

THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS AS A “JESUS-MIDRASH”

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1. *Introduction*

My interest in the Epistle¹ to the Hebrews concerns the way in which it cites and transforms verses, stories, characters, and themes from the Hebrew Bible. The author does not just adopt these Jewish traditions, but forms them into an immense intertextual network. By writing in an elaborated Greek, he or she presents Jewish traditions from his/her own particular viewpoint. The text never refers to non-Jewish traditions, nor does it cite Greek or Roman literature. Rather, the author concentrates his/her literary composition on the words of God that she/he finds in Greek translation in the Scriptures of Israel. Therefore the Epistle to the Hebrews has mainly a Jewish background.

I want to examine the special kind of Jewish background that might be possible for our text. First I will consider—in the section on methodology—whether Hebrews contains any midrashic elements and whether it might be considered as a Jewish midrash. Therefore I will analyze how it uses quotations from the Hebrew Bible and their introductory formulas. The next step will be to examine the content of Hebrews and its theological impact. How does the text refer to figures from Israel’s history? Finally I will return to the question of whether we may speak of the overall text of Hebrews as a midrash and will offer a hypothesis for a possible original *Sitz im Leben*.

¹ I will refer to our text as an “epistle,” although by using this term I do not intend to describe its literary form. Translations of Hebrews and other biblical texts in this article are my own.

2. *Methodological Approach*

2.1. *The Epistle to the Hebrews—a “Jesus-Midrash”?*

If we want to call the Epistle to the Hebrews a “Jesus-Midrash,” we have to define the *genre* midrash in a broad sense. The word *midrash* is used in rabbinic and New Testament exegesis in different ways. It may describe a literary genre, certain books, or a model for contemporary biblical-literary analysis.² A definition of what is meant when we talk about midrash is therefore in order: (1) the contents of a text, (2) its form, (3) a method, (4) or all of these. Moshe D. Herr emphasized in 1971 that “Midrash is the designation of a particular *rabbinic literature* constituting an anthology and compilation of homilies.”³ Arnold Goldberg worked on a descriptive terminology of the “form” midrash. Yet his definition from 1985, whereby a lemma means a dictum provided that a certain hermeneutical operation is performed,⁴ seems too narrow.

Most of the books which are described as Midrashim were written from the second century CE on. However, early forms of midrashim were already known in the centuries before Christ. Goldberg comments that in early Judaism the periphrastic exegesis of the Torah was more important than in our transmitted Midrashim. The oldest Midrash books are the so-called “tannaitic” or “exegetic” Midrashim (*Mek. R. Yish.*, *Sipra*, *Sipre Num.*, *Sipre Deut.*). These were written from the third century on, but include much older material.

In terms of the methods employed, the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews is thoroughly Jewish. He or she uses exegetical terminology, rules of interpretation, and expository patterns (like the midrash) that are found elsewhere in Judaism. But the *christological* interpretation of the biblical writings makes a unique contribution.

As an interpretive activity the midrashic procedure is mostly oriented to Scripture, adapting it to the present for the purpose of instructing or edifying the reader or hearer. The literary expression can be described in two different ways. With the use of midrash in

² Cf. Lieve Teugels, “Midrash in the Bible or Midrash on the Bible? Critical Remarks about the Uncritical Use of a Term,” in *Bibel und Midrasch: Zur Bedeutung der rabbinischen Exegese für die Bibelwissenschaft* (ed. Gerhard Bodendorfer and Matthias Millard; FAT 22; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998), 44.

³ Moshe D. Herr, “Midrash,” *EncJud* 11:1507.

⁴ Arnold Goldberg, “Form-Analysis of Midrashic Literature as a Method of Description,” *JJS* 36 (1985): 159–174, esp. 162.

Ben Sira and Qumran, the term “midrash” is now employed more broadly to designate “interpretive rendering of the biblical text” (= implicit midrash) and various kinds of “text and exposition” patterns (= explicit midrash). Implicit midrash first appears as a process of rewriting.⁵

Some examples of passages in Hebrews that have been identified as midrash are:

- (1) Heb 1–4: “Schriftgnosis mit paränetischem Midrasch”⁶
- (2) Heb 1:1–14⁷
- (3) Heb 1:1–2:18⁸
- (4) Heb 2:5–8: “Ps 8:4–6 . . . followed by a midrashic commentary”⁹
- (5) Heb 3:1–6: “exegetic midrash”¹⁰
- (6) Heb 3:7–4:13: “selbständiger Midrasch über Ps 95”¹¹
- (7) Heb 3:12–4:11: “Psalm 95:7–11 together with a midrashic application of the passage to the situation of the readers”¹²
- (8) Heb 3:16–19: “Methode des rabbinischen Midrasch”¹³
- (9) Heb 5:1–7:28¹⁴

⁵ E. Earle Ellis, *The Old Testament in Early Christianity: Canon and Interpretation in the Light of Modern Research* (WUNT 54; Tübingen: Mohr, 1991), 92; cf. 2 Chr 13:22; 24:27.

