

# WHY BOTHER WITH HEBREWS? AN AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE<sup>1</sup>

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## INTRODUCTION

In a lecture given on the eve of her retirement, Marie Isaacs, a Letter to the Hebrews scholar,<sup>2</sup> gives a snap-shot (covering fifty years – 1950–2002) of the place of Hebrews in the churches and in the academic study of the New Testament:

Hebrews was [and is] not regarded as sufficiently ‘mainstream’ either in the academic circles or in its ‘market’, the churches, to warrant much attention. Then as now we knew that only the Gospels and Paul were really worth bothering about! In my undergraduate days the rest (Hebrews, James, 1 & 2 Peter, 1, 2, & 3 John, Jude and the Apocalypse) were referred to as ‘the back-end’ of the New Testament. But at least then the back-end was an integral part of any reputable university’s basic New Testament syllabus, which cannot be said of today. With the reduction of the Biblical Studies component in most theology degrees, and its concomitant, the reduction in time and content of our syllabuses, Hebrews – along with a number of our New Testament works – has effectively been made redundant, and we are left with a ‘canon within the canon’.<sup>3</sup>

The effect of this, she argues, is the impoverishment of what has been left in New Testament syllabuses, i.e., Synoptic, Johannine and Pauline studies, through the ignorance of what was previously peripheral but is now left out altogether. Her lecture, therefore, seeks to show why this is the case by pointing out and explicating three, we may say, unique contributions Hebrews brings to different aspects of New Testament studies. These are that Hebrews (1) ‘provides evidence of the Diversity of Early Christian tradition’; (2) ‘evidences a Christian Community which has yet to break with Judaism’; and that (3) ‘brings us face to face with the metaphorical character of much of the language of the New Testament’. Presumably, what Isaacs remarks is in the context of, and applies to, the churches in Britain and British academic institutions. By this I mean that Hebrews has been peripheral in the churches of Britain (and possibly the Anglo-American ones) and neglected in its academic institutions.

Consequently, in seeking to justify its inclusion in both arenas, her arguments for its importance may appeal mostly if not exclusively to that particular context. I wonder, then, what place Hebrews would have in New Testament studies in Africa<sup>4</sup> and depending on what we find, whether we need to call attention to its significance, and, further still, what the justifications for such a significance might be.

#### HEBREWS IN NEW TESTAMENT STUDIES IN AFRICA

New Testament studies in Africa, unlike those in an Anglo-American setting, tend not to stand on their own; as Gerald West observes, 'African biblical studies is one strand in the closely woven cord that is African Theology. The separation of biblical studies from other theological disciplines, so common elsewhere, does not happen in African biblical studies'.<sup>5</sup> The reasons for this and its implications for the way New Testament studies are carried out in Africa, *vis-à-vis* those in Anglo-America, would be worth considering,<sup>6</sup> but such a consideration is beyond the scope of this paper save for one implication which is of immediate relevance to us. This implication happens to be the most obvious: unlike most Anglo-American academic institutions, theology in Africa is integral to Biblical studies. In a survey done not so recently, Maurier found that 'theological writing in Africa has been circumstantial, focused on particular pastoral or moral problems'.<sup>7</sup> It is in much of these theological writings that one finds the Bible studied, and not in studies exclusively on the Bible. Put differently, the Bible is constantly studied with the aim of relating it to the church generally and to the life of the society at large, that is, it is studied circumstantially, to address a perceived pastoral, moral, even political problem. Consequently, studies attempting to understand different sections of the Bible on their own terms and for their own sake, as, say, a historico-critical reading of a select New Testament text would attempt to do, are infrequent in Biblical studies in Africa. For the purpose of this paper, this means that assessing the place of Hebrews in African New Testament scholarship has to be determined by the frequency, relative to other books of the New Testament, with which it appears in academic theological writings in Africa, rather than by the syllabuses of New Testament studies in Africa. So, going by two relatively comprehensive surveys of published New Testament studies in Africa which appear mostly in the context of theological writings engaging with the Bible,<sup>8</sup> it appears that the Gospels and Pauline books are the only ones engaged.<sup>9</sup> So, there is a case for assuming that Hebrews, together with other non-Synoptic, Johannine and Pauline texts of the New Testament, is also on the periphery of New Testament studies in Africa. I would surmise that in African academic institutions where we have New Testament studies standing on their own,

or where they are given some prominence in Faculties of Theology, or in Religious Studies Departments of Universities in Africa, we have a replication of the situation described by Isaacs: i.e., New Testament studies that are outside the Synoptic, Johannine, and Pauline studies are marginalized. At least this is my East African experience: New Testament studies in my undergraduate studies had no place for non-Pauline, Johannine and Synoptic studies. This is unfortunate, not because, as argued by Isaacs, what has been left in New Testament syllabuses is impoverished through the ignorance of what is left out, but for a different and more pressing reason. Isaacs' reason may well justify the study of Hebrews and other marginalized New Testament books in Africa, but it seems secondary, given the context in Africa, to the one I have in mind, to which we now turn.

