writer and the audience are Jewish: "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors … by the prophets" (1:1).[6] They share their introduction to Christianity from the same source: "…it was attested to us by those who heard (Jesus)…" (2:3). They are

[4] I use the term "argument" to describe the rhetoric used in Hebrews because it is laid out in the manner of a logical or legal argument.

[5] While the authorship of the epistle is unresolved, and Priscilla (wife of Aquila) is among the names hypothesized, I will conclude that the author was a male based on 11:32, which uses the masculine participle. This is noted by several authors, in particular Andrew H. Trotter Jr. in *Interpreting the Epistle of the Hebrews*, 42, and Harold W. Attridge in *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 1-3.

[6] Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

already a Christian community: "…brothers and sisters, holy partners in a heavenly calling…" (3:1), and "…we have become partners of Christ…" (3:14). It has been a long time since they have become Christians, but they are not growing in their faith: "For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you…" (5:12). They have suffered for their faith: "…you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being public exposed to abuse and persecution… you had compassion for those who were in prison and you cheerfully accepted the plundering of your possessions…" (10:32-34). They have not been martyred: "…you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood…"(12:4). Some are being tortured: ""Remember those … who are being tortured…" (13:3).

Amid this history, Hebrews is concerned that these Christians not lose their faith. While we do not know if that means they are becoming lax in their religious practices or returning to Jewish practices or other pagan beliefs, in several places the text does seem to argue against a return to Jewish practices. Note especially chapter 13. In verse 9, for example, the author points to "regulations about food" — most likely Jewish halakah — and the lack of benefit derived by following them. All of Hebrews' arguments are aimed at convincing this audience that they have a great promise awaiting them if they remain faithful, while their flagging faith is a dangerous situation because there is little time left for them to make their commitment before the window of opportunity is shut to them forever. Using language that harkens back to their ancestors, especially the desert generation "whose bodies fell in the wilderness" (3:17) and "would not enter his rest" (3:18), Hebrews draws parallels with a Hellenistic viewpoint of the afterlife, promising a "rest" that is to come (4:3) in a heavenly afterlife.

While Hebrews is identified as a letter/epistle, the form of the book does not conform well to that genre. Outside of the epilogue (13:22-25), which adds greetings from "those from Italy"[7] and gives news of Timothy and a possible visit soon, the book appears to be more of a sermon. It includes scriptural teaching — a quick review of cross references in the Oxford Annotated Edition shows the books contain more than 100 direct or indirect references to the Hebrew Scriptures — exhortation to turn from faithlessness and words of comfort that assure the congregation that they still have time. As Lane points out, Hebrews does not conform to the typical format of a first century letter. Instead, it appears to be an example of early Christian preaching. [8] In that it is unlike other New Testament canonical writings. In fact, Hebrews calls it a "word of exhortation" (13:22). The only other place that term is used in the New Testament is in Acts 13:15 when Paul and Barnabas are asked to give "a word of exhortation" after reading Scripture. That invitation is obviously for the two men to give a sermon, so we can assume that Hebrews also means he is offering a sermon.[9]

Sharing a sermon with this wavering church at Rome, Hebrews uses language that will both instill fear and provoke restored faith. To do that, Hebrews must combine two ways of looking at life and death —ancient Jewish theology and contemporary Hellenistic philosophy. Hebrews' audience is familiar with both, being Jewish Christians who live in a Greco-Roman world.[10] While I am not suggesting that the Jews in Rome

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[7] Although there is nothing more to go on to determine who "those from Italy" were, it is interesting to note that Priscilla and Aquila were Roman Christians, expelled during the reign of Claudius in 49, according to church tradition, who were wealthy supporters of the church in Corinth. Could they be "those from Italy" cited in Hebrews?

[8] William L. Lane, *Hebrews: A Call to Commitment* (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 1985), 15-17.

[9] Lane, *Hebrews*, 18.

