

25 Hebrews. Subversive Hermeneutics: The Finality of Jesus Christ

The book traditionally known as “The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews” is neither from Paul nor is it a letter. Hebrews is anonymous. The author may well have been Apollos (Acts 18:24-26), unmarried like Paul with an itinerant lifestyle (18:24, 27; see high priority concerns about hospitality and imprisonment in Hebrews 13:2-3). The author represents a cultured and educated elite and addresses well-informed readers recently impoverished by persecution (10:32-34). Although traditionally known as a “letter,” Hebrews does not have the typical introductory patterns of this genre. Rather it is a sermon, an exhortation (13:22) and only at the end (13:23-25) includes the news and personal greetings characteristic of a letter.

Hebrews probably was written ca. 65-66 AD, shortly after Paul’s martyrdom and the great fire in Rome (64 AD), but before the war and the destruction of Jerusalem (67-70 AD), thus, almost 40 years after Jesus’ death and resurrection (30 AD; see the “forty years” in 3:17).

Hebrews appears to address a house-church (20-50 people) in Rome (Hebrews 13:24). Romans 16 had indicated some five such house-churches in Rome (58 AD). Emperor Claudius’ edict (49 AD) expelling Jews (including Jewish Christians) from Rome resulted in confiscation of their property (10:34), and the city’s great fire (64 AD) had led to persecution and imprisonment (10:32-33). Christian Jews suffered this persecution first from emperors (who viewed them as a Jewish sect), but also from Jewish compatriots (for whom they were heretics).

Of all the New Testament books, Hebrews most frequently makes use of the Hebrew Scriptures, especially the radical Exodus traditions, the 40 years in the wilderness, the conquest (followed by the just distribution of land). Nevertheless, Hebrews represents an extreme among the writings of the New Testament because of the evident degree of Neoplatonism in its language

and theology. Furthermore, the numerous citations from the Hebrew Bible never simply reflect the original meaning but continually propose new interpretations, often Christological, and appropriate to the readers' context.¹

1. The Oppressed Poor and Liberating Justice. Concerning poverty and its causes, Hebrews follows the Exodus paradigm: oppression as the fundamental cause of poverty.² The question still debated is whether liberation/salvation is conceived in purely Neoplatonic terms (a "way out" similar to the Exodus but with a spiritualized, immaterial, heaven as the goal); also whether the eschatology of Hebrews is consistent with the apocalyptic and Utopian perspective common to the rest of the New Testament: a cosmic hope that includes a new earth characterized by justice (2 Peter 3:13).

Passages referring explicitly to poverty are few but significant and eloquent. The great faith chapter culminates with triumphalistic references to militarism and political victories in Israel's history (11:32-35), but then realistically acknowledges:

"Others, however, suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, impoverished (hysteroúmeni), oppressed (thlíbo), tormented--of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground" (11:36-38).

The persecution that brutalized and impoverished these people left them without homes and adequate clothing, while they suffered violence, torture and mocking. However, like the elect in James (2:5) they were rich in faith (Hebrews 11:39-40). In other references to the poor, Hebrews speaks of the impoverished Christians whose properties were plundered (10:32-34) and of the Israelite slaves in Egypt (11:24-26; see Exodus 1--15).

Since Hebrews begins by emphasizing that God spoke through the prophets (1:1), the focus on oppression and persecution as fundamental causes of poverty is not surprising (10:33; 11:25, 37). The oppression targeted a persecuted group and also threatened any who showed solidarity with them (10:33, koinonía; 11:25; cf. those in solidarity with the poor whom Jesus called the “poor in spirit” (--> Matthew 5:3; 25:31-46).

Hebrews shares with the rest of the New Testament the understanding that the church’s ministry provides partial and provisional response to the suffering of the poor. Thus in Hebrews the “assembling together” is both to meet the material needs and for spiritual edification (Hebrews 10:24-25). The church’s ministry to the oppressed may be seen theologically as the internalization of God’s just law in the New Covenant/Alliance (8:8 -12; note 'adikía, “oppression,” v. 12; cf. 6:10; 10:17; Jeremiah 22:16). Externally this ministry is manifested in the good works for the needy, the solidarity of agape-love and the service (diakonéo) to the saints (6:10). Fraternal love (philadelphía) is manifested in the hospitality to homeless visitors (13:2, itinerant prophets and evangelists like Apollos?), visiting those who suffer imprisonment (13:3, 23), physical solidarity with those “excommunicated” from their traditional spiritual community (13:12-13), good works, and shared sacrifice (koinonía, 13:15-16, 21). The basic prerequisite for such sacrificial actions is to be free of the “love of money” (13:5).