#### HEBREWS – A PARADIGM FOR DOING THEOLOGY IN AFRICA

My thesis is that the significance of Hebrews for New Testament scholarship in Africa is largely in its particular usefulness as a model for an African theological reflection. Consequently, this importance can be properly appreciated within the context of the scope and concerns of African Theology, rather than, *contra* Isaacs' Anglo-American context, within the field of New Testament studies as such. (This assertion correlates well with African Biblical studies that know no separation from theology.) The following should make the reasons for this thesis clear. African Theology was spawned in response to yearnings for 'theological' independence, and desires to engage in theological reflections in tandem with African cosmologies; these practical elements still remain today the *raison d'être*, and are definitive, of African theology.<sup>10</sup> This African cosmology (be it political, social, cultural, historical, economic, religious *etc.*), it is worth pointing out, becomes for all practical purposes the context for African theological discourse, with its necessarily correlative orientations, agendas, interests, questions, and experiences. Intimated here is a theology derived from the interplay of Christian tradition, or any aspect of it, on the one hand, and African cosmology, or an aspect of it, on the other. With regard to the Christian tradition, I would contend (as is widely recognized in African theological scholarship) that the Bible holds a central position, for it is incumbent on those who wish to articulate an African theology to use the Bible in dialogue with African cosmologies and culture for it to be a *Christian theology*. For this reason, the Bible takes on special importance in attempts to articulate and develop African theologies.

We could conceive of the Bible's use in theology, not least in African theology, as able to take place in one of three ways: (1) When it is used as the subject matter (in the sense of being the primary source of study) for

theology; (2) when it is used as part of theological formulations or discourses; or, (3) when it is used as a model for theology. *Hebrews, I submit, can be particularly significant to the development of African theology by being used in the third way, consequently making its study vital in African New Testament scholarship.* So, it is proper to look, however briefly, at this way of using the Bible in theology more closely, before we proceed to illustrate Hebrews' significance.

The third use of the Bible in theology just alluded to is not so much focused on the Bible's content *per se* as a primary source for theology as it is in using examples detected therein to do theology. This way, the Bible is seen as a model or a paradigm for doing theology. Joel Green states it this way:

we must give appropriate weight to the status of scripture for how its books, separately and together, while drawing on these paradigmatic presuppositions, *model the instantiation* of the good news in particular locales and with respect to historical particularities . . . in the New Testament already, one finds 'theology' both in its critical task of reflection on the practices and affirmations of the people of God to determine their credibility and faithfulness and in its constructive task of reiteration, restatement, and interpretation of the good news *vis-à-vis* ever developing horizons and challenges (ibid., my italics).<sup>11</sup>

Some leading questions in studying the Bible for such purposes would be these:<sup>12</sup> What strategies for articulating the good news are contained in this text? What strategies for bringing about faithfulness are to be found? How does the text proceed in its theological reflection? On what sources (authorities) does the text draw? How does this text participate in theological reflection? All of these questions are intended to tease out of the Bible ways of doing theology in ever-changing situations – an invaluable resource for African theology. In what follows, therefore, I will illustrate how Hebrews provides a model for doing theology that can be used fruitfully by African theology. More specifically, I will discuss the way in which Hebrews engages with the Aaronic priesthood, and draw lessons (paradigms) from there which African theologians can use to engage with their own religio-cultural context. (Incidentally, the bulk of the content of Hebrews has to do with high priesthood – first introduced in 1:4, touched on in 2:17 and 3:1, and the focus of 4:14–10:18. And because priests must have a sanctuary to attend to, it also has to do with the tabernacle and the activities therein.) The outcome of this exercise will underscore the value of studying Hebrews in African New Testament scholarship. But first, we must give a cursory glance at Hebrews generally.