[10] *Encyclopedia of Diasporas* (New York: 2004) points out, "The (Jewish) communities (in Rome) were in some ways very Greek, not just in dress and design, but in language and thought." The entry on pages 181-182 go on to point out that some Jewish synagogues were named in honor of Roman leaders, and

were assimilated into the Roman culture, there is sufficient evidence that they were influenced by their Roman neighbors, using their language and their names, as well as contributing Jewish names to the Roman lexicon. There is, however, much more evidence of Christian inculturation of Roman culture. Snyder demonstrates this through his review of symbols from the period.[11] While Jews used purely Jewish symbols, such as the menorah, shofar, ethrog, lulab and the Torah shrine at burial sites and in other evidence, Snyder points out that the new Christian communities had no identifying symbols so they used both Jewish symbols, such as the dove and the olive branch, and symbols from Roman culture, such as the lamb and the anchor. Brandle and Stegemann's review of first century Christianity in Rome calls it a "diffusion" of Palestinian Judaism into a non-Jewish society. "It gained its effective historical form, theologically and socially, in the tension-filled encounter between Jews and non-Jews in the Mediterranean urban centers."[12]

It is in that tension that the author of Hebrews presents his arguments, embracing both cultural viewpoints, using one to support the other. This paper will focus on how Hebrews uses this Jewish/Hellenistic rhetoric to restore a church made up of people who are very much a part of their Hellenistic culture while still Jewish at heart.

The ancient Jewish outlook on death and resurrection is varied, but it is grounded in the idea that worshipping God — the purpose of life — can be done only when one is alive and living on Earth. Johnston points to this viewpoint throughout his review of

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children were given Roman names as found inscribed on Jewish tombstones. Yet, they held on to their Jewish religious convictions and a yearning for Jerusalem.

[11] Graydon F. Snyder, "The Interaction of Jews with Non-Jews in Rome," in *Judaism and Christianity in First-Century Rome* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 69-90.

[12] Rudolf Brandle and Ekkehard W. Stegemann, "The Formation of the First 'Christian Congregations' in Rome" in *Judaism and Christianity, 122.*

references in the Hebrew Bible.[13] In them, death is accepted as the natural end of life, praising a “natural” death that comes at the end of a long life. As both Job (7:21) and the Psalmist (39:13) aver, after death one shall be “no more.”[14] While ancient Israel’s views of death are nuanced and layered, with references to death as both relief (i.e. Job 3:17) and feared (ie. Ps. 55:4), one thing is clear — death is the end of life. It is not viewed as a goal to be achieved. When resurrection is introduced, especially in later apocalyptic writings, it is a picture of returning to Earth, not life in another, heavenly realm. Even individual resurrection is perceived as part of a return of the Jewish people, or the kingdom of Israel. For example, Daniel 12:2 speaks of a time when “many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.” But Johnston rightly points out that the focus of the chapter is on “your people,” a return of the nation, and the theology of resurrection, while it can be detected in the Hebrew Scriptures, is hardly well-developed.[15] In the extra-canonical writings, this theology of resurrection is more highly developed.[16] Those writings represent a more recent development, dating from about the second century BCE, in which we can see the influence of other cultures, including Greece. Johnston points especially to the second century BCE Wisdom of Solomon,[17] which develops the Platonic concept of the immortality of the soul — “…their hope is full of immortality” (3:4). 2 Baruch 30:1-5 mentions a resurrection of the soul but not of the body, while earlier, in 2:17, Baruch denies any afterlife, and Wisdom 1:15 and 4 Macabees 14:5-6 and 18:23

[13] Phillip S. Johnston, *Shades of Sheol* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002)
[14] Johnston, *Shades,* 26.
[15] Johnston, *Shades,* 225-227.
[16] 2 Maccabees refers to the promise of resurrection for martyred heroes. I Enoch speaks of resurrection both implicitly and explicitly. Later writings, such as the Apocalypses of Baruch and 2 Esdras, written in the late first century, also refer to resurrection. See Johnston, *Shades*, 229-239, for further discussion.
[17] Johnston, *Shades,* 236-237.

express a belief in the immorality of the soul.[18] Another important element of Jewish theology that finds no place in Platonic philosophy is the concept of a linear history that will come to an end — an eschaton — when God will judge humankind, leading to the Christian belief in the return of Christ and the ultimate new heaven and new earth.

Before investigating the text of Hebrews more closely, it is important to understand the background of the two viewpoints being utilized.

