

Review of Robert P. Gordon, *Hebrews*. 2nd ed. Readings: A New Biblical Commentary. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008.

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The first edition of this commentary was published in 2000. The only changes introduced in the second edition are a number of minor corrections and an additional Introduction (pp. 36-53).¹ After a few general remarks I will restrict my comments to this new Introduction.

In keeping with the aims of the series, the commentary has a very brief bibliography and few footnotes. Gordon interacts with little of the secondary literature, listing only five commentaries (Attridge, Bruce, Lane, Michel and Spicq) in his meagre bibliography, with the most recent of these now twenty years old (Lane 1991), plus a number of other works. The bibliography was not updated in the second edition to include the additional works referred to in the new Introduction, although the authors of these works do appear in the Index of Authors. The Index of References to Ancient Literature has been updated.

Gordon dates *Hebrews* prior to 70 CE, and suggests that the author may have been a “learned man” like Apollos of Alexandria (see Acts 18:24), although he declines to identify Apollos as the author. He argues from such texts as Heb 2:16, referring to the descendants of Abraham, that the addressees were Jewish-Christians. He declines to locate them geographically, and argues from Heb 2:14-15 as well as the references to death and dying in Heb 11 that the presenting problem for the addressees was fear of death, perhaps accompanied by fear of imperial edicts in Rome against Christians. Faced with such fears, the recipients appear to be suffering from “cultic deprivation,” concerned that the absence of tangible cultic arrangements in Christianity may indicate that Christianity was inadequate to meet their spiritual needs. In the face of this the author of *Hebrews* argues that Christ, and what his readers possess in Christ, is superior to the cultic arrangements of the Old Testament.

In the original Introduction Gordon briefly discussed the issue of supersessionism (pp. 24-29), and in the new Introduction he supplements this discussion. He notes that in several places the text makes “comparisons between Christianity and Judaism ... to the disadvantage of the latter” (p. 36). This he labels “supersessionism.” He is not alone in this claim, found as it is in the works of several other scholars. However, questions may be asked about this analysis, in particular with respect to Gordon’s use of the terms “Judaism” and “Christianity.” These terms appear nowhere in *Hebrews*, and indeed, whether there were two religions with these names at the date Gordon proposes for *Hebrews* is open to serious question. It seems clear that there were very early disputes between the followers of Jesus and the Jewish authorities over the validity of the temple (Acts 6:13), and that the followers of Jesus were sometimes excluded from synagogues (e.g. John 9:22; 12:42; 16:42). On the other hand, the events recounted in Acts 13:14-16, which, while probably earlier than *Hebrews* by some decades, indicate that Paul and his companions were in the habit of attending and participating in synagogue worship. While “the partings of the ways” cannot be definitively assigned to the first century, it seems clear that some of the addressees of *Hebrews* may have been in the habit of participating in Jewish rituals centred on the temple cultus in Jerusalem (13:10-16). This the author wishes to combat and does so by calling his readers to exit “the camp” (13:13-14), probably an oblique reference to Jerusalem and the temple, and to go not to some new religion, but to Jesus. Supersessionism implies that the church (and Christianity) has replaced Israel (and Judaism) in the purposes of God. There is none of this in *Hebrews*.

Those who detect supersessionism in Hebrews generally respond in one of two ways. One response is set out in a paper presented by Pamela Eisenbaum at the 2005 SBL annual meeting. Eisenbaum argues that Hebrews is not supersessionist for four reasons. First, Hebrews post-dates the destruction of Jerusalem, and is a response to the non-existence of the Temple, and not an attempt to write it out of existence; second, the labels “Christianity” and “Judaism” are anachronistic at the time Hebrews was written; third, the tendency of some scholars to describe the cultic language of Hebrews in terms of metaphor too easily slides into the understanding that the sacrifice of Christ is what is truly real, while Jews “preoccupy themselves with meaningless rituals”; and finally, Hebrews deals not with the living religion of Judaism but with the ancient Israelite cult, and that the two religions, “Christianity” and “Judaism” both superseded that cult, a point that Gordon himself makes (pp. 28, 46-47). These are valuable insights, though I would argue, with Gordon, that while the evidence is mixed, a date prior to 70 CE seems more likely. Also, talk of metaphor does not necessarily entail the rejection of the former cultus as “meaningless ritual.”