#### AN OVERVIEW OF THE RHETORIC OF HEBREWS

Hebrews has impressed itself on its critics as a rhetorical discourse.<sup>13</sup> Accordingly, several rhetorical genres have been proposed<sup>14</sup> by means of

which Hebrews can be read rhetorically.<sup>15</sup> In this regard, the rhetorical device of ‘*synkrisis*’ is particularly pertinent for the study of Hebrews. Evans<sup>16</sup> points out that *synkrisis* was a Greek rhetoric term for comparison and a branch of Greek encomiastic tradition. Its ‘speciality was that it arrived at praise or blame by means of a comparison’.<sup>17</sup> The comparison could be of opposites or of similar things with the intention of finding out, by demonstrating, which was the superior. He points out that Hebrews’ vocabulary and style (for example its twenty-seven instances of the comparative, and its series of antithetical statements serving to show the superiority of one over another that are introduced by μέν and δέ [‘on the one hand . . . and on the other’]) show that the theme of superiority by comparison orders its argument. Indeed, except for 13:1–25, Hebrews can be viewed as structured by its *synkrisis* of Jesus with angels (1:1–2:14), then with Moses (3:1–6), and finally with Aaron and Melchizedek (5:1–10, 7:1–25 and 8:4–10:18), with each *synkrisis* subsequently followed by a relevant paraenesis. The *synkrisis* of Hebrews (in keeping with the general aim of the rhetorical genre it belongs to)<sup>18</sup> functions to help the audience see the superiority of Jesus over angels, Moses, the Aaronic priesthood and its *cultus*. The author, thereafter, in his paraenesis, uses this established superiority to motivate this community to right action (in this case to obedience, faith and worship, and perseverance). In a nutshell, as Harold Attridge<sup>19</sup> and others (e.g., Paul Ellingworth)<sup>20</sup> observe, exhortation to faithfulness is the practical purpose of Hebrews, and this is done primarily through *synkrisis*. We can now consider more closely the *synkrisis* between Jesus and the Aaronic priesthood and, subsequently, its implications (from which we will draw out paradigms for theology in Africa).

#### JESUS AND THE AARONIC PRIESTHOOD: HEBREW’S THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Perhaps the best place to begin to consider the *synkrisis* between Jesus and the Aaronic priesthood is by seeking to determine the mediatorial roles of the Aaronic high priest that are in focus here. Two (intercession and mediation of forgiveness) stand out, and are brought out in contrast to, and side by side with, the superiority of Christ’s high priesthood. Intercession is mentioned directly with regard to Christ, who lives forever to intercede (ἐντυγχάνειν) for those who come to God through him (Heb 7:25), but it is mentioned as such in the context of the Aaronic priesthood whose primary role is to intercede for the people.<sup>21</sup> With the Tabernacle/Temple cultus this (intercession) is done partly in virtue of the high priest appearing before God on behalf of the people (Heb 9:24), which he does cardinally on the Day of Atonement. As for mediation of forgiveness/cleansing, most of the discourse on the high priest is to do with his

activities on the Day of Atonement, thus, the spotlight is on the sacrifice that he offered on that day and, accordingly, the author of Hebrews provides a sustained discussion of it (Heb 9:1–10:18). What is important to note here is that on the Day of Atonement, the high priest offered two sacrifices, one for his sins and one for those of his people (Heb 9:7) through which they were forgiven or cleansed.

The Aaronic priesthood's role of intercession and mediation, as mentioned, are brought out in contrast to, and interwoven with, the superiority of Christ's priesthood. The first contrast is with the sanctuary (σκηνή) in which the Levitical priests minister (Heb 8:1–6). The Aaronic high priesthood serves on earth in a sanctuary made by hands and 'as a copy (ὑποδείγματι) and shadow (σκιᾶ) of what is in heaven' (Heb 8:5), whilst Christ serves in heaven, in the 'true tabernacle set by the Lord' (Heb 8:2). In virtue of this, Christ has a superior ministry (λειτουργία) and is a superior mediator. More importantly (because it is more specific than the first) the second contrast is with the ineffectiveness of the Aaronic priesthood's mediation of forgiveness compared to the efficacy of that of Christ. Hebrews points out that the sacrifices offered by the priesthood in the Tabernacle/Temple did not (and could not), save for outward purity (Heb 9:13), bring cleansing and forgiveness to the people, and thus free or effect access to God (Heb 9:8), resulting in the giving of the sacrifice annually (Heb 9:9–11 and 10:1–4, 11). Also, the author considers the Aaronic priesthood's mediation as part of the old order, which is in the process of being dispensed with (Heb 9:9–10). But Christ's priesthood, heralding the new order and the dissolution of the old (Heb 9:11), is effectual. Not only does he enter a sanctuary not of this creation (Heb. 9:11, 24), but he does so with his own blood which cleanses indeed (Heb 9:14), hence the once-for-all (ἐφ' ἅς) nature of his sacrifice (Heb 9:25–26, 10:10, 12–14). He is therefore a superior mediator of God's cleansing and forgiveness.

