The New Testament’s most dangerous book for Jews

Reading and preaching Hebrews without supersessionism

by Jesper Svartvik in the September 22, 2021 issue

Christ the Great High Priest, 16th-century fresco (St. Nicholas Toplički Monastery, North Macedonia)

In 1993, as a visiting research student at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, I read for the first time a passage in the rabbinical text Midrash Tanchuma, a text that has influenced me profoundly. The passage begins with a discussion of the differences between the written Torah (the five books of Moses or, in a wider sense, the entire Hebrew Bible) and the oral Torah (Jewish oral traditions). Then follows a Midrash, in which it is suggested that Moses also wanted the Mishnah (the oldest part of the oral Torah) in writing. However, God said no, because God foresaw that the peoples of the world were going to translate the Torah and read it in Greek, and then they would say: *Anu hen Yisrael* (“We are Israel”). God therefore wanted the Mishnah to be a secret, because there are those who will use the Jewish scriptures as a theological weapon aimed at the Jewish people.

This is clearly a reference to the claim of the Christian movement. Indeed, numerous Christians take for granted that this is the singular Christian position—that is, that Christians must claim that they are "the true Israel" or "the new Israel" or simply "Israel," at the expense of the Jewish people. Jews have been targeted by numerous anti-Jewish ideologies throughout the ages, but only Christendom has claimed that it has replaced Israel, that Hebrew Bible texts actually are about Christians, and that they can only be read with Christian glasses. At the time of Augustine (354–430), it was not controversial to invert the distribution of roles in the Bible. Hence, he read the words in Psalm 59:11—"Slay them not, lest my people forget"—as an instruction about how the church ("my people") should treat Jews ("them"). In other words, the church fathers developed a hermeneutics that decentered and even disinherited Jews and Judaism.

One New Testament text has done more than any other to cement the notion that Judaism and Christianity are two separate covenants, that the newer covenant is better, and that this is fundamental to Christian faith: Hebrews. This is not surprising. Hebrews includes 14 of the New Testament's 33 uses of the Greek word *diathêkê* ("covenant") and 13 of its 19 uses of *kreittôn* ("better"). If this text is a comparison between Christianity and Judaism, is it so far-fetched to draw the conclusion that Christianity is the better religion? After all, the text explicitly states that "in speaking of 'a new covenant,' [God] has made the first one obsolete. And what is obsolete and growing old will soon disappear" (8:13).

So how on earth are we to interpret Hebrews? And how can ministers preach it responsibly and well?

"We are Israel," say the gentiles whom God foresees in Midrash Tanchuma. Supersessionism understands Judaism not as a distinct religion from Christianity but rather as its prologue. In history, it is argued, Judaism *preceded* Christianity; moving forward, Christianity should *proceed* alone. Judaism paved the way, and now it should make way. This way of thinking has been extraordinarily influential in Christian theology.

Yet many of us seek other ways to describe the relationship between Judaism and Christianity—and the Bible provides us with an older, less-traveled approach. By asking old questions and articulating some new answers, we can read these texts in such a way that the early Christian movement's inherent Jewishness is given much stronger consideration than it typically received only a couple of decades ago.

Both the historical Jesus and the historical Paul are now firmly situated within late Second Temple Judaism, and it's understood that the post–70 CE writers of the New Testament form their theology and write their texts in the wake of the destruction of the temple, when all branches of Judaism had to cope with the fact that the sanctuary was no more. A growing number of scholars now understand Judaism not as the gloomy background from which Christianity had to be removed in order to glow and grow but rather as the matrix one must restore in order to appreciate the New Testament texts more fully.

In this endeavor to uncover an early Christian, non-supersessionist hermeneutics, Hebrews seems to be an exception: scholars, preachers, and people in the pew all seem to agree that Hebrews is a supersessionist text. But in my opinion, it would be anachronistic to find in such an early text—it should reasonably be dated to right around 70 CE—the supersessionist theology that was developed only later, when it became possible to consider Judaism and Christianity as two sharply defined religions. Have we sufficiently reflected on this as a text written before they were perceived this way?

