

THE ESCHATOLOGY OF THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS

A Paper

Presented to

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Western Seminary San Jose

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Course

NTS 537S, Exegeting the Book of Hebrews

By

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June 25, 2009

Introduction

In an essay titled, “Hebrews in Its First Century Context: Recent Research”, George H. Gunthrie notes that the “...trend toward reading Hebrews against the backdrop of Jewish apocalyptic thought has had great influence in Hebrews research of the past few decades.”¹ This is a positive trend in the research of this epistle since one could argue that Hebrews is one of the most intentionally eschatological writings of the New Testament. In the following pages we will attempt to survey the apocalyptic eschatology of this epistle. We will highlight several of the main themes and passages that relate to our subject. It is our goal that the reader of Hebrews is able to approach this epistle with a new lens that allows him to see the Christo-centric eschatological message that the author sought to convey.

Christ: The Beginning of the End

The epistle begins with a juxtaposition between the former days and “these last days” (ἐπ’ ἐσχάτου τῶν ἡμερῶν τούτων). In the previous days God spoke in various ways to the fathers through the prophets. This statement acknowledges that the former covenant was of value. It *was* the means by which God addressed His people. This has changed. As Raymond Brown notes, “In the eschatological context of the last days, the introduction (1:1-3) affirms the superiority of Christ over all that has gone before in Israel.”²

God *once* spoke “in the prophets” (ἐν τοῖς προφήταις); God *now* speaks “in Son” (ἐν υἱῷ). Harold W. Attridge observes, “The final and decisive address of God to humanity occurs not ‘of old’ but, literally, ‘at the end of these days’.”³ Since the author has prefaced this with the aforementioned declaration that the readers are in “these” last days the author wants the readers

¹ George H. Gunthrie, “Hebrews in Its First Century Context: Recent Research”, in Scot McKnight and Grant R. Osborne, eds, *The Face of New Testament Studies: A Survey of Recent Research*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004. 429.

² Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, New York, NY: Doubleday, 1997. 683.

³ Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Hermenia, Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1989. 39.

to understand the Christ-event inaugurated the last days. The readers are to understand themselves as being part of the plan of God for the end of this era of human history.

Things to Come: The Function of μέλλω

Throughout the epistle there are several passages where the author uses a form of the word μέλλω to direct his reader's attention to something that is "to come". In 1:14 and 2:5 the author is in the middle of exalting the person of Messiah over angels. The first use of μέλλω reminds the readers that the role of angels is simply to serve those who "are about to inherit salvation" (τοὺς μέλλοντας κληρονομεῖν σωτηρίαν). The second use is used part of a rhetorical question being asked that expects a negative answer: Is it angels that are to inherit the world that is about to come (πέταξεν τὴν οἰκουμένην τὴν μέλλουσαν)? In the context of both of these passages the author points the reader toward the day when the Son will inherit the world which means the sons will inherit salvation.

In one of the "warning passages" the author informs his audience in 6:5 that one of horrible things about those who fall away is that they have "tasted" the powers of the age that is about to come (δυνάμεις τε μέλλοντος αἰῶνος). We can note from the previous use of this type of terminology that this refers to a loss of inheritance. This means that those who fall away would have tasted the reign of Messiah yet they will have no part in it.

In another one of the "warning passages" the author proclaims in 10:27 of the "flaming fire" of judgment that is "about to consume the enemies of God". McKnight and Church note that eschatological judgment is often depicted as fire (hell).⁴ Therefore this statement ought to be read in the shadow of v. 37 where "the coming one will come" to judge the wicked.

⁴ Edger McKnight and Christopher Church, *Hebrews-James*, Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary, Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys, 2004. 245.

William Robinson has argued that the eschatological nature of Hebrews functions as an exhortation for those who were concerned about the delay of the *Parousia*.⁵ This is certainly to be considered, but we may suggest that it is more so an exhortation for those who seem to no longer be concerned about the second coming. In either case the function of μέλλω in 11:8 and 11:20 would be to show that like these readers also Abraham sought a place that he would receive as an inheritance (ξελεθεῖν εἰς τόπον ὃν ἤμελλεν λαμβάνειν εἰς κληρονομίαν) and likewise Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau regarding those things about to come (εἰς μελλόντων εὐλόγησεν). For an audience that was seeking such an inheritance and such a blessing it would be encouraging to read that personalities like Abraham and Isaac, the two foremost forefathers of the Jewish people, also sought something about to come.