This contrast between the Aaronic high priesthood and Christ's high priesthood is done only after the validation of the high priesthood of Christ (Heb 4:14–5:10): because a high priest must be able to sympathize with those he represents (Heb 5:1–3), Jesus sympathizes with those he represents (Heb 4:14–15 and 5:7–10); because a high priest must be divinely appointed (Heb 5:4), Jesus is appointed a priest in the order (τόξίς) of Melchizedek. In explicating the latter (Heb 7:1–28), Hebrews again brings into relief the superiority of Christ's high priestly intercession and mediation over the Aaronic one. Scholars of Hebrews are not agreed on exactly what kind of relationship there exists between Melchizedek and Christ.<sup>22</sup> For our purposes, it suffices to note that we have a correspondence between Melchizedek and Jesus, which Hebrews uses to validate and illuminate the priesthood of Christ, with the result that the priesthood of Christ in Hebrews rests upon the priesthood of Melchizedek. There are two basic correspondences which are used accordingly to show an aspect of the superiority of Christ's priesthood

over the Aaronic one. The first is with the eternity of Melchizedek and his priesthood (Heb 7:3, 7): because Christ's priesthood is in the τάξις of Melchizedek, it is forever. Therefore Christ's priesthood is superior to the Aaronic one since, unlike Aaronic high priests, he has a permanent priesthood, and thus always lives to make intercession (ἐντυγχάνειν) for 'those who come to God through him' (Heb 7:23–25). The second correspondence is with the 'other' in the Melchizedek priesthood, i.e., Melchizedek shows the existence of another order of priesthood not founded on Aaronic pedigree (σαρκίνηζ) but on indestructible life (ζωῆς ἀκατλυτον) and on an oath that is unchangeable (Heb 7:11, 15–20). So, Jesus' priesthood being of the order of Melchizedek is introduced to replace the Aaronic one that has failed to perfect the people (Heb 7:11, 18).<sup>23</sup> So we see again Jesus being like an Aaronic high priest because he meets the requirements of being a priest, and also performs their roles. However, he is superior to them because, being a priest in the order of Melchizedek, he surpasses them (thus making them defunct) by his effectiveness in those roles. He is, therefore, now the definitive mediator for the Christian community in view here.

#### IMPLICATIONS OF HEBREWS' THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

So what exactly does the *synkrisis* between Jesus and the Aaronic high priest imply? We have already identified some of its implications indirectly in our delineation of Jesus as high priest in pointing out that he surpasses the Aaronic priesthood by his superior effectiveness in the functions he undertakes. We have seen this brought out in three instances: intercession, mediation of forgiveness, and the order, or ontology, of Christ's priesthood (it rests on the priesthood of Melchizedek). In other words, it seems, the Aaronic priesthood in its imperfect functions and being was a pointer to the Gospel; to Christ who performs to perfection the very functions the Aaronic priesthood tried to perform, and whose priesthood is of a higher order. Hebrews 10:1 is key to providing the metaphysical framework, so to speak, for such an understanding. Here it is clear that the law (which sets forth the Aaronic priesthood) is an imperfect foreshadow (σκιᾶ)<sup>24</sup> of the the good things to come (τῶν μελλόντων ἀγαθῶν), of the reality of those things (τὴν εἰκόνα τῶν πραγμάτων) which have come now in Christ. In this sense, the Aaronic priesthood can be understood to have been a witness to the Gospel. More specifically we could say that the Aaronic priesthood was a prophetic institution to the Gospel, and never an end in itself. So, with the coming of the Christ, it was not only surpassed, but, also, was made redundant.