Hellenistic Philosophy, Jewish Theology

Plato, in the fourth century BCE, developed a philosophy that viewed life on two levels — the physical life as a shadow of the real life. Death was perceived as a release from the physical life and a return to the "real" life of the spiritual world. Immortality and an afterlife where the souls of the worthy are rewarded and the evil are punished are an important part of this philosophy and can be seen mirrored in the Christian doctrines of heaven and hell. Philo of Alexandria (c. 20BCE-50CE) was a Jewish philosopher who combined this Platonic, Hellenistic philosophy with his Jewish, scriptural theology. We can see in the writings of Philo, and reflected in Hebrews, how Hellenistic philosophy, especially as influenced by Plato, could be absorbed into a Jewish worldview. Philo's ten volumes of writings address a wide range of topics, including allegorical interpretation of the Bible, discussions of stories, characters and concepts found in the Bible, Jewish laws and regulations, as well as more philosophic topics, such as the freedom of man and eternity of the world. Philo used typical Platonic attitudes and applied them to his own

[18] Daniel B. Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 272.

Jewish faith,[19] allowing the Alexandrian Jews a way to conceive of their faith within their culture. Later, the emerging Christian church would do the same. This is the world in which the audience of Hebrews lived. They were Jews living in Rome, generations of people impressed by the Hellenistic worldview and living in a Hellenistic world. They became Christians, Jews who accepted Jesus as the Messiah promised in the Scriptures. It is no surprise, then, that Hebrews uses the philosophy of Philo to bolster and perhaps inform his arguments to these people.

Williamson explains that Philo takes the Platonic concept of time and history as recurrent cycles with no eschatology and adds a Jewish provision that "for the race which has lived a life of virtue there will be peace and wealth and long life."[20] He goes on to point out that there is no Messianic hope in Philo, a theme that is present in Hebrews, but rather a "path according to virtue with life and immortality as its end…" — a path that leads to a "city of God" that is "found in the soul of the man…"[21] These ideas were not new to the population of Rome 60-95 CE. They had been developed over three centuries, at least since the Scriptures' translation into Greek c. 260 BCE. With the Jewish Diaspora spreading throughout the Mediterranean region, Hellenistic ideas entered into the Jewish population, including at Alexandria, where Philo lived and wrote, and Rome, where the recipients of Hebrews' letter likely lived. Jewish Christians also developed Philo's Platonism for their own theology. In Wolfson's impressive two-volume work on Philo and the influences of religious philosophy, he describes Philo's application of references

[19] Williamson, *Philo*, provides numerous discussions of how Philo incorporates Platonic concepts, revealing a Hellenistic worldview in Alexandria.
[20] Williamson, *Philo,* 143.
[21] Williamson, *Philo,* 144.

to resurrection in 2 Maccabees to the Platonic concept of immortality, calling it "new birth" (palingenesia),[22] a familiar theme in Christianity.

In this culture, it is not surprising that Hebrews uses both Jewish and Hellenistic concepts to stir the congregation in Rome. The judgment language from their Jewish background could immediately instill fear in their hearts, while the more modern concept of immortality could calm their fears. Hebrews sets up this tension in chapters 3 and 4 with the threat and promise of "the Lord's rest."

Preaching to a Congregation in Crisis

Hebrews begins by connecting the ancient and the present – the Jewish and the Christian. "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son…" (1:1-2). These words foreshadow what will be a constant comparing and collapsing of the apocalyptic language of the ancient Jewish Scripture and the language of a Hellenistic promise within a dire warning that there is little time left, these are the "last days." The tone of this epistle/sermon is set, and its recipients are given a clear image with which to read the rest. Jesus, the Son in verse 2, is an "exact imprint of God's very being" (1:3). Williamson points out that *charakteros* (exact imprint) is a word shared by Philo and Hebrews, but not with any other writer in the New Testament.[23] A favorite of Philo, the word is used with many shades of meaning — a stamp or impression as in an engraving; impressions on a human soul made by God or virtue, for example; a trait or characteristic; one's character "a form which God has stamped on the soul," quoting from Spicq; as man

[22] Harry Austryn Wolfson, *Philo: Foundations of Religious Philosophy in Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1947), 405.