Finally, the author encourages his readers in 13:14 to no longer focus on this city, but “the city that is to come” (ἀλλὰ τὴν μέλλουσαν). This likely is a reference to Jerusalem in contrast with the heavenly, coming Jerusalem. This has led some like Marie Isaacs to suggest that the situation for the writing of the epistle was the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.⁶

Inheriting the World to Come: The Son and the Sons

As previously alluded the content between 1:14 and 2:5 introduces an eschatological inheritance. The author asks his audience to ponder whether or not God will judge those who ignore the words of His Son if He has judges those who ignored the words He delivered through angelic messengers. The obvious answer to this is “yes”.

In 2:3 the author asks “how will we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?” ἐκφευξόμεθα is a future middle indicative first person masculine plural which means that this

⁵ William Robinson. “The Eschatology of the Epistle to the Hebrews: A Study in the Christian Doctrine of Hope”. *Encounter* 22 (1961): 41.

⁶ Gunthrie, 441.

question refers to a future escape. Since the positive aspect of this context refers to future inheritance (as seen with τοὺς μέλλοντας in 1:14) this question must refer to future judgment.

The positive aspect is further developed in 2:11-18. The author depicts the Son as being made a little lower than the angels for a temporary time period in order to taste death for all people so that those whom the Father sanctifies can become his “brethren”. In 2:12 the Messiah is quoted as saying the words of Psalm 22:22, “I will proclaim Your name to my brethren, in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise”. Both the proclamation (ἀπαγγεῶ) and singing (ὕμνήσω) of the Messiah amongst his siblings to God the Father are in the future indicative first person singular indicating a future event when Messiah will lead all the redeemed in a song of worship to the Father. Messiah calls these redeemed “brethren”. The author wants his reader to focus on a future event when this will occur.

A Priest Forever: Christ and Melchizedek

The theme of the priesthood of Messiah is prominent in Hebrews. It has an eschatological aspect in that the priesthood of Messiah is forever. In 7:17 the author quotes Psalm 110:4 saying, “You are a highpriest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek. While the person of Melchizedek is obscure the point of this argument is not. The author clarifies in v. 23 that the Aaronic priesthood needs a large number of priest because these priest died and this meant that there needed to be a replacement. In v. 24 he states that Messiah has his priesthood forever because he does not died (τὸ μένειν αὐτὸν εἰς τὸν αἰῶν). The eschatological aspect of the priesthood of Messiah is that like the New Covenant his priesthood is eternal and like the Old Covenant the priesthood could not be sustained because the priest were temporal.

Christ the Coming One: The Second Coming

In 10:26-39 we have one of the most forthright passages about the second coming of Messiah. In v. 26 the author addresses those who go on sinning willfully. While there is not enough space to dedicate to this statement we argue that in this context this has to do with rejecting Messiah—the only sufficient sacrifice for sins. Those who continue in sin can expect judgment (v. 27). As in 2:3-4 the author reminds his audience in 10:28-29 that if God judged those who disobeyed the Law of Moses it was a sure thing that God would judge those who disobeyed the Messiah. To make this choice is to welcome the vengeance of God upon one's self (v. 30) since to reject Messiah is to “trample underfoot the Son of God” (v. 29).

The author seeks to encourage his audience in vv. 32-36 by reminding them of all that they have already endured for the sake of the message of Christ. In vv. 37-38 the author loosely quoted the LXX of Habakkuk 2:3-4. In Habakkuk 2:3-4 the prophet announces that YHWH is going to judge his people through Babylon. The message of the prophet will come to pass and the righteous person will “live” (i.e. be spared) by his faithfulness to YHWH.

In 10:37-38 the author updates this prophecy. The thing that is going to come to pass is not the message given to the prophet Habakkuk, but rather a person. The person is “the coming one he will come and not delay” (ὁ ἐρχόμενος ἥξει καὶ οὐ χρονίσει). Most scholars believe this to be a reference to the returning Messiah. The righteous one is the one who lives will do so by “faithfulness” to Messiah. Those who are not faithful to Messiah will be judged when he comes back.

While this can serve as an eschatological warning it can also serve as an eschatological exhortation. The audience is suffering persecution as is evident in vv. 32-35. If one endures and is faithful to Messiah the coming one will come to avenge that person on the Day of Judgment.