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Perhaps one thing that has contributed to this text being read timelessly—by which I mean anachronistically—is that we know so little about its historical context. I think Hebrews was originally a sermon, noteworthy for its elegant Greek and rhetoric, that eventually was edited in order to fit the format of an epistle, but that is far from the only suggestion. We can't be sure by whom, to whom, when, where, or why it was written. Origen famously stated that "who wrote the epistle, in truth God knows." Introductory essays tend to suggest that it was probably written between 60 and 120 CE, and that it has something to do with Italy (see Heb. 13:24). But that is all.

This lack of a minimum of historical knowledge has probably contributed to the mainstream interpretation: that the text is the first example of the Christian supersessionism that later would determine so much of Jewish-Christian relations. In other words, Hebrews is more often presented as the first volume in Christian dogmatics than as one of several enigmatic New Testament texts.

So what about the use of the word *covenant*? Christians are so used to referring to the Jewish Bible as "the Old Testament" and Judaism as "the old covenant" that they

might not be able to see what the anonymous author here actually has in view. At the time of the composition of Hebrews, “the old covenant” could not be a technical term for Second Temple Judaism. And it is crucial to note that in Hebrews, the “new covenant” above all belongs to the future. In other words, Hebrews is far more eschatological than most readers have realized. This is not far-fetched: if both the oldest letters (written by Paul) and the oldest Gospels (the synoptic tradition) are eschatological, then why shouldn’t the oldest preserved Christian sermon be as well?

Hebrews presupposes the dialectics between the present and the future: we now live in “the time that is” (9:9), and the author longs for “the time for a better order” (9:10). The heavenly service, in which Jesus Christ serves as high priest, is already in progress; this is invisible to human eyes, inaudible to human ears, and incomprehensible to human thoughts. But the time of the new era has not yet completely broken. In the words of Peter J. Tomson: “The ‘new covenant,’ if we may thus accentuate it, is valid only in heaven, not yet upon earth.”

It is also crucial to note how the verb *palaioun* (“to grow old”) is used. The word occurs three times in the New Testament: once in the Gospel of Luke and twice in Hebrews. In Luke 12:33, Jesus encourages his disciples to sell what they have and give alms, so that they provide themselves with money bags that “do not grow old” (*mê palaioumena*), a treasure in the heavens that does not fail as earthly goods do. In Luke this verb is set in a comparison between earthly possessions (which are perishable) and heavenly treasure (which never grows old).

Hebrews 1:10–12 quotes Psalm 102:26–28, praising God for the creation, which, although breathtakingly splendid, one day will perish: it will “wear out” (*palaiôthêsontai*) like clothing. The verb is used to describe the vulnerability and limitations of this world.

The third text is Hebrews 8:13, in which it is anticipated that the old covenant “will soon disappear” (*engys aphanismou*). Is not the most plausible interpretation that the author here, too, articulates the belief that one day this world will “grow old” and only God will remain? If so, this verse is an expression of an intense eschatological longing for the future, for a complete and perfected world.

And if so, it is a tragic irony that so many Christians have inverted the meaning in these two passages in Hebrews—suggesting that God actually does change, since

God is understood as preferring a newer religion to an older religion and wishing that the latter would disappear. This is the opposite message of Hebrews 1:12: “But you [God] are the same, and your years will never end.”

Hebrews does not compare Christianity to Judaism. Instead, it compares the future and perfect to the earthly and fragmentary. In short, it compares heaven and earth—and the author of Hebrews states, not surprisingly, that the heavenly is perfect and the earthly is deficient. The new is better than the old because the kingdom of heaven is better than earthly life.

I think that Hebrews 8:13 neither predicts the fall of the temple (if written before 70 CE) nor gives vent to theological schadenfreude (if written later). But I do believe that it articulates a profoundly eschatological expectation. The message in Hebrews is hardly that Christian services are “better” than those that take place in synagogues. It’s that the celestial service is heavenly compared to earthly—more or less mundane—services.

This line of thought is presented in more detail in a chapter of the 2011 book *Christ Jesus and the Jewish People Today*, which I coedited with Philip A. Cunningham, Joseph Sievers, Mary C. Boys, and Hans Hermann Henrix. In fact, this interpretation of Hebrews has become relatively influential. Among other places, it’s reflected in “The Gifts and the Calling of God Are Irrevocable” (paragraph 18).