[23] Williamson, *Philo*, 74-80.

made “after the image of God and after his likeness,” quoting from Gen. 1:26; intention; or a sign. Hebrews, Williamson writes, only uses it once, to convey that Jesus has a supreme role in redemption and revelation. “To do this he draws on words current in philosophical circles…”[24] To further convince his readers, Hebrews places Jesus in the present, past and future. He has been “appointed heir” (1:2), yet through him God “created the worlds” (1:3). Jesus is both an imprint of God and the sustainer of “all things by his powerful word” (1:3). After having “made purification for sins” — the job of a priest — Jesus “sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high…” (1:4). This human being who lived a short lifespan is represented outside of the normal context of time, stretching from creation to an immortal place on a heavenly throne. Jewish theology observes time as linear, with God working within it, while humans are confined to it. Hebrews sets Jesus outside of that constraint, and later assures the congregation of their place outside of it, too. This can only be accomplished by incorporating Hellenistic philosophies into that Jewish worldview.

Hebrews then introduces a new subject, that of Jesus’ position *vis a vis* the angels. The modern day reader should keep in mind that angels are often introduced in the Hebrew Scriptures as God’s messengers (a point made again in chapter 2) — consider the angels who visit Abraham and Sarah and Lot. Jesus’ message is superior to theirs, as is Jesus “much superior to angels” (1:4). Verses 5-13 include seven quotations from the Scriptures that support Hebrews’ assertions. While this congregation is made up of Hellenized people, they are also Jews, and Hebrews uses Scripture in much the same way Philo does to support and defend notions that might otherwise seem foreign to the world of those Scriptures.

[24] Williamson, *Philo*, 78.

Chapter 2 begins with an exhortation, the first of many in Hebrews. "Therefore we must pay greater attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it" (2:1). Hebrews is reminding them that if the message of angels is valid, how much more is the gospel message of Jesus. But Hebrews adds another note of warning: "and (if) every transgression or disobedience received a just penalty, how can we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?" (2:2-3). Again, quoting Hebrew Scripture (Ps. 8) in verses 6b-8a, Hebrews goes on to point out that Jesus may have been made a "little lower than the angels" in his humiliation on the cross, but he is "now crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone" (2:9b). In verses 14-15, Hebrews points out that all humans die, but the way to overcome that power is to be freed from "slavery," not to the Egyptians from whom the desert generation escaped, but of the "fear of death." Hebrews is taking the Christian *kerygma* of Jesus' death as a sacrifice that saves believers from death (that theme is further developed later in the epistle), and embeds the Hellenistic philosophy that death is a release from a poor reflection of a true life that awaits one. The reality is that believers have died since the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus, so the promise of everlasting life must be incorporated in an afterlife, which fits well into Hellenistic philosophy. Further, the suffering of these believers is embraced as an opportunity to participate in Jesus' suffering, and because Jesus suffered, "he is able to help those who are being tested" (2:18).

Chapter 3 begins by including the readers as "brothers and sisters, holy partners in a heavenly calling" (3:1), perhaps a call to suffering as it follows the imagery of chapter 2. This title also sets up the beginning of an *inclusio* that ends at verse 14: "For we have

become partners of Christ." In the first verse, it is Jesus who has been "faithful" to God, as Moses was faithful to "God's house." In the 14th verse, the congregation is being asked to do the same, "if only we hold our first confidence firm to the end." The argument that ensues in this passage is distinctly Jewish. Jesus has been compared to Moses, among the greatest of the patriarchs, and set above him. Reference to Moses naturally leads to a reminder, quoted from Psalm 95 in the Septuagint, that the desert generation of Israelites was not faithful, and their punishment was that they would not enter the Lord's rest. "Take care," Hebrews continues his warning. The unspoken part of that warning is that the fate of the unfaithful Israelites was not only that they were not able to enter Canaan, the Promised Land, but that many of them died in the desert at the hand of God. In case they missed that point, Hebrews reminds them in v. 17: "… those who sinned whose bodies fell in the wilderness…" There is more going on here than just a reminder of their rebellious history. The deaths of their ancestors to which Hebrews is referring was horrific in more than one way. They died of poisoning from bad fowl; some were swallowed up by an earthquake; others were killed in an inglorious battle when they tried to fight their way into Canaan. These ignoble deaths, we learn throughout Johnston, meant serious consequences in Sheol. Hebrews' use of the story and several biblical references (Ps. 95, Num. 14, even Jer. 17:5-6 in v. 12, which brings up another horrific historic experience of the Jews) must have certainly instilled fear into his audience — Jews who understood the consequences of disobeying God's will in terms of their own diaspora and recent history at the hands of the Roman oppressors. Hebrews uses God's punishment — "They will not enter my rest" (3:11b) — to set up a new dynamic and a dichotomy. For the desert generation, and for 1st century Jews reading the quotes from Ps.