But this is not all; I would contend that in the very fact of being a foreshadow to the Gospel, the theological reflection on the Aaronic

priesthood in Hebrews belies one other important function: acting as a preparation for comprehending the significance of the Gospel. The way in which Jesus' identity and work is cast in Hebrews is deeply dependent on the Aaronic priesthood, without which there would be no such understanding of the Gospel. For this reason, the Aaronic priesthood has in this instance acted as a means of preparing the audience of Hebrews for this particular understanding of the Gospel, a *praeparatio evangelica* – an aspect of their religious heritage has aided towards an explication of the Gospel that they can grasp and fully relate to.

#### HEBREWS AND AFRICAN THEOLOGY

What paradigms, then, might there be from Hebrews as understood above for doing theology in Africa and for Africa? I suggest that there are at least three, all of which are centred on the perceived interaction between Africa's religio-cultural heritage and Jesus. The first paradigm is the use to which Africa's religious heritage could be put in the re-conceiving of Christ in Africa. *Hebrews, by its example, can be used to offer African theology an appropriate analogy/metaphor for the re-conceiving of Christ.* Hebrews' casting of Jesus as mediator (i.e., a high priest, itself a conception of Christ within Jewish religious cosmology) means that we have a biblically sanctioned category that is easily grasped by Africans, one through which they can then conceptualize and interpret Jesus. This is so because in most of Africa there exists a constellation of beliefs and practices focusing on mediator figures. Indeed there seems to be no ethnic group without them.<sup>25</sup> Consequently, it would mean having a Christology that is conceptualized within an African cosmology, and, *ipso facto*, for a given time, place, and human situation that is African. In using the category of ancestor on the basis of Hebrews to articulate an ancestor-Christology in Africa, the African theologian, Kwame Bediako,<sup>26</sup> has used Hebrews, albeit in a limited way, for precisely this. He himself writes, 'the value for us in the presentation of Jesus in Hebrews stems from its relevance to a society like ours with its deep tradition of sacrifice, priestly mediation and ancestor function'.<sup>27</sup>

The second paradigm has to do with how African Christians can relate their religious heritage to the Gospel. Hebrews provides a way of doing theology that can greatly help the quest of African theology to relate African religious heritage to Christ. The provision for such a way of theologizing is made by the way Hebrews relates Jesus to aspects of Judaism (as portrayed in this instance in the Aaronic priesthood) which presents a paradigm for the way that Africa could relate the Gospel to her religious heritage. This essentially is because of apparent similarities between Africa's religious heritage and aspects of the Jewish religious heritage. In the first half of the last century, Williams,<sup>28</sup> with special



reference to the Ashanti of Ghana, drew attention to the myriad parallel practices between Africans and the Hebrews of Canaan. He assembled similarities ranging from religious dances, linguistic similarities, the enthronement of Kings (Conyonk in Ashanti), familial names, to cross-cousin marriages, purification ceremonies and monotheism, to name a few. He concluded that there must have been a centre of diffusion to account for these similarities. Isaac, writing later, would agree saying that 'there are large numbers of parallels between African and ancient West Asian ritual practices as well as other evidence of relationship'.<sup>29</sup> This phenomenon is particularly seen in the encounter of Africans with the Old Testament, where, it is observed, Africans have a predilection if not priority for the Old Testament.<sup>30</sup> The said similarities are almost taken for granted in Old Testament studies in Africa where correspondences between the Old Testament and religious beliefs and practices in African societies are a thriving area of study.<sup>31</sup> If the phenomenon of similarities is granted, then, there is a sense in which aspects of the religio-cultural heritage of Africans can be viewed as pointing to, and preparing Africans for the reception of the Gospel, in which God speaks with finality and fulfils some aspects, perfectly, of their religious heritage in the same way that the Aaronic priesthood (as an aspect of Jewish religious heritage) in Hebrews is viewed to act as a preparation for, and pointer to, Christ. Put differently, Hebrews' way of theologizing could afford African Theology the possibility to ponder on how aspects of Africa's religious heritage point to, and are fulfilled in, Christ, and to understand them as such. The importance of such a theology for the rehabilitation of Africa's religious heritage and its integration into the life of African Christians cannot be overstated.