⁶ Hans Windisch, *Der Hebräerbrief* (2d ed.; HNT 14; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1931), 8.

⁷ See E. Earle Ellis, *Prophecy and Hermeneutic in Early Christianity: New Testament Essays* (WUNT 18; Tübingen: Mohr, 1978), 221–226.

⁸ Ellis (*The Old Testament in Early Christianity*, 96 n. 69) suggests that Heb 1:1–2:18 is “perhaps” an instance of explicit midrash appearing as a “special pattern.”

⁹ Donald A. Hagner, *Hebrews* (NIBC 14; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1998), 14.

¹⁰ Otto Michel calls Heb 3:3–6a an “exegetic Midrash,” which is influenced by the parallel text of Moses in Heb 3:2c (Otto Michel, *Der Brief an die Hebräer* [6th ed.; KEK 13; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966], 92); cf. Scott Layton, “Christ over his House (Hebrews 3,6),” *NTS* 37 (1991): 473: “Heb 3,1–6 is a complex midrash on several texts.”

¹¹ Peter S. Wick, “The Midrash on Deuteronomy 12:9–11 in Hebrews 3:7–4:13: A Key to the Overall Theological Concept of Hebrews” (paper presented at the international meeting of the SBL, Groningen, Netherlands, 26 July 2004). Cf. Otto Michel: “selbständiger Midrasch über Ps 95” (Michel, *Brief an die Hebräer*, 7). Martin Dibelius, “Der himmlische Kult nach dem Hebräerbrief,” *TBl* 21 (1942): 7: “Midrasch über Ps 95.” Windisch (*Hebräerbrief*, 30): “längere midraschartige Betrachtung über Ps 94,7–11.”

¹² Hagner, *Hebrews*, 14.

¹³ Friedrich Schröger, *Der Verfasser des Hebräerbriefes als Schriftausleger* (BU 4; Regensburg: Pustet, 1968), 113.

¹⁴ Theme and initial texts (Heb 5:1–6; Ps 2:7; 110:4) + Exposition (Heb 5:7–10; [+ Inserted exhortation (Heb 5:11–6:12)] + Supplementary text (Heb 6:13–14; Gen 22:16–17) + Exposition (Heb 6:15–20) + Supplementary text (Heb 7:1–2; Gen

- (10) Heb 7: “Midrasch über Ps 109,4 und Gen 14,17–20”¹⁵
 (11) Heb 9: “midrash-like presentation of material drawn from the Pentateuch, but with no explicit quotation”¹⁶
 (12) Heb 10: “quotation of Ps 40:6–8 with a brief midrashic commentary”¹⁷
 (13) Heb 10:5–39: “proem Midrash”¹⁸
 (14) Heb 10:1–18: “selbständige[r] Midrasch über die Einzigartigkeit des Opfers Christi”¹⁹
 (15) Heb 11:8–19: “Abraham Midrash”²⁰
 (16) Heb 12: “midrashic treatment of OT material”²¹
 (17) Heb 12:5–6: “Midrasch Haggadah”²²

The above mentioned passages are *explicit midrashim*. They appear as clusters of texts and commentaries on a particular theme. Similar patterns may be found in Qumran (e.g. 4Q174) or in the texts of the first-century Jewish writer Philo of Alexandria.²³ The New Testament exegetical patterns display a number of differences from those of the rabbis. As I shall show later for the introductory formulas, this may represent an earlier stage of development of the art and genre as well as a divergent theological orientation. For example, the midrashim underlying Heb 5–7 are distinctive because of their christological dimension; they apply Ps 110:4 (109:4 LXX) to Jesus.

Perhaps Hebrews cites not just the traditions, themes, and persons of the people of Israel to illustrate Jesus’ role and mission to the world, but also employs a traditional Jewish handling and creative writing of the well-known texts. Therefore, we might examine next the use of the quotations and introductory formulas in the next step.

14:17–20) + Exposition (Heb 7:3–27) + Concluding allusion to the initial text (Heb 7:28); cf. Ellis, *Prophecy and Hermeneutic*, 157 and Ellis, *The Old Testament in Early Christianity*, 99 n. 81.

¹⁵ Windisch, *Hebräerbrief*, 59.

¹⁶ Hagner, *Hebrews*, 14.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Ellis, *The Old Testament in Early Christianity*, 98, 107.

¹⁹ Michel, *Brief an die Hebräer*, 184.

²⁰ Luis F. Mercado, “The Language of Sojourning in the Abraham Midrash in Hebrews 11:8–19: Its Old Testament Basis, Exegetical Traditions and Function in the Epistle to the Hebrews” (Th.D. diss., Harvard University, 1966), 2.

²¹ Hagner, *Hebrews*, 14.

²² Schröger, *Verfasser*, 189.

²³ Ellis, *The Old Testament in Early Christianity*, 96 n. 71: “E.g. Philo, *De Sacrif. Abel.* 76–87: Lev 2:14 + Commentary with verbal links and supplementary texts + Concluding allusion to the opening text + Final texts (Exod 6:7; Lev 26:12).”