95, the "rest" in question is the settlement in Canaan, the promised land. But Hebrews has another idea in mind, and it depends in many ways upon a Hellenistic view of immortality and afterlife.

In Chapter 4, Hebrews begins with a promise that the "rest is still open." How can that be if the "rest" in Ps. 95 and Num. 14 meant settling in Canaan? What follows is a legalistic argument that includes a variety of biblical references to God and rest that prove the promise was never closed, but that argument rests heavily on the Hellenistic idea of an eternal rest that is not actually found in the Scriptures.[25] First, Hebrews switches to the Lord's Sabbath rest introduced in Gen. 2:2, immediately comparing it to the "rest" in Ps. 95. Equating *katapausis* and *sabbatismos*, redefines the term *katapausis* found in Ps. 95:11. That redefinition "decisively dissociates the term from its potential political or apocalyptic connotations," argues Attridge.[26] "To enter God's 'rest' is not to take possession of the land of Israel, nor to enter a concrete eschatological temple. Rather, it is to have a share in God's eternal 'sabbatical' repose." Pointing out that Ps. 95:7b-8a offers an open-ended invitation— "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts" (4:7).[27] — Hebrews restores that invitation to his listeners. Hebrews goes on to argue that if the "rest" in Ps. 95 had actually been achieved by those who entered

[25] It also depends on the Greek translation, which uses a single term for rest — *katapauosis*, to cause to cease, to cause sufferings to cease, to end activities or conditions, or even to kill. The Hebrew Masoretic version, however, does not use the same term, which would be *shabbat*. Instead it uses *nucha*, a verb that means to settle down and remain or to repose as after labor. Already the influence of the Greek language and culture becomes apparent in Hebrews. This audience was fully immersed in that culture.

[26] Harold W. Attridge, "'Let Us Strive to Enter That Rest' the Logic of Hebrews 4:1-11" in *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 73, No. 1-2, (Jan.-Apr. 1980), 283.

[27] This is a quote from Hebrews 4:7, from the Septuagint. The wording is slightly different in the NRSV, "O that today you would listen to his voice! Do not harden your hearts…" The JPS Tanakh reads "O, if you would but heed His charge this day. Do not be stubborn…" A literal translation in the Greek reads, "a certain 'he determines' day."

Canaan with Joshua, the Psalmist would not have included an invitation for “today.” Further, Hebrews argues, the Sabbath rest remains open for everyone.

This *inclusio*, which starts at 4:1 — “Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest is still open, let us take care that none of you should seem to have failed to reach it.” — ends at 4:11 — “Let us therefore make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one may fall through such disobedience as theirs.” But all of this depends on a notion of that “rest” as a promise of a rest achieved after death or after the eschaton, which Hebrews and his audience expect soon — “as you see the Day approaching” (10:25). Verse 12 introduces another image that also depends both on Jewish theology and Hellenistic philosophy. “Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” Jewish theology embraces a God who is “living and active” in the lives of God’s people, but this goes further to embody the “word of God” with that activity. The “word” wields a two-edged sword that can divide soul from spirit — the *psyche* from the *pneuma* (both words find a parallel in the Hebrew *nephesh*, and both relate to breath of life), the joints from marrow — the most basic building blocks of the human body. This picture reflects the Platonic dualism of body and soul reflected in a view of earthly and heavenly life. Recalling that this epistle started with a reminder of the words spoken by God through the angels and ultimately through Jesus, the concept of Jesus as the Word, found in the Gospel of John, is not hard to detect. It is worth noting the use of two hortatory phrases in 4:14-16 that point to this looking back and looking forward. In verse 14, “Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, *let us hold fast* our confession.” Then, in verse 16, “Let

us then with confidence *draw near to the throne of grace*, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." (Italics are mine in both verses.) This would seem to point backward to the traditions of the ancient desert Hebrews and forward to the Hellenistic concept of a dualistic reality — earthly, where there is need, and heavenly, where there is grace and mercy.[28]

In the first chapters of the epistle, Hebrews is using the desert story to place his audience inside of Jewish history. They, too, are living under tyranny, experiencing persecution and abuse. But their escape is not across a desert to Palestine, but a desert experience that will ultimately bring them into the Lord's rest, a new birth into the perfect, "real" life of the immortals, just as Jesus was made perfect through suffering and death, learning obedience and becoming the "source of eternal salvation for all who obey him" (5:7-9).