Finally, the third paradigm is in shedding light on how African Christians can engage with their religious heritage in the light of their Christian faith. This is because *Hebrews, again, by its example, provides African theology with an essential prophetically critical voice to help foster authentic embodiments of the Christian faith*. As Lamin Sanneh argues, 'prophetic witness and reform'<sup>32</sup> has always had its place in Christian communities, precipitating appropriate prophetic words in cases of perceived compromise. From such a perspective, it is possible to understand some New Testament writings, and not least Hebrews, as prophetic words to Christian communities in danger of compromise (if they have not compromised already). Consequently, if the rhetoric of Hebrews is in fact dealing with a real issue of a relapse to Judaism as some critics would have it (and I think this is the most likely situation),<sup>33</sup> then, we could understand it as a prophetic word to that Christian community, critical and apologetic of its religious heritage (upon which they want to fall back). And if so, Hebrews would be a paradigm for, chiefly, a first-order level of African Theology<sup>34</sup> as a continuing prophetic witness to African Christian communities.

First-order theology is an essential task of African Theology because of the perpetual threat to African Christians of compromising their Christian faith on account of their religious heritage. This is especially because of the Africans' 'enchanted' worldview which, as an alternative to Christianity, presents a formidable challenge to the same in Africa since African Christians find themselves falling back to it (especially, as pointed out by Sawyerr,<sup>35</sup> in times of crisis). In such a world, as Gifford notes, divinities, spirits and ancestors, spells and charms, witchcraft and sorcery are 'the primary and immediate and natural categories of interpretation'.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, so long as the Christian faith and Africa's religio-cultural heritage interact and in consequence contest their ground among Africans in African churches, there is a need for African Theology to engage critically and apologetically with the latter in efforts to foster authentic embodiments of the Christian faith; and Hebrews is an example of how that could be carried out.

#### CONCLUSION

The sustained Christological engagement with Jewish religious heritage – through *synkrisis* between Jesus and Jewish mediatorial figures in particular – is a unique feature of Hebrews that is nowhere reproduced in the rest of the New Testament, hence its importance. Moreover, the significance of this unique feature is magnified by the fact that Jewish religious heritage is mirrored to a certain degree in the religio-cultural heritage of African societies. Without the similarities alluded to in the two traditions, it is doubtful that the paradigm of Hebrews for African theology for which we have argued would be as highly relevant as it appears, particularly in the first and second paradigms mentioned above. Indeed, if there were no such similarities, this paper would not be called for. It would have sufficed to point to, or further explicate, Perry's article, 'Method and Model in the Epistle to the Hebrews',<sup>37</sup> where he discusses the relevance of Hebrews to Anglo-American culture. This relevance (on the assumption that Hebrews' culture is 'alien to most people today')<sup>38</sup> he discusses chiefly in terms of its theological method of engaging the culture of its audience. Accordingly, he posits that Hebrews' paradigm (its method and model) is that of setting forth a theology that speaks with precision to its audience's condition and uses that condition as a 'mental furniture to convince people of the importance of Christ'.<sup>39</sup> This, he suggests, is what contemporary theology should learn from Hebrews and, consequently, apply by (1) seeking to speak with precision to its contemporary audience and, (2) using its contemporary audience's 'furniture' (in this case what he has intimated as its 'scientific culture')<sup>40</sup> to convince it of the importance of Christ.

It is instructive that he cannot draw from Hebrews the same paradigms as the ones I have proposed in this paper because, unlike me, he is looking at the model of Hebrews for theology in a context that is dissimilar to the one of Hebrews' audience. In other words, the acuity of studying Hebrews from the preceding standpoint stems from the awareness, on the one hand, that no other New Testament text provides such a model for African Theology and, on the other, that Jewish religious heritage has some similarities with Africa's religio-cultural heritage. Who knows, then, what the outcome and consequences for the future shape of African theology would be, or the contribution that African scholarship would make to Hebrews scholarship if Hebrews would be given as much study as the Gospels and Pauline texts? Certainly there is a case for bothering with it in African New Testament studies, and the prospects, if this is done, are promising.

## Notes

1 I am grateful for comments on this article received from my Ph.D supervisor at the University of Edinburgh Prof. Larry Hurtado and from Prof. Jesse Mugambi of the University of Nairobi.

2 Best known in Hebrews scholarship for her book *Sacred Space: An Approach to the Theology of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Journal for the Study of the New Testament: Supplementary Series 73, Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992).

3 M. E. Isaacs, 'Why Bother with Hebrews?' *HeyJ* XLIII (2002), p. 60.

4 The question of the centrality of Hebrews in the churches of Africa is an important consideration. As early as the 1940s, it was noted that: 'In East Africa if not elsewhere, one of the favourite New Testament books is Hebrews, the argument of which appeals to Africans more naturally than Europeans' (G. E. Phillips, *The Old Testament in the World Church* [Guildford: Lutterworth, 1942], p. 7). In any case, my concern in this paper is with its place in New Testament scholarship in Africa.