2.2. Quotations

Some scholars claim to have found midrash texts elsewhere in the New Testament: 1 Cor 10:1–22 and the so-called “formula quotations” in Matthew’s Gospel.²⁴ These formula quotations have the same formal structure as rabbinic midrashim defined by Goldberg.²⁵ How are the quotations used in Hebrews?

The Epistle to the Hebrews is structured around forty-four direct quotations referring to a total of fifty-three different texts from what would come to be called the Hebrew Bible. There are more than eighty further allusions to other texts of the Jewish canon.

Almost all quotations are taken from the Septuagint. However, it must be noted that the collection of Septuagint texts had not been completed by the end of the first century and that the author may only have had certain parts of the Septuagint available. Judging from the scriptural quotations, these texts would have included the Torah, the Psalms, and Jeremiah.

We know that in the case of the Epistle to the Hebrews, comparing Hellenistic or Jewish influence does not help to reveal the meaning of Hebrews in the first century. There are many texts which demonstrate a combined Hellenistic-Jewish influence, such as the writings of Philo of Alexandria, who wrote in Greek but used midrashic techniques. We also know that there were many Greek synagogues at the time of the composition of the Epistle to the Hebrews. Therefore Hebrews can quote the Hebrew Bible in Greek translation and still be a “Jewish” book, because the common language of the first century CE was Greek.

Hypothesis 1: From the choice and origin of its quotations, it can be seen that the Epistle to the Hebrews originated at the boundary between Hebrew-Jewish and Hellenistic-Jewish milieu.

To support the hypothesis, we might notice the following six points:

(1) We have already seen that the *auctor ad Hebraeos* had access to a number of different parts of the Septuagint. If we use the Jewish division of the Hebrew Scriptures into Torah, Prophets, and Writings

²⁴ Cf. Matt 1:23; 2:6, 15, 18, 23; 4:15–16; 8:17; 12:18–21; 13:35; 21:5 and 27:9–10.

²⁵ Arnold Goldberg, “Midrashatz: Vorschläge für die descriptive Terminologie der Formanalyse rabbinischer Texte,” *FJB* 17 (1989): 45–56.

(*Ketubim*), we see that twenty-two of the direct quotations in Hebrews are from the book of Psalms; some Psalms (95, 110 [94, 109 LXX]) are even mentioned twice, and a few are alluded to even more often. This is a common rabbinic method: the rabbis like to quote the text under discussion, as is done in Heb 3:7–4:11 and Heb 7.

(2) Next most frequent are quotations from the Torah, especially Genesis and Deuteronomy. The question is whether we already are finding signs in Hebrews of the three-part division of the Hebrew Bible. The author does not bother to discuss the development of the canon or to give us any hints in the text. The New Testament phrases “Law (of Moses) and Prophets”²⁶ or “Torah of Moses, Prophets, Psalms”²⁷ are not mentioned in Hebrews.

It should, however, be noted, that the Greek word νόμος appears only in Heb 7–10, which deals with cultic patterns. Here the argumentation about Jesus as high priest is interpreted in terms of the Melchizedek-Abraham tradition and cultic descriptions of the role and function of the priests. Therefore, νόμος describes the Levitical part of the law. However, the underlying meaning of νόμος here—and always—is the “Torah of Moses” which reveals the will of God (Heb 10:28; cf. 9:19).

(3) Most Jewish texts seek to place themselves in the long tradition of the prophets of Israel. Hebrews does this too. In the exordium, the author introduces the prophets as revealing God’s message in an earlier time (Heb 1:1): “Having spoken of old in many forms and various ways to the fathers through the prophets.” Texts from the prophetic books, such as Jer 31, are not just widely quoted but express the essence of the theological impact of the letter. Two quotations from 1 and 2 Samuel are eminently important. One cites God’s promise in Nathan’s prophecy (2 Sam 7:14 in Heb 1:5) and the other includes God’s assurance that the faithful priest will receive from God an everlasting house (1 Sam 2:35 in Heb 2:17; 3:2, 6).

(4) Except for the book of Psalms, there are not many quotations from the Writings (*Ketubim*) in the Epistle to the Hebrews. Indeed, it seems that Hebrews does not even know the Greek word γραφή, using instead λόγος ζῶν (Heb 4:12).

²⁶ Cf. Luke 16:16 // Matt 11:13; Luke 16:29, 31; 24:27; Matt 5:17; 7:12; John 1:45; Acts 13:15; 24:14; 28:23; Rom 3:21.

²⁷ Cf. Luke 24:44.

An indication of the clear and consistent *christological* interpretation of texts from the Hebrew Bible is given in Heb 10:7. Here Christ speaks in the words of Ps 40:8 (39:8 LXX): “in the scroll of the book, it is written about me” (ἐν κεφαλίδι βιβλίου γέγραπται περὶ ἐμοῦ).