The New Covenant of Hebrews 8 (see Jeremiah 31) internalizes the Torah as a whole, including its considerable sociopolitical justice dimension, not just select compassionate and reformist elements. Consequently, Hebrews 8 implies a “structural” approach to eliminate oppression (see 8:12, 'adikías; cf. 6:10) and to instill a praxis of liberating justice (“know me,” 8:11; see Jeremiah 22:16-17). The traditions of the Exodus and the conquest in 3:1 --4:11 and the political-military triumphalism of 11:32-35 also are pertinent, but all were past realities, not contemporary. Although not as explicit as Luke in presenting the Gospel as Good News “to the

poor,” Hebrews similarly proclaims a Gospel that involves an integral salvation-liberation. For Hebrews, however, as for our other New Testament documents, inclusive house-churches represented the first fruits of God’ anticipated new just order.

A Neoplatonic reading of Hebrews would contradict the other Utopian-apocalyptic writings of the New Testament (Revelation 20--22; 2 Peter 3:13). Nevertheless, despite tendentious translations, we may detect, even behind Neoplatonic mistranslations, teachings coherent with the materialism of Hebrew thought and that of the other New Testament books. Above all, “Mount Zion” and “the heavenly Jerusalem” (12:22-24; cf. 11:10, 16) should not be misinterpreted as an immaterial kingdom, eternally separated from the earthly scene, but rather as “near” in space as well as in time (13:14). The Jerusalem that is heavenly in origin will finally (as in Revelation 21--22) descend to earth to consummate God’s Kingdom “earth ... heaven...we are receiving,” Hebrews 12:26-28; cf. Matthew 6:19, “on earth”).

Whatever the correct reading (Neoplatonic-spiritual or Hebrew materialist), the consummation of God’s Kingdom represents, as in other parts of the New Testament, the glorious resolution for the suffering of the poor and the oppressed. Without doubt the teachings of Hebrews about creation (1:1-4; 12:27) and bodily resurrection (11:35; 13:20) are more consistent with a Hebrew materialist reading of the book. However, even though an intermediate state and the celestial sphere receive greater development and emphasis than in other New Testament books, this reading does not necessarily contradict the apocalyptic material and earthly dimension. Hebrews’ description of Moses’ decisive option for solidarity with the poor and oppressed provides us with our most vivid and explicit paradigm of this fundamental element in contemporary liberation theologies:

“By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called a son of Pharaoh’s daughter, choosing rather to share ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting

pleasures of sin. He considered abuse suffered for the Christ to be greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking ahead to the reward” (11:24-26).

Undoubtedly the erudite and eloquent author of Hebrews identified with this portrait of Israel’s great liberator, who established Torah to exemplify God’s liberating justice and maintain the liberated community free from enslavement.³ Given Hebrews’ deep grounding in the Hebrew Bible and the Exodus paradigm of poverty caused by oppression, not surprisingly we find throughout the book repeated references to liberating justice. The first chapter sets the tone with its portrayal of Jesus as messianic Son, whose divine rule is characterized by rectitude, liberating justice and detesting of oppression (1:8-9, citing Psalm 45:6-7; cf. Ps. 72). In the great faith chapter, Noah (not Abraham!), saved from the flood that extinguished violent contemporaries, exemplifies God’s liberating justice (dikaiosúne) that comes by faith (11:7). In Hebrew, Melchizedek’s very name (“King exemplifying liberating justice”) and city (King of [Jeru]-Salem, peace) unite two fundamental characteristics of God’s rule (7:1-2; similarly, the “harvest of liberating justice and peace” resulting from divine discipline in 12:11; cf. Isaiah’s apocalyptic hope for liberating justice resulting in peace, 32:15-18). Hospitality for the homeless (itinerant prophets, disciples fleeing persecution) and solidarity with oppressed prisoners are described as expressions of brotherly love (13:1-2), but in the context of the book, may also be understood as expressions of liberating justice (see 12:23; 11:33; cf. 2:2; 5:13; 9:1, 10; 11:4).