A second response to supersessionism is more cogent, and is one that Gordon himself hints at in both his original Introduction and his new Introduction. In 2000 he pointed out that “the Old Testament contains the seeds of its own supersession ... [and that the author of Hebrews argues] from within a faith continuum that he himself traces back to Abel in early Genesis” (p. 27). This he reiterates in the new Introduction, adding that “even though he requires his addressees to disassociate themselves from their Jewish matrix, he still regards himself and the ‘Hebrews’ as belonging to the community of those who worship the God of Israel” (p. 51). His critique of Judaism is an “in-house” critique from one who stands in the tradition of the long list of faithful heroes listed in Heb 11. Richard Hays develops this line of argument more fully when he argues, from several perspectives, that for the author of Hebrews the story of Israel is “a vast figurative narrative whose true meaning is finally disclosed in Jesus” (Hays 2009, 163). The events of the Old Testament and the Old Testament cult are real and valid, but point to a christological fulfilment. Indeed, to the author of Hebrews God’s speech act in Jer 31:31-34, where he declares a new covenant, effectively renders the previous covenant old (Hays 2009, 161), and what is old is about to disappear (Heb 8:13).

Thus the author of Hebrews argues from a place within Second Temple Judaism that the story of Israel finds its ultimate *telos* in Jesus of Nazareth. His readers are now to carry forward that story by following Jesus. As Gordon himself claims, “in Christ a new entity emerges from the ancestral religion of Israel that incorporates both Jews and non-Jews, that does not look to the old covenants conceived purely in ethnic terms, and that envisages the fulfilment of the ancient promises not only in the birth of the church but also in the ultimate blessing of the Jewish people through the Gospel” (p. 48).

For the author of Hebrews the former covenant and its associated cultus were valid for their time as pointers to what was to come, and now that the “time of reformation” (9:10) has come, these must give way to that which they anticipated. But the exhortation is not to follow another, new religion, but to follow Jesus (12:1-2; 13:14), one who arose from the tribe of Judah (7:14), and in whom God’s plans to set free the descendants of Abraham are centred (2:16). Jesus and his sacrifice do not so much supersede the temple cult of Judaism, as bring the Israelite cult to its *telos* (8:13; 10:5-10). Now that this *telos* has come with his exaltation to the right hand of God (1:3; 8:1), for his followers to occupy themselves with the former cult is to risk holding Jesus in contempt (6:6) and laying themselves open to the judgment of God (10:26-31).

I am not sure that it is altogether helpful to describe this as supersessionism, especially in the present climate where, as Gordon says, “the importance of religious tolerance and interfaith dialogue is being increasingly recognised” (p. 36). This is the climate in which the two religions do now exist side by side, and while what is found in Hebrews could be alienating to those who continue to cherish the former cultus (cf. Dunn 2006, 121), whether or not it is referred to as

supersessionism, Hebrews comes from a former age, where the climate was very different, and it will not do to flatten it out. What we have in Hebrews is a simultaneous affirmation and transmutation of the former cult. That cult pointed to the eschatological realities, now come with the exaltation of Christ, and to go back to that cult would be to revert to the old when the new has come.

Gordon's commentary remains useful as a fresh reading of Hebrews, and is enhanced by this new Introduction. But those who own the first edition may not want to purchase the second simply to access these additional eighteen pages.

ENDNOTES

¹ One minor correction that was not made is the reference 4Q174 Column 3 as Column 1 (p. 59).

REFERENCES

Dunn, J. 2006. *The partings of the ways between Christianity and Judaism and their significance for the character of Christianity*. 2nd ed. London: SCM.

Eisenbaum, P.M. 2005. Hebrews, supersessionism and Jewish Christian relations. Online: <http://www.hebrews.unibas.ch/documents/2005Eisenbaum.pdf> Accessed November 15, 2011.

Hays, R.B. 2009. "Here we have no lasting city": New covenantalism in Hebrews. In *The Epistle to the Hebrews and Christian theology*, ed. R. Bauckham et al. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.



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