This paper will not attempt to exegete the entire epistle, but some observations are in order. Hebrews' efforts to explain Jesus' role as redeemer in the context of a high priest also depends on an overlapping of Jewish and Greek thought. Placing this comparison not in the Temple but in the desert tabernacle is significant in that it carries forth the desert experience, maintains the tension and anxiety created in chapter 3 in order to continue to remind the readers of the fate of the unfaithful. Hebrews also harkens to a mystical figure in Jewish history — Melchizedek, a priest king whose own history is a mystery. The role of Jesus the High Priest takes place upon his passing "through the heavens" (4:14), and because of it we can "receive mercy and find grace" when we "approach the throne of grace with boldness" (4:16). While the image of the high priest is

[28] Harold W. Attridge, in *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), alerted me to this consideration on page 21, although he does not address the same conclusions.

clearly Jewish, the promise of "eternal salvation" (5:9), a high priest who is priest forever "since he always lives" (7:25) despite having died and sits "in the heavens, a minister in the sanctuary and true tent that the Lord, and not any mortal, has set up" (8:1b-2) is a reflection of Hellenistic philosophy. The concept that there is a "true tent" in the heavens reflects the platonic notion of a heavenly experience that is real, while the life we are living is a poor reflection of that reality. A sharp reminder of that is found in 8:5 in a description of earthly priests who "offer worship in a sanctuary that is a sketch and shadow of the heavenly one," language that reflects a Platonic viewpoint of life and afterlife.

Another interesting connection is the use of Joshua and Jesus (the same name in Greek and Hebrew). Synge makes some interesting observations about that connection. "Jesus the son of Nun was the man who led Israel into the promised land," Synge writes, "but whereas he was unable to give them the promised rest of God, 4:8, Jesus the Christ both leads his Israel into the promised land and also gives them rest." [29] This foreshadowing and comparison (Synge develops this much further) also depends on a Hellenistic Jewish understanding of the significance of the promised land for the Jews and the hope of a perfect heavenly afterlife for the Greeks. For Synge, the "key" to understanding the use of Hebrew Scripture in Hebrews and the rest of the New Testament is to see the Hebrew Bible as a "book of promise."[30] The promise of the Lord's rest in a promised land is made real in Jesus Christ. That concept moves the rest and the land to a different plane. It is no longer a literal land — Palestine/Canaan — but a "real" place of Hellenistic thought — a heavenly afterlife. And the rest is no longer an end to the desert

[29] F.C. Synge, *Hebrews and the Scriptures* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1959), 20.
[30] Synge, *Hebrews,* 58.

experience or even a temporary relief from labor, both of which serve as types to the antitype of God's promised "rest" found in Hebrews, a comparison of the "earthly and the heavenly."[31] It is the goal of the Hellenistic thinker, a shedding of earthly pain and troubles for a heavenly place.

Bonsor confirms this point.[32] Considering the Christian belief in the resurrection, Bonsor notes that the Jews (as well as Jesus) "believed in and proclaimed the resurrection of the body at the coming of the kingdom," the eschaton. "In contrast, the Greeks thought of death as a release from physical existence. Life after death is a return of the soul to higher, spiritual realms. Physical existence means distance from the One. Death is release from the physical movement back toward the source and unity of being."[33] Why would Jewish Christian preachers use this Hellenistic philosophy in their writing? Bonsor says it is "the work of believers attempting to formulate their faith in such a way as to show it was coherent, intelligent, believable."[34]

There is no doubt that Hebrews is attempting that same thing. The sermon is filled with logic-based, if-then arguments that aim to make the Hebrew Scriptures translate into a Hellenistic worldview, and in turn to use those Scriptures to strike fear into his Hellenistic Jewish Christian audience in order to enforce a faith that holds the promise of a Hellenistic view of afterlife. This is not syncretism, as it may seem, but instead is an effort to show that the Hellenistic worldview and its Platonic basis is actually a way of understanding the God of the Jews and the Christ of the Christians. Plato's One is accepted as God by the Hellenistic Jews and Christians. "They read the scriptures from a

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[31] Attridge, *Let Us*, 286.