(5) We should further recognize that Hebrews is full of composite quotations which often append to one text a compilation from another (cf. Heb 10:37–38; Isa 26:20 and Hab 2:3–4). This practice appears frequently in other Jewish literature, and such study and interpretation of Scripture was an established practice in first-century Judaism.

We have to assume that biblical quotations that deviate from the text of the Septuagint were generally intentional alterations rather than unintentional lapses. The Epistle to the Hebrews uses this technique freely to show and draw out its textual impact. Therefore, Hebrews has a number of *textual alterations*, such as Heb 10:6, “in burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not have pleasure.” The first words about the offerings, from Ps 40:7 (39:7 LXX), create verbal links within the larger exposition of Scripture, i.e., a pattern of *explicit midrash* (cf. Heb 10:38; Rom 10:12–13, 16, 18). However, there does remain the possibility that the author is using a different version of the Septuagint from the one known to us, rather than making a deliberate alteration. For instance, this question remains open for the use of “body” in Heb 10:5 rather than “ears” as in the Psalm verse being quoted here (Ps 40:7 [39:7 LXX]).

(6) Besides the quotations of Scripture from what would come to be called the Hebrew Bible, Hebrews includes allusions to the additional books in the Septuagint, specifically to the later Wisdom tradition (Heb 1:3; Wis 7:25–26; 11:25) and to the books of Maccabees (Heb 11:25; 2 Macc 6–7 and 4 Macc 15:2, 8).

We may conclude that the use of scriptural quotations in the Epistle to the Hebrews is consistent with the development of the Jewish canon as witnessed in the writings of Greek-speaking authors of the first century (cf. Josephus, *C. Ap.* 1.38–46). Hebrews therefore seems to be part of the Jewish discussion: it respects Jewish boundaries and thus enables the community it addresses to develop their ideas and understanding of the world and of God’s plan in the context of and in discussion with Jewish positions and traditions.

Let me complete this point with Arnold Goldberg’s well-known insight that rabbinic literature—and, I would add, the Epistle to

the Hebrews—is “a literature of tradition, but also a literature of quotation.”

2.3. *Introductory Formulas*

The Epistle to the Hebrews not only quotes texts from the Hebrew Bible, but also uses introductory formulas to introduce these quotations. These *formulae quaestionis* are important when we ask how Hebrews transforms the biblical texts and how it uses them to show that Jesus is the redeemer of the world. The formulas show that the Epistle to the Hebrews may be placed on the boundary between Hebrew-Jewish and Hellenistic-Jewish milieu.

The well-known phrase, “it was written” (γέγραπται), is used only once, in a quotation from Ps 40:8 (39:8 LXX) in Heb 10:7. In its place, phrases containing verbs like λέγειν or φανεῖν (“speak, say”) or in some texts μαρτυρεῖν (“witness, bear testimony”) are used (Heb 2:6; 7:17). This reflects the fact that Greek is richer in verbs of saying than is Hebrew. With these verbs a certain shift from a written text to oral speech is made. The quotations in the Epistle to the Hebrews are no longer written, but are becoming the spoken authoritative word.

Bruce Metzger has compared the use of introductory formulas in the Mishnah and in the New Testament. He suggests that when these formulas differ, they are two different *genres* rather than being two differing *interpretations of history*. He points out that the New Testament and the Mishnah each contain a number of examples where the subject of the verb of saying in the formula may be either the Scriptures or God: “Indeed, so habitual was the identification of the divine Author with the word of Scripture that occasionally personality is attributed to the passages itself.”²⁸ In fact, “the author of Hebrews cites the words of Scripture as the words of God even where the OT does not so characterize them, and where the words are in the third person about God.”²⁹

The author of Hebrews even characterizes two quotations as words of Christ: Heb 2:12–13 and 10:5–7. These are not the words of the earthly Jesus of Nazareth, but rather words of Christ, who expresses

²⁸ Bruce M. Metzger, “The Formulas Introducing Quotations of Scripture in the NT and the Mishnah,” *JBL* 70 (1951): 306.

²⁹ *Ibid.* Cf. Heb 1:6, 7, 8; 4:4, 7; 7:21; 10:30b.

his incarnation and his relation to God and his brothers and sisters in the words of Scripture (Ps 22:23 [21:23 LXX], etc.).

Another text shows the use of the Holy Spirit in an introductory formula which expresses the authority of the quotation. In 2 Sam 23:2, God's spirit speaks through David's words. It is possible that this text is the origin of the formula, "as the Holy Spirit says" (cf. Heb 3:7, quoting Ps 95 [94 LXX]). The Psalms are full of references to being God's word, and so fit easily with the intention of Hebrews that the Psalms should be heard as divine speech.

Various subjects are used to transmit the quotations: God, the Son, the Holy Spirit, Moses (Heb 9:20; 12:21), "someone" (Heb 2:6) and, at the end of the epistle, "we" (Heb 13:6).³⁰

This change of authorities in introductory formulas is in its use similar to rabbinic literature. Texts that are quoted as God's word are cited in the rabbinic literature as words of an authoritative rabbi.