I’m convinced that the comparative paradigm (the “new” and the “better”) that has governed so much of Jewish-Christian relations is based on a flawed reading of Hebrews, one that fails to consider the role of early Christian apocalypticism. Here are three recommendations that I hope will help us read Hebrews responsibly and well.

Rediscover the pilgrimage motif in the Bible, and in Hebrews in particular. Christians who look upon themselves as pilgrims are reminded that they have not yet reached their destination, that they are still on their way, and that they do not have all the answers.

John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* is dependent on the theology of Hebrews. In Ernst Käsemann’s *Das wandernde Gottesvolk*, written while imprisoned by the Nazis for insubordination, the theologian argues that the wandering of the people of God is the principal motif in Hebrews. William G. Johnsson explores this theme in “The Pilgrimage Motif in the Book of Hebrews,” a 1978 article in the *Journal of Biblical*

Literature.

Read Hebrews holistically. We often read the concluding chapters of Hebrews eschatologically, forward-oriented. (In my native Sweden, hymns sung at funerals often include theology and sometimes even quotations from Hebrews.) One particularly forward-looking verse is 13:14: “Here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.” The same perspective is found in 11:16: “But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. . . . God . . . has prepared a city for them.”

It seems reasonable to argue that the author of Hebrews is no less eschatological in chapters 8 and 9 than in chapters 11–13. Yet the earlier material is often read as if it has a separate, polemical agenda. This should give us pause.

Take note of what is being compared in Hebrews. There is certainly a comparison in this sermonic epistle, and one thing is shown to be better than the other—but it is not Judaism and Christianity that the author compares. The comparison is between what is now and what shall one day be. And staunch Platonists, such as the author of Hebrews, are not the only ones who would maintain that the heavenly service must be better than the ones on Earth.

A related problem is that we tend to compare our own ideals to the other’s reality—our words to their world. Krister Stendahl famously offered three rules for improved interreligious relations. Along with “let the Others define themselves” and “leave room for Holy Envy,” the Swedish bishop and Harvard professor challenged us to “compare equal to equal.” We must always compare our ideal to the other’s ideal and our reality to the other’s reality.

Needless to say, an eschatological reading of Hebrews does not answer all questions. Rather, it adds a new one: How on earth are we to read the text? The answer is that *on earth* we should read it as we read Paul’s eschatological statements. He, too, thought that the end of the world was imminent; he thought that he belonged to the last generation, and he longed to depart and to be with Christ, “for that was far better” (Phil. 1:23).

The New Testament texts also emphasize what has already happened. In the Pauline epistles we read about the ingathering of the gentiles—they, too, are now covenantally embraced by the God of Israel. In the synoptic Gospels we encounter numerous texts that proclaim that the kingdom of God is at hand. In the Fourth

Gospel we find the influential theological line of thought that the presence of God is in Jesus Christ: the *shekhinah* of God tented (*eskênousen*) in him, John writes in his prologue. (*Shakhan* in Hebrew and *skênoun* in Greek both mean “to tent”—one of few such etymological connections between the two languages. Perhaps the words for the divine presence in our world comprise the strongest link between the two parts of the Christian Bible.)

In Hebrews, the oldest Christian sermon we have, we hear what we already are familiar with from listening to other New Testament voices: a yearning for a world that is better than this world. We hear it, that is, if we can listen without presupposing the supersessionism of a later time. Reading Hebrews eschatologically provides us with a hermeneutical framework when interpreting it. *Yearning*: in a word, this is how we should read Hebrews on earth.

Midrash Tanchuma offers us a Jewish perspective on Christians’ triumphalist claim that God has abandoned the Jewish people and that the church is now Israel. It is a fact that this is how many Christians have looked upon themselves vis-à-vis the Jewish people, and more often than not, the book of Hebrews has been called upon to serve this self-aggrandizing agenda. But when we start reading Hebrews as an eschatological text, written by a person on earth longing for the *eschaton*, a new scenario may be set before our eyes.

I would therefore like to suggest an alternative ending for this Midrash, based on the words of Zechariah 8:23: “Thus says the Lord of hosts: In those days ten men from nations of every language shall take hold of a Jew, grasping his garment and saying, ‘Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.’”

Read the author's lectionary columns on the Hebrews passages assigned for October 3 and October 10.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “A dangerous book.”