[32] Jack. A. Bonsor, *Athens and Jerusalem: The Role of Philosophy in Theology* (Nahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press,1993), 26.

[33] Bonsor, *Athens,* 26.

[34] Ibid.

Greek perspective, understanding what they read in terms of their own worldview."[35] An example is how early Christians, including the Jewish Christians addressed by Hebrews, conformed the Palestinian Jewish Christian concept of Jesus returning at the end of time — the Second Coming — to a Hellenistic worldview, which did not include resurrection or an end of history. Instead, these early Hellenized Christians, many of them gentiles as well, established new ways of understanding that promise that led to later heresies and councils, all looking for ways to consolidate these two worldviews.

What is more important to the writer of Hebrews is that he get through to this flailing congregation of believers. It is less important that he explain a theology in the manner of Paul's Epistle to the Romans[36] than it is that the congregation be moved to immediate action, to strengthen their faith and not fall away as is threatened. To do that, Hebrews uses language that will instill fear but will also instill faith in a promise they can understand and embrace. Hebrews "combines various Jewish and Hellenistic traditions in a subtle and intricate way and often significantly redefines the significance of traditional material," Attridge concludes.[37] Hebrews' arguments are made in a logical way, reflecting a Hellenistic way of thinking. Those arguments use meaningful Scriptures — what Attridge calls "inherited symbols" interpreted through a "complex process"[38] — that ensure that these Jewish Christians are part of the history of God's people. They are a desert people who face the same choices as their "wandering Aramean" ancestors. They can remain faithful, in the face of crisis, and enter the Lord's rest, or they can return to

[35] Bonsor, *Athens,* 29.

[36] Note that in 6:1-8, Hebrews states, "Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity…" The basics are repeated — ablutions, laying on of hands, resurrection of the dead, eternal judgment — then concludes with a desperate warning that there are those at dire risk of being "burned" if they turn from the "heavenly gift" they have already "tasted." Doctrine is not his point. Salvation is.

[37] Attridge, *Let Us*, 287.

[38] Attridge, *Let Us*, 288.

"Egypt" and lose that promise. These Jewish Christians know that the loss of that promise means eternity in Sheol, separated from God, because God will surely send them to an untimely and unseemly death, as God did to the unfaithful desert generation. In order to provide a readily understandable alternative, Hebrews' author uses his rhetorical skills to turn the reader's mind to a Hellenistic view of paradise. It is a place where Jesus is the high priest in the "true tent," not the poor reflection of an earthly tabernacle and priest with all the imperfections of this life. That picture of perfection, the law, is "only a shadow of the good things to come and not the true form of these realities…" (10:1). Instead, these Hellenistic people are reminded that "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (11:1). The problem they face is a Jewish one — the end of time is coming soon — and a Hellenistic one — some of them face losing out on those unseen things, those true realities. At the conclusion of the sermon (which I place at the end of chapter 12, with chapter 13 serving as a concluding prayer and prologue), Hebrews again uses the faith and fear motif, clearly restating his stern warning. "Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe; for indeed our God is a consuming fire" (12:28-29).

Hebrews obviously has a strong grasp of Platonic philosophy, especially as it is reflected in the writings of Philo. That is easily detected in the epistle/sermon. More importantly, Hebrews' audience is also acquainted with that same worldview. It is their worldview, for the most part. Regardless of Hebrews' theological and philosophical background, what is more important is that his admonitions are embraced immediately

and without question. To do that, Hebrews must speak in the language of a Hellenized worldview. It is the world Hebrews is seeking to save.

A promise for today

To the modern, Western Christian, much of the Jewish argument is lost, making it a difficult book to preach and teach, but the Hellenistic promise makes easy sense. While the church still refers to an imminent second coming in creeds and some teachings, there is actually little lasting anxiety over that possibility. More likely would be an anxiety over the possibility of an individual's death before he or she has become a true believer (acted out in various ways, from baptism to a public affirmation, or even an "outpouring of the Holy Spirit," depending on the Christian expression). Still, most Christians today can easily grasp the concept of a heavenly promise of a perfect afterlife. While their descriptions of that afterlife are likely to be varied, most would agree that in some way it is "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

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