

## LAW AND GOSPEL IN HEBREWS: SOME PARADIGMS FOR CHRISTIANITY IN AFRICA

---

PETER NYENDE  
rev\_ptn@hotmail.com

### *Abstract*

*The 'law' in the book of Hebrews is seen to relate to Christ in a variety of intriguing ways: almost simultaneously the 'law' anticipates, illuminates, is fulfilled and made redundant in Christ—the centre of the gospel. This paper will argue that it is possible to conceive of some aspects of Africa's religious heritage (still a force to reckon with in Africa) as being in the same kind of relationship to Christ, and in consequence, will also consider the missiological and pastoral implications that emanate from such a conception for the Church in Africa.*

### **LAW AND GOSPEL ACCORDING TO HEBREWS: A SENSE OF PERSPECTIVE**

How are we to understand the law in Hebrews, whose relationship with the gospel therein we seek to discuss? For purposes of this paper, will take 'the law' in a wide sense to cover in principle the Jewish religious tradition being engaged with in Hebrews. Specifically, the designation will signify the levitical priesthood. This is because, for want of space, we will limit our discussion of the law and the gospel in Hebrews to this particular aspect of it.

As concerns the Gospel, we will take it here simply as representative of Christ, his person and his work. This being the case, our task is to explore the relationship that exists in Hebrews between the levitical priesthood (the law) on the one hand and Christ (the gospel) on the other. Since our theme is 'OT Law and the Gospel: Its Relevance Today'—is intended to relate biblical interpretation to contemporary African issues, I will attempt to bring into dialogue the outcome of my study with contemporary Christianity in Africa. We turn, therefore, first to Hebrews' message generally.

## **AN OVERVIEW OF THE RHETORIC OF HEBREWS**

Hebrews' rhetoric is characterized by the comparison of Jesus with the Jewish religious figures and thus can be looked at in this way:

|                               |  |
|-------------------------------|--|
| Angels (1:1–2:18):            | Comparison of Son and Angels (1:1-14)<br>Exhortation (2:1-18)            |
| Moses (3:1–4:16):             | Comparison of Moses and Christ the Son (3:1-6)<br>Exhortation (3:7–4:16) |
| Aaron (5:1-6:20):             | Comparison of Aaron and Christ (5:1-10)<br>Exhortation (5:11–6:20)       |
| Melchizedek (7:1– 8:3):       | Comparison of Melchizedek/Christ and Levitical Priesthood (7:1-25)       |
| Covenant (8:4–10:18):         | Comparison of First Covenant and New Covenant (8:4-10:18)                |
| Exhortation (10:19–12:29)     |  |
| Epistolary Appendix (13:1-25) |  |

We will use this structure first to pursue briefly the subject matter of this comparison and, later, use it to consider the subject matter of the exhortation when we attempt to determine the intended end of Hebrews on its audience.

### **Comparison of Son and Angels**

The author of Hebrews introduces Jesus as the Son of God through whom he has spoken in 'these last days' (1:1-2).<sup>9</sup> As God's Son, the world was created through him, and he was appointed heir (κληρονομοῦν) of all things. The purpose of this introduction becomes clear in verse 4 when the comparison with angels is made—that Jesus is superior to angels because he is God's Son and they are not. The several scriptural quotations (1:5-2:14) that follow help to underscore this superiority on the basis of identity.

### **Comparison of Moses and Christ the Son**

Comparison with Moses comes next in chapter 3 where the author of Hebrews shows that though they are both faithful (πιστοῦν, 3:2) to the one who appointed them, Jesus is superior for, unlike Moses who is faithful as a servant (θεραπειῶν 3:5) in the

house of God, he is faithful as a Son (υιος 3:6) over his house.

### **Comparison of Aaron and Christ**

Next is the comparison with Aaron the high priest. Even though both are called by God (5:4), Jesus is superior because he is a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek (κατα την ταξιν Μελχισεδεκ 5:6), as exposed in 7:1-28. This priesthood is permanent and precedes the Aaronic one. In addition, Jesus' priesthood is superior by virtue of the efficacy of his sacrifice; hence its once for all (εφραπαξ 7:27) status that does away with the need for further sacrifices.

The comparison with the Aaronic priesthood leads the author of Hebrews to compare the new covenant which Jesus mediates, and the old covenant (8:1 – 10:18).