In addition, it is noteworthy that Hebrews is the only book in the New Testament to contain examples of the indefinite type of formula where the subject is "someone" and/or the source of the citation is left unspecified (Heb 2:6, "someone [τις] bore testimony to this somewhere [πού], saying"; Heb 4:4, "for he has spoken somewhere [πού]"; Heb 5:6, "since he [God] says elsewhere [ἐν ἑτέρῳ]"). This indefinite formula appears also in the Mishnah and the writings of Philo.³¹ Hebrews uses these unspecific references to the Hebrew Bible to emphasize that the biblical text is not human writing, but the word of God (see Heb 5:12, λόγια τοῦ θεοῦ).

Hypothesis 2: Hebrews' view of the continuing activity of God in the historical event comprising the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, as fulfilling or even surpassing divine revelation as recorded in the Hebrew Bible, is reflected even in the choice of

³⁰ A precise list of the quotations, noting their differences from the Septuagint text known to us, may be found in Michael Theobald, "Vom Text zum 'lebendigen Wort' (Hebr 4,12): Beobachtungen zur Schrifthermeneutik des Hebräerbriefs," in *Jesus Christus als die Mitte der Schrift: Studien zur Hermeneutik des Evangeliums* (ed. Christof Landmesser et al.; BZNW 86; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1997), 754.

³¹ Philo, *Ebr.* 61, *Deus* 74; cf. William Leonard, *The Authorship of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (London: Vatican Polyglot, 1939), 275, 283; Herbert E. Ryle, *Philo and Holy Scripture* (London: Macmillan, 1895), xiv; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, "The Use of Explicit Old Testament Quotations in Qumran Literature and in the New Testament," *NTS* 7 (1960–61): 299–305.

formulas introducing quotations of Scripture in the Epistle to the Hebrews.

2.4. *Use of Interpretation Patterns*

Friedrich Schröger recognized different rhetorical styles. In his earlier work, *Der Verfasser des Hebräerbriefes als Schriftausleger*,³² he distinguishes between typological elements, methods of scriptural interpretation, and rabbinic or Qumranic Midrashim. However, we cannot entirely accept these distinctions, since it is not possible to distinguish between exegetical methods like the seven middot (exegetical rules) of Hillel,³³ which are quite often used in rabbinic texts and which also have many parallels in Hellenistic rhetorical language and in rabbinic Midrashim, and interpretative methods of midrash itself.

Typology is not a method but what we might call a “spiritual” approach. Like the haggadah of the rabbis, it brings the text into the present by appropriating the prophetic and representational character of Old Testament characters, events and institutions.³⁴

Some scholars have shown how *typological elements* are used in the Epistle to the Hebrews and have characterized them as “Hellenistic” or “Philonic” traditions. But E. Earle Ellis remarks that “in the New Testament typology appears, broadly speaking, as *creation typology* and *covenant typology* . . . In the covenant typology various persons, events and institutions of Old Testament Israel are viewed as prophetic prefigurements of New Testament realities.”³⁵ This is the case in the Epistle to the Hebrews, where the covenant typology is found in chs. 8–10. There it expresses the “new covenant,” which will be found in the house of Israel and Judah. Hebrews 8:8–12 quotes the whole text of Jer 31:31–34, focusing on just three topics: the new covenant, the end of sacrifices and the writing of Torah/law in the hearts and minds of the people. The heart plays an important role for Hebrews,

³² Schröger, *Verfasser*.

³³ Cf. Günter Stemberger, *Einleitung in Talmud und Midrasch* (8th ed.; Munich: Beck, 1992), 25–40.

³⁴ Cf. Karl-Heinrich Ostmeyer, “Typos—weder Urbild noch Abbild,” in *Bildersprache verstehen: Zur Hermeneutik der Metapher und anderer bildlicher Sprachformen* (ed. Ruben Zimmermann; Texte und Studien zu Handlung, Sprache und Lebenswelt 38; Munich: Fink, 2000), 218, 223; Leonhard Goppelt, *Typos: The Typological Interpretation of the Old Testament in the New* (trans. Donald H. Madvig; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 30–31, 152, 198, 201–202.

³⁵ Ellis, *The Old Testament in Early Christianity*, 166.

for it is the place where someone decides whether he or she is willing to follow the law (see Heb 3:8, 12). This stands in relation to the central question of the audience for which Hebrews was written: whether to return to the Jewish faith or to continue to believe in Jesus as the Messiah. In the central chapters Heb 8–10, Jesus is shown as realizing the new covenant and as resuming the prophecy of Jeremiah.³⁶ The author of Hebrews cites the prophetic text referring to a “new covenant” to show Jesus’ superiority (Heb 8:6, “better covenant”) compared to the covenant given at Mount Sinai and not to the covenant of Jeremiah. In Heb 10:15–17, Jer 31:33 is quoted as the word of the Holy Spirit. This is intended to direct the words of the text directly at the readers and listeners of the epistle, who understand themselves to be living at the end of time (Heb 1:2). This method of interpretation is comparable with the Peshar-Midrashim in Qumran.³⁷

Besides the passages quoted directly from the Hebrew Bible, Hebrews includes a large number of allusions to certain stories or expressions, such as “consuming fire” (Heb 12:29, πῦρ καταναλίσκον; cf. Deut 4:24); or “pursue peace with everyone” (Heb 12:14, Εἰρήνην διώκετε; cf. Ps 34:15 [33:15 LXX]),³⁸ etc.