5 G. O. West, 'Mapping African Biblical Interpretation', in *Ibid.* and M. W. Dube (eds.), *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories, and Trends* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), p. 43. Here, it is worth noting West's earlier article 'On the Eve of an African Biblical Study', *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 99 (1997), pp. 99–115, which is a programmatic essay from him that is set out in the light of this reality.

6 Some considerations can be found in G. LeMarquand, 'New Testament Exegesis in [Modern] Africa', in *The Bible in Africa*, pp. 72–102, who takes up some of these considerations.

7 H. Maurier, 'La Théologie Africaine Francophone', *Spiritus* 88 (1982), quoted in J. Okoye, 'Inculturation and Theology in Africa', *Mission Studies* (1997), p. 69.

8 See J. Mbiti, *The Bible and Theology in African Christianity* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 44–66, and J. S. Ukpogon, 'Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Modern Africa', *Missionalia* 27 (1999), pp. 313–29.

9 Apart, of course, from Old Testament books.

10 Studies and discussion on African Theology point this out clearly. See C. Nyamiti, 'Approaches to African Theology' in Sergio Torres and Virginia Fabella (eds.), *The Emergent Gospel* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1978), pp. 31–45, and J. Pobee, *Towards an African Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979) for short introductions, and J. S. Ukpogon, 'Current Theology: The Emergence of African Theologies', *Theological Studies* 45 (1984), pp. 501–536. G. H. Muzorewa, *The Origins and Development of African Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1985), and J. Parratt, *Reinventing Christianity: African Theology Today* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1995) for comprehensive discussions on this.

11 J. B. Green, 'Modernity, History and the Theological Interpretation of the Bible', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 54 (2001), p. 322.

12 I have adopted them from Green who employs this particular way of using the Bible in 'inquiring into how I Peter itself engages in the theological task', *ibid.*, p. 322.

13 See for example C. C. Black II, 'The Rhetorical Form of the Hellenistic Jewish and Early Christian Sermon: A Response to Lawrence Wills', *Harvard Theological Review* 81 (1988), pp. 1–18, and W. G. Buchanan, *To the Hebrews: Translation, Comment and Conclusion* (Garden City: Double Day and Co., 1972).

14 This is important since rhetorical analysis presumes that rhetoric follows the logic of its genre (cf. R. Meynet, *Rhetorical Analysis: An Introduction to Biblical Rhetoric*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplementary Series 256 [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998], pp. 169–172) rendering the search for a right genre critical to its investigations.

15 Such as 'paronomasia' (see K. H. Jobes, 'The Function of Paronomasia in Hebrews', *Trinity Journal* 13 [1992], pp. 181–191), 'amplification' (see T. H. Olbricht, 'Hebrews as Amplification', in Stanley Porter and Thomas Olbricht (eds.), *Rhetoric and the New Testament: Essays from the Heidelberg Conference*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplementary Series 90 [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993], pp. 375–87), and 'homily' (see H. W. Attridge, 'Paranesis in a Homily: The Possible Locations of, and the Socialization in, the 'Epistle to the Hebrew', *Semeia* 50 [1989], pp. 211–226).

16 C. F. Evans, *The Theology of Rhetoric: the Epistle to the Hebrews* (London: Dr. Williams's Trust, 1988).

17 *Ibid.*, pp. 5–6.

18 See G. Zuntz, *The Text of the Epistles: A disquisition upon the Corpus Paulinum* (Oxford: Geoffrey Cumberlege, Oxford University Press, 1953) p. 286, and T. Seid, 'Synkrisis in Hebrews 7: the Rhetorical Structure and Strategy', in S. Porter and D. Stamps (eds.), *The Rhetorical Interpretation of Scripture: Essays from the 1996 Malibu Conference* (Journal for the Study of the New Testament: Supplementary Series 180, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), pp. 322–47.