### **Comparison of the First Covenant and New Covenant**

The comparison which draws out the superiority of the new covenant is focused on the place of worship (the tabernacle) and the main activity therein (sacrifices). The old covenant had an earthly tabernacle which was a copy and shadow of the heavenly one (8:5). Sacrifices of the goats and bulls and others offered there were not able to take away sin (9:13) hence the need to offer sacrifices again and again (9:9). In contrast, the new covenant has Jesus who, as its high priest, entered the heavenly tabernacle with his own blood that effectively takes away sins (chapter 10). Consequently not only is the new covenant superior to the old one, it replaces it as well (10:15-18).

### **Exhortations and Intentions**

We may now consider the subject matter of the exhortation from which, against the background of the comparison, we will get something of the intentions of Hebrews on its audience. The first exhortatory section (2:1-18) comes after the demonstration that Jesus is superior to the angels. It is a warning to the audience not to slip away (παραρυωμεν 2:1) from the word of Jesus, for such an action would carry a greater penalty than the one given those who disobeyed the message spoken to them by angels.

We again encounter in the second section (3:7-4:16) another

warning from the author to the Hebrews just after the comparison of Jesus with Moses: 'see to it brothers, that there is not in any of you a wicked (πονηρα), unbelieving (απιστιας) heart that turns away ( αποστηναι ) from the living God' (3:12). This warning is dwelt on by a lesson from the generation that Moses led which failed to enter God's rest because of unbelief (3:16-4:5).

In the third exhortatory section (5:11- 6:20), the author of Hebrews bemoans his audiences' slowness of learning (5:11-6:3) which prevents him from explaining more of his theme of Jesus as a high priest in the order of Melchizedek. He then, again, warns them of the dangers of falling away (6:4-7) and of laxity, before exhorting them to be imitators of those who, through faith and perseverance (μακροθυμιας ), inherit what has been promised' (6:12).

Most of the last exhortation section (10:19-12:29) is a reiteration of what the author of Hebrews has previously said: in his exhortation, for example, to hold fast (κατεχωμεν) to their hope (10:23); to watch out against sin (10:26-31); to persevere in their previous confidence (10:35-39) and not to turn away from God (12:25-27). However, he now shows a concern for worship (he tells his audience to draw near to God in assurance of sins forgiven [10:19-22] and with reverence and awe (12:29), and for his audience's ecclesial life when he gives them general pastoral advice (12:12-17). Pastoral advice also predominates in the 'epistolary appendix'.

From the above mentioned exhortations, we could conclude that the situation that leads to the writing of Hebrews is that of a Christian community in imminent danger of drifting away from God through a combination of disobedience, sin and a crisis of confidence in their faith. Thus the author of Hebrews seeks to pre-empt this by numerous warnings of the consequences of such action, by motivation through examples and by reminding them of their past ways. The desired ends of Hebrews on its audience is to motivate them to obedience, faith and perseverance, the kind they had before (10:32-25). The comparison in Hebrews functions to help the audience see the superiority of Jesus over angels, also over Moses, the Aaronic priesthood and its *cultus*. The author then in his exhortation 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 Attridge<sup>1</sup> and others<sup>2</sup> observe, exhortation to faithfulness is the practical purpose of Hebrews, and this is done primarily through the comparison.

### **HIGH-PRIESTLY CHRISTOLOGY OF HEBREWS**

It will be noticed that the content of the comparison mentioned above is with mediatorial figures where the comparison of Jesus is with Israel's principal mediators before him. However, the bulk of the content of Hebrews has to do with high priesthood. This is first introduced in 1:4, touched on in 2:17 and 3:1 and the content 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. We want to consider this closely with a view of comprehending what light it sheds on the relationship of the law and the gospel.

#### **Intercession and Mediation:**

##### **Aaronic High Priesthood**

Perhaps then, the best place to begin is by seeking to determine the mediatorial roles of the Aaronic high priesthood 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 (*εντυγχανειν*) for those who come to God through him (7:25), but it is mentioned as such in the context of the Aaronic priesthood whose primary role is to intercede for the people. With the Tabernacle/Temple *cultus* this (intercession) is done partly by virtue of the high priest appearing before God on behalf of the people (9:24), which principally he does 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

---

<sup>1</sup> Attridge, H.W. *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1989, pp. 21-22

<sup>2</sup> Ellingworth, P. *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, Carlisle, Paternoster, 1993, pp. 78-80