Summary: We have seen that the Epistle to the Hebrews is full of explicit quotations and implicit allusions to Scripture. Is it possible to assume that the “epistle” to the Hebrews as a whole is transmitted also in a familiar Jewish form? And what would that mean for our interpretation of the text?

3. *Theological Content*

3.1. *Introduction*

That the text “to the Hebrews” is a *Jewish* text can be seen not only from the kind and genre of quotations, but also from the theological

³⁶ Cf. Konrad Taut, *Anleitung zum Schriftverständnis? Die heiligen Schriften nach dem Hebräerbrief* (THEOS 20; Hamburg: Dr. Kovac (private), 1998), 89.

³⁷ For the genre Peshar-Midrashim and midrash eschatology in Pesharim, see Timothy H. Lim, *Pesharim* (Companion to the Qumran Scrolls 3; London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 48–53.

³⁸ The injunction “pursue peace” is a common motif of Old Testament and of later Jewish paraenesis. See Ps 34:15; *T. Sim.* 5:2; *m. ’Abot* 1:12; Matt 5:9; 1 Pet 3:11, which cites Ps 34:15. Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 367 with n. 10.

transformation and intention of the text. Hebrews explains Jesus' role and function for a group of people who are familiar with the stories and figures of the Hebrew Bible. The original readers are referred to as "Hebrews" or "Jews." Hebrews thus shows us an intra-Jewish discussion between Jews who refer to their "common" Judaism (*religio licita*) and others who believe that Jesus is the Messiah of Israel. When we read the text of Hebrews it is as though we were listening to one side of a telephone conversation. We must see whether the theological interpretations may fit the hypothesis that Hebrews is a *Jewish* text.

3.2. *The Eschatological Dimension in Hebrews*

Since in Hebrews the *eschatological perspective* is the underlying motive, it is important to examine and compare it with Jewish texts. The *auctor ad Hebraeos* characterizes herself/himself and the addressees as living in the last days, as described in the exordium of Heb 1:2: "at the end of these days."³⁹ This conviction is common for authors of New Testament texts and Jewish apocalyptic texts.⁴⁰ In Hebrews, history is divided into two ages: this age and the age to come (Heb 6:5, μέλλοντος αἰῶνος). The message has to be seen in connection with Ps 95 (94 LXX), quoted in Heb 3–4, which pronounces the nearness of the *eschaton*:⁴¹ "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your heart as in rebellion."⁴²

It should be noted that, like Hebrews, the Book of Revelation represents a comprehensive adaptation of the images and motifs of the Hebrew Bible, using midrashic techniques to verbalize the eschatological vision of the seer.

3.3. *Figures from the History of Israel*

The Epistle to the Hebrews mentions more than twenty important characters from the history of the people of Israel. In Heb 11, the

³⁹ For text-critical remarks see Attridge, *Hebrews*, 35.

⁴⁰ Cf. Peter von der Osten-Sacken, *Die Apokalyptik in ihrem Verhältnis zu Prophetie und Weisheit* (TEH 157; Munich: Kaiser, 1969), 39–43.

⁴¹ According to Herbert Braun, *An die Hebräer* (HNT 14; Tübingen: Mohr, 1984), 95, and against Erich Grässer, *An die Hebräer* (3 vols.; EKKNT 17; Zürich: Benziger and Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1990–1997), 1:187 n. 21.

⁴² For the use and messianic-eschatological interpretation of Ps 95, see Str-B 1:164–165.

encomium of faith, fifteen biblical figures are cited, including Abel, Enoch, Noah, Jephthah, Samuel, and the prophets, and God’s response to their faith and good deeds is described.

For the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, it was enough just to mention the names and a few aspects of the biblical figures. When they heard the names of these biblical heroes, his/her readers and listeners were able to relate these references to the familiar biblical stories. By using this method, the author was able to reframe characters and biblical stories: stories from the Hebrew Bible became part of the history of Jesus and emphasized the superiority of Jesus Christ.

Further research is needed to assess the significance of the author’s choice of biblical figures. Following Heinrich Zimmermann and William Loader, it might also be interesting to consider how the role of the high priest is transformed.⁴³ We can note, however, that a number of figures of great importance for the constitution of the people of Israel are frequently mentioned in our text.

Let me focus here on Abraham and Moses, who appear in several texts illustrating Jesus’ superiority and his heavenly connection to God.