2. Women and Sexual Minorities. Hebrews mentions only two women by name: Abraham’s wife Sarah (11:11; see her involvement in bigamy and promoting divorce in Genesis 16 and 21) and Rahab, the prostitute (11:31; cf. various unnamed women of faith in 11:35). Concerning Sarah Hebrews says: “It was equally by faith that Sarah, although past the age, was empowered to conceive [literally: ‘deposited seed’], because she trusted that God who had made the promise would be faithful to it” (11:11). The Greek text thus attributed to Sarah the male

role of “depositing seed” (even though the existence of the feminine ovule fertilized by semen was not scientifically recognized until the 19th century). To avoid anachronism our translations commonly change Sarah’s role and reduce her to a parentheses: “By faith he [Abraham] received power of procreation, even though he was too old (Sarah herself being barren) because he considered him faithful who had promised” (11:11, cf. NIV and NRSV).

Given the marginalization of women in Hebrews, the exaltation of Rahab, the Gentile prostitute who showed solidarity with the Israelites in the conquest of Jericho, is notable (11:31; Joshua 2). Just as James places Rahab and Abraham on an equal footing as examples of sexual minorities with faith (James 2:25), Hebrews presents Rahab as comparable to Sarah in faith (Matthew 1:5 includes her in Jesus’ genealogy). This exaltation of Rahab in the Bible is consistent with the presentation of Jesus as a “friend of tax collectors and prostitutes” and with the teaching of Paul, who did not rebuke the prostitutes but Christian husbands who paid for their services (1 Cor. 6:12-20). Churches that condemn sex-workers deviate widely from the teaching and example of Jesus and the New Testament authors (Matthew 21:31-32).

Furthermore, according to the Hebrew Scriptures, Sarah herself must be reckoned among the sexual minorities: first she is called “sterile” (a patriarchal and pre-scientific perspective); second, she arranges for Abraham to take as concubine her slave Hagar (putting her in a kind of menage en trois that endured several years); and finally she demands the dismissal (divorce) of Hagar with her son Ishmael, Abraham’s first-born. Genesis even accuses Sarah of “oppressing” Hagar (Hebrew: 'anah, Genesis 16:6). 1 Peter depicts Sarah as a pious, submissive wife (1 Peter 3:5-6), but in Genesis she is strong, not always submissive, and is the first person in the Scriptures accused of “oppression.”⁴

Nevertheless, for many contemporary readers, more problematic than Hebrew’s omission of heroic women of faith (like Deborah), is the interpretation of Christ’s death as a kind

of child abuse, a sacrifice in which God (like Abraham threatening Isaac in Genesis 22) cruelly abuses his son.⁵ Mary D'Angelo concludes that Hebrews implies divine approval for child abuse (2:10; 5:8; 12:4-11). Similarly, with reference to Hebrews 12:5-11, which cites Proverbs 3:11-12, Donald Capps maintains that the author of Hebrews gives evidence of having suffered abuse as a child (which may have included sexual abuse).⁶ Capps recommends as preferable Jesus' teaching that God is a kind Father (see Q, the Sermon on the Mount, the parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15:11-32) and the teaching of Matthew, where Jesus introduces a new era in adult-child relationships in which children are treated with dignity and respect (18:1-4 // Mark 9:33-36 // Luke 9:46-47; similarly Isaiah 11:1-9 and Psalm 8). Also Hebrews 12:8 easily leads to child abuse with its pejorative reference to those who are "bastards and not sons," another example of the patriarchal culture supporting an ideology through language control (--> James).

Hebrews' focus on Christ as high priest may be manipulated to prohibit the ordination of women. Nevertheless, Jesus was a layman and not descended from the priestly tribe of Levi, but he exercised a priesthood similar to that of Melchizedek (see below). Consequently, we may understand Jesus' priesthood as involving a rejection of traditional patriarchal ordination and a basis for accepting the spiritual leadership of women, sexual minorities and the physically challenged (7:11-19; 8:3-5; Isaiah 56:3-5).