The Great Cloud of Witnesses: The Theme of Endurance

We have already noted how the examples of Abraham and Isaac functioned to show the readers that these great men also pursued a promise that had yet to come to pass. In the entire eleventh chapter the author makes a list of examples from Jewish history that had lived by faith in God. In 12:1 the author says that since his readers are “surrounded by so great a cloud of witness” they should run the race with endurance in order to finish what they started. Although the examples from the eleventh chapter serve as an encouragement in is Christ whom the readers are to keep their eyes focused upon in 12:2.

This concept ought to be applied to the warning passages in 2:1-4; 4:11-13; 6:4-8; 10:26-31; and 12:25-29. Each one of the warning passages include eschatologically motivated rhetoric used to shame the readers away from returning to the system of the old covenant. We have already briefly examined or alluded to 2:1-4; 6:4-8; and 10:26-31.

In 4:11-13 the warning is found within the exhortation of 4:1-11 where the author argues that the “rest” provided by Joshua when the Hebrews entered the promise land was not the final rest. The final rest occurs because of the “word of God” (v. 12) which has come through the “high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God”. Joshua lead the Hebrews into the earthly promised land; Jesus leads his people into the heavenly promise land. To act as those who did not follow Joshua into the promise land is to die in a worse wilderness than those. Those who refuse to follow Jesus into the heavenly promise land die in an eternal wilderness. This warning is eschatological by nature as well.

In 12:25-29 the warning is also obviously eschatological. The cosmological imagery of God “shaking” the earth and the heavens is used to encourage the readers to “receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken” (v. 28). This is the heavenly kingdom.

The Eschatology of the New Covenant: Sinai versus Zion

In 12:18-25 we find juxtaposition between Sinai, where the Law was delivered, and Zion. This is not necessarily between earthly Sinai and early Zion, where the temple was located, but between earthly Sinai and the eschatological heavenly Zion.

Sinai is not mentioned by name but this is obviously Sinai. The descriptions given—it cannot be touched, it is on fire, it is covered in darkness, gloom, a whirlwind, and so forth—all echo the Exodus story and other Old Testament references to Sinai.⁷ The author seeks to depict the distance of YHWH when the Law was delivered. Animals and people would die if they touched the mountain. Moses even feared.

Zion on the other hand is where “the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem” is located. Sinai had angels. Zion has a “myriad of angels”. This is where the church of the “first born” is gathered. This is where those who have their names in heaven, who are known by God, are citizens. This is where the spirits of the righteous dwell. This is where Jesus Christ mediates the new covenant.

Since this Zion is not simply earthly Zion, but heavenly Zion, this is an eschatological comparison. Believers are already citizens there (v. 23), yet they await its arrival. The new age in Christ is a time when people can come before God in the heavenly Zion without fear.

“We Do Not Have a Lasting City”: Temporal versus Eternal

Jerusalem was the center of the cult activity of Judaism. In 13:9-14 the city and the system are condemned in favor of “Jesus Christ: the same yesterday, today, and forever” (v. 8). In v. 9 the author reminds his audience that it is grace that provides the believer with needed strength, not ritual foods. In v. 10 he informs his audience that they have a heavenly (implied)

⁷ See Kevin S. Chen, “Longing for Zion: Tracing an Inner-Biblical Contrast in the Biblical Literature”, Providence, RI. ETS Annual Meeting, Nov. 2008.

alter than the priest cannot eat from as they did in Jerusalem. In vv. 11-12 the author uses the analogy of the burning of the sacrifices outside the camp as proof that Jesus' death outside the gates of Jerusalem means that being left outside Jerusalem is not of importance.

All this appears to suggest that the readers were Jews who could not find a home in the Holy City. It is likely that they were Hellenistic Jews who lived somewhere like Rome. Jews of the Diaspora felt like wandering nomads. Yet this author announces that earthly Jerusalem—whether it was still standing at the time of this writing or had been sacked by the Romans—is of no avail. The *true* city is the one that is to come (ἣν μέλλουσαν ἐπιζητοῦμεν). The earthly city is not an enduring city; the heavenly city is eternal.

Conclusion

Hebrews is filled with eschatological imagery. It is apocalyptic in the sense that it presents the current age as entering into the eternal age while leaving behind the old age. God has done something new. God has spoken through His Son. If this is so the old has passed away. The temporal institutions of Judaism—the angelic-Mosaic covenant, the Aaronic priesthood, the temple and the sacrificial system, Mount Sinai, and Jerusalem—are all replaced. We now have the New Covenant through the Son, the priesthood like Melchizedek, the one eternal sacrifice of Messiah, the holy Mount Zion, and the heavenly Jerusalem. God has spoken through His Son and He has said that a new era has begun.

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