The image of Abraham as Father of the People of Israel is used at the beginning of our text to point out that Jesus had come to the children of Abraham (Heb 2:16). God’s promise that Abraham would be made into a great people is even quoted in Heb 6:14: “Surely, I will bestow blessings on you and will multiply you” (Gen 22:17).

The children and grandchildren of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are mentioned three times in Heb 11. These texts seem to lay a strong accent on the family relationship of the forefathers of Israel.

The second figure widely used in Hebrews is Moses. The New Testament cites Moses and his deeds more than eighty times. Moses appears in different roles—as the mediator of the Torah, or as a prophet. Generally in the New Testament, as in Hebrews in particular, his role and function as mediator between God and the people

⁴³ The portrait of Christ as a high priest is singular in the New Testament. It derives from traditions that are based on a complex Jewish heritage. Cf. Heinrich Zimmermann, *Die Hohepriester-Christologie des Hebräerbriefes* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1964), passim; William Loader, *Sohn und Hoherpriester: Eine traditions-geschichtliche Untersuchung zur Christologie des Hebräerbriefes* (WMANT 53; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1981), passim; Windisch, *Hebräerbrief*, 12–14; Michel, *Brief an die Hebräer*, 165–169; Oscar Cullmann, *Die Christologie des Neuen Testaments* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1957), 83–110, etc.

of Israel is compared to Jesus' function and mission.⁴⁴ Hebrews characterizes Moses as the leading figure for the desert generation, authorized by God (Heb 3:1–6),⁴⁵ who is, like Jesus, a loyal, faithful and reliable mediator of God. Further on, the Epistle to the Hebrews mentions Moses as the transmitter of the Torah (Heb 9:19; 10:28). But it also criticises his “covenant” as antiquated and unworthy (Heb 8–10). Such criticism of the quality of the prophecy of Moses is well known in Midrash texts. For instance, his knowledge of God's thoughts and plans is far inferior to that of Balaam:

And there arose no prophet in Israel like Moses (Deut 34:10). In Israel no prophet arose; but amongst the nations of the world there was one. Who is this? Balaam, the son of Beor. But there is a difference between the prophecy of Moses and the prophecy of Balaam. Moses did not know who was speaking to him, but Balaam knew who was speaking, for it is said: 'the oracle of one who hears the words of God' (Num 24:16). Moses did not know when God would speak to him, until God spoke, but Balaam knew when he was speaking to him. (Sipre Deut. 357 to Deut 34:10 [my translation])

The only historical figures mentioned in Hebrews who do not belong to the people of Israel are Timothy and the brothers and sisters in Italy, who appear at the end of the epistle in the (probably spurious)⁴⁶ final greeting (Heb 13:23–24).

4. *May we Even Speak of the Overall Text of Hebrews as a “Jesus-Midrash”?*

As we have seen, the Epistle to the Hebrews demonstrates many similarities with other Jewish interpretations of Scripture. The author's methods and his/her ways of handling Scripture and interpreting it in a messianic and eschatological way show that the text is a part of the Jewish tradition.

⁴⁴ See Hubert Frankemölle, “Mose in Deutungen des Neuen Testaments,” *KuI* 9 (1994): 72–84.

⁴⁵ Cf. the interpretation of Heb 3:1–6 in Elke Tönges, “Der Brief an die Hebräerinnen und Hebräer—Eine antijudaistische Schrift?” in *Christlich von Gott reden im Angesicht Israels: Symposion zum 60. Geburtstag von Klaus Wengst* (ed. Katharina von Bremen and Elke Tönges; Iserlohn: Institut für Kirche und Gesellschaft der Evangelischen Kirche von Westfalen, 2003), 85–91.

⁴⁶ See the discussion in Wolfgang Kraus, “Neuere Ansätze in der Exegese des Hebräerbriefes,” *VF* 48 (2003): 67–68.

The use of Septuagint texts is also relevant: Hebrews alters certain biblical texts and presents them in a different (usually christological) way.⁴⁷

But how do we deal with the *Jewish* text, published in the explicit *Christian* canon, the New Testament? The difference between rabbinic Midrashim and New Testament midrash is this: "While rabbinic midrash seeks to discover some hidden element within the Old Testament texts itself, the New Testament midrash with its eschatological orientation applies the text theologically to some aspect of Jesus' life and ministry. While for the rabbis the text is primary, the New Testament writers give primacy to Jesus and to the surrounding messianic events, or tradition of events, and only then use Old Testament texts to explain or illuminate them."⁴⁸

Hagner presumes that Hebrews is "a carefully argued exposition, employing midrashic treatment of Scripture, repeatedly punctuated by exhortatory passages,"⁴⁹ whereas George W. Buchanan even goes so far to describe Hebrews as "a homiletic midrash based on Ps 110."⁵⁰ In my opinion, the central idea of Buchanan that Hebrews is Jewish exegesis in the form of a midrash cannot be denied, but relating it to Ps 110 (109 LXX) as *the* biblical basis for the midrash is exaggerated. Let us search for the *Sitz im Leben* of the midrash exegesis.

There is a possible *Sitz im Leben* of the familiar tannaitic Midrashim: during worship in the Hellenistic synagogue. Goldberg assumes in his form-critical analysis of periphrastic Midrash-sentences that it is possible that periphrastic biblical exegesis played a more central role in early Judaism than is apparent from our Midrash texts. He and Günter Stemberger also suppose that this biblical exegesis took place in the context of the service in the synagogue.⁵¹ There is, however, a slight problem with this hypothesis: there are almost no texts to

⁴⁷ See Martin Karrer, "Der Weltkreis und Christus der Hohepriester. Blicke auf die Schriftrezeption des Hebräerbriefs," in *Frühjudentum und Neues Testament im Horizont Biblischer Theologie* (ed. Wolfgang Kraus and Karl-Wilhelm Niebuhr; WUNT 162; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 151–179.

⁴⁸ Ellis, *The Old Testament in Early Christianity*, 94.

⁴⁹ Donald A. Hagner, *Encountering the Book of Hebrews: An Exposition* (EBS; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 29.

⁵⁰ George W. Buchanan, *To the Hebrews. Translation, Comment and Conclusions* (AB 36; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1972), XIX.

⁵¹ Arnold Goldberg, "Paraphrasierende Midrashsätze," *FjB* 18 (1990): 22; Stemberger, *Einleitung in Talmud und Midrasch*, 234, 238, 241–242.

support it. Goldberg ended his last lecture with the following task for his pupils: “The assumption of an early literary form with its *Sitz im Leben* within the synagogue sermon or homily should be examined further.”⁵²

There is another question which must be discussed in this context: the classification of the so-called Epistle to the Hebrews as a sermon or homily. Hebrews is full of parenetic phrases. The later Midrash form referred to as *homily* has the specific structure *yelammedenu—petichta—semikhah—inyan—chatima*, as does also a synagogue homily. Indeed, as we shall discuss in a moment, the one may be the same as the other. At the least, such a homily must consist of a *petichta* and *chatima*. The *petichta* opens the sermon and serves as a *proemium*. It consists of a verse of the Hebrew Bible, apparently unrelated to the theme of the homily, and the interpretation of both this verse and the rabbinic commentary on it, finally connecting to the homily’s theme. The *chatima* ends the homily, offering comfort and reassurance or an eschatological kerygma.

It is possible that the form of the Epistle to the Hebrews is that of an early homily or homiletic midrash.⁵³ While it does not conform precisely to the homiletic structure outlined above, it possibly reveals a version of the form that may have been developed in the context of an early first-century Hellenistic synagogue service. As such, the Epistle may have been an early homily or homiletic midrash that was written for “Hebrews” who believed in the messianic role and function of Jesus and sought to describe them in cultic, biblical terms. We do have a sort of *proemium*, the interpretative key of our epistle, at Heb 1:1–5 (or Heb 1:1–13). If the closing verses of Hebrews, 13:20–25, are seen as a later addition, then it is possible to distinguish a possible *chatima* in Heb 13:18–19: “Pray for us; for we are persuaded that we have a good conscience since we desire to behave honorably in all things. I especially entreat you to do this so that I may be restored to you sooner.”

In adding the closing verses of Hebrews as it has come down to us, an anonymous editor characterized its contents as *λόγος τῆς*

⁵² Goldberg, “Paraphrasierende Midrashesätze,” 22 (my translation).

⁵³ Cf. Windisch (*Hebräerbrief*, 124), who thinks the form of Hebrews is most likely that of the synagogal homily; Hartwig Thyen, *Der Stil der jüdisch-hellenistischen Homilie* (FRLANT 65; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1955), 17–18.

παρακλήσεως (Heb 13:22, “message of exhortation”).⁵⁴ Hans-Friedrich Weiss has shown that this phrase is a *terminus technicus* for the reading of the sermon or homily that follows the reading of “Torah and Prophets.”⁵⁵ It was used in the Hellenistic synagogues in connection with the exegesis of Scripture, with the intent that the faith of the congregation should be strengthened and related to their own situation through the exegesis of Scripture in a midrashic form. In particular, the doctrinal presuppositions of the congregation interact with the interpretation of texts from Scripture both in content and in structure.

It is clear that Heb 13:22–25 is full of problems. This passage was written by someone who wanted to use Hebrews as a true Epistle—i.e., as a written text. It therefore marks the transition from an oral to a written tradition. This is similar to what happened with the rabbinic literature at the end of the second century. It is only in Heb 13:22 that we find the signal that Hebrews may be a spoken text—a homily—which presents a logos-theology. Perhaps the editor already encountered Hebrews as a homily and assumed at the end of the text that it is must be a λόγος τῆς παρακλήσεως.

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⁵⁴ Cf. Attridge, *Hebrews*, 404; cf. Acts 13:22–25.

⁵⁵ Cf. Hans-Friedrich Weiss, *Der Brief an die Hebräer* (KEK 13; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991), 40.

HEBREWS, AN