Hebrews defends the integrity of heterosexual marriage against those who despised it (13:4; adherents of some Neoplatonic philosophy? Note the use of "bed" as a sexual euphemism with a positive sense; cf. "bed-males" --> 1 Timothy, 1 Corinthians). However, the homeowners expected to practice hospitality and resist the temptation to love money (13:2, 5) may have included many who were not married (--> Romans 16). Sexual minorities certainly receive the strongest affirmation throughout the book. Above all, Jesus, unmarried and not of priestly descent, is the new high priest whose sacrifice, "once and for all time" (10:11), puts an end to all

previous sacrifices and priesthods. Since Jesus was a layman, not descended from Aaron nor from the tribe of Levi, Hebrews portrays his priesthood as prefigured by the gentile king and priest, Melchizedek of Jerusalem--whom the Scriptures present, not only as never married, but even as having neither parents nor descendants (7:1-3, sexual minority, really “queer”!).

Melchizedek’s story clarifies antiquity’s prescientific concept of procreation, since Hebrews even affirms that when Melchizedek went out to encounter the patriarch, Abraham already carried in his loins descendants (such as Levi) who were born centuries later (7:10)! Often the Bible is cited against abortion because the unborn are already viewed as human beings (Psalm 139; Luke 1, etc.). However, should we also then conclude that all semen in male “loins” contain real human beings destined to be born even generations later? Campaigners against abortion must assume rather a modern scientific understanding of procreation. They cannot start simply from biblical texts that affirm the existence of life before birth, because such biblical texts also presume that human life exists in semen even centuries before conception.⁷

In fact, not only isolated cases (Rahab, Sarah, Abraham, Melchizedek) but the great majority of persons named in Hebrews represent sexual minorities of some type. In the list of heroes of the faith in Hebrews 11, for example, only two, Enoch and Joseph, appear to be heterosexuals legitimately married to only one wife. Nevertheless, unmarried Abel died by violence at the hands of his brother Cain, who apparently incestuously married a sister. Noah had only one wife, but became drunk after the Flood, lay naked and apparently was raped by his son Ham (Genesis 9:18-28, euphemistic language; see NRSVSB note). Isaac and Jacob married close relatives (incest, according to Leviticus), and even Moses was the son of an incestuous relationship (according to Leviticus).

3. The Weak, Physically Challenged, and Sick: Divine Healing and Empowerment.

The people of God are perceived in Hebrews as debilitated, “weakened” by so much persecution

and oppression (4:15; 5:1-3; 11:34-35), but even more as “exhausted” (12:12) and consequently yearning to ascend to the new Jerusalem (12:22, 29) and enter their heavenly “rest” (4:1-11). Much more than other New Testament books, Hebrews utilizes the vocabulary and certain Neoplatonic concepts common among educated persons in the Greco-Roman culture. The book nevertheless remains deeply rooted in the fundamental Hebrew concepts of God’s creation, liberating acts in history, and the dynamic understanding of the life of God’s people as walking on a way (3:10; 9:8; 10:20) or “running a race” (12:1-3).⁸ Like the rest of the Bible, Hebrews never employs the static, ahistorical concepts of “ethics” or “morals” dominant in Greek philosophy and the Neoplatonized traditional theologies. The weak, tired, and physically challenged are not a marginalized class in Hebrews, but represent all of God’s people, who should, nevertheless, “run with perseverance the race that is set before us” (12:1):

“Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed” (12:12-13; cf. Isaiah 40:27-31).

Outline

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- 3 Humanity's glorious origin and destiny (and Jesus' death that defeats evil) 2:5-18
- 4 Faithfulness: Moses and Jesus as authentic paradigms 3:1-6
- 5 Listening to God's voice in the midst of the AIDS crisis: God wrath against
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- 7 Prayer: Our bold approach to the throne of grace (God's loving solidarity
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- 8 Stern warning for times of persecution (when our solidarity with
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- 11 Jesus, lay minister of a better covenant with superior promises (whose
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- 12 Jesus' death (1): earthly defeat, celestial triumph (our sins of ignorance
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