19 H. W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), pp. 21–22.

20 P. Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Carlisle: The Paternoster Press, 1993), pp. 5–6.

21 Montefiore points out how Aaron took on this responsibility by bearing the names of the Israelites 'on the breastplate of judgement when he went into the Holy Place' (H. W. Montefiore, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* [London: Adams and Charles Black, 1964], p. 129 [Ex. 27:29]). Later speculations that revolved around the symbolism of the high priest's vestments all point to his intercessory role (see M. Barker, *The Gate of Heaven: The History and Symbolism of the Temple in Jerusalem* [London: SPCK, 1991], pp. 112–24). Also, by pointing to the relevant literature, H. W. Attridge (*The Epistle to the Hebrews* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989], p. 211) shows that priests as well were understood to function primarily as intercessors in the Second Temple period.

22 Proposals on Melchizedek's relationship to Christ include the following: an antitypology of Christ (F. L. Horton, *The Melchizedek Tradition: A Critical Examination of the Sources to the Fifth Century A. D. and in the Epistle to the Hebrew*, Society for the New Testament Studies Monograph Series 30 [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976], pp. 161–164), a pre-figuration of Christ (M. Delcor, 'Melchizedek from Genesis to the Qumran Texts and the Epistle to the Hebrews', *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 2 [1971], pp. 125–27), even a pre-incarnation of Christ (A. T. Hanson, 'Christ in the Old Testament According to Hebrews', *Studia Evangelica* 2 [1964], pp. 393–407).

23 Note how the Aaronic priesthood is tied to the Mosaic covenant just like Jesus' priesthood is tied to the new covenant.

24 Apparently few scholars writing more recently on Hebrews would take the view that σκιά is here used in the Platonic sense of a shadow, something unreal or passing, a lesser reality of the eternal, as was held before by scholars such as J. Moffatt, *The International Critical Commentary: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1924), p. 135. If this was indeed the case, then the Aaronic priesthood and cultus of the Old Testament would stand in quite a different relationship to Christ than the one given above which understands the cultus as having a 'horizontal nuance' by pointing to Christ in a temporal (eschatological) way. For more, see H. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), pp. 269–72.

25 For more on this, see J. Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1969), pp. 75–91.

26 K. Bediako, 'Jesus in African Culture: A Ghanaian Perspective', in K. Bediako (ed.), *Jesus in Africa: The Christian Gospel in African History and Experience* (Yaunde: Regnum Africa, 1990), pp. 20–33.

27 Ibid., p. 28. (I myself pursued this paradigm in my Ph.D thesis at Edinburgh University.)

28 J. J. Williams, *Hebrewisms of West Africa: From Nile to Niger with the Jews* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1930).

29 E. Isaac, 'Relations between the Hebrew Bible and Africa', *Jewish Social Studies* 26 (1964), p. 98.

30 For more on this see K. Dickson, *Theology in Africa* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1984), pp. 141–60.

31 Cf. K. Holter, 'The Current State of Old Testament Scholarship in Africa: Where Are We at the Turn of the Century?' in M. N. Getui *et al.* (eds.), *Interpreting the Old Testament in Africa*, (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2001), p. 29.

32 L. Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (MaryKnoll: Orbis Books, 1991), p. 40.

33 For example, F. F. Bruce, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 2d ed. (London: Marshall, Morgan, Scott, 1964), W. G. Buchanan, *To the Hebrews: Translation, Comment and Conclusion* (Garden City: Double Day, 1972) and P. Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Carlisle: The Paternoster Press, 1993); but see also F. M. Young, 'Temple Cult and Law in early Christianity', *New Testament Studies* 19 (1994), pp. 325–38, who looks at Hebrews in the light of the 'Temple Cult and Law in early Christianity', and P. Walker, 'Jerusalem in Hebrews 13.9–14 and the Dating of the Epistle' (*Tyndale Bulletin* 45 [1994]), pp. 39–71, who discusses it in the light of Jerusalem and the motif of going 'outside the camp'.

34 'First-order level of theology' is a term Maddox uses of theologies that contribute directly to 'forming Christian character and influencing Christian praxis' (R. L. Maddox, 'The Recovery of Theology as a Practical Discipline', *Theological Studies* 51 [1990], pp. 650–672).

35 H. Sawyerr, 'Sacrifice', in K. Dickson and P. Ellingworth (eds.), *Biblical Revelation and African Belief* (London: Marshal, Morgan, Scott, 1969), p. 80.

36 P. Gifford, *African Christianity: Its Public Role* (London: Hurst and Company, 1998), p. 328.

37 M. Perry, 'Method and Model in the Epistle to the Hebrews', *Theology* 77 (1974), pp. 66–74.

38 Ibid., p. 66.

39 Ibid., p. 71.

40 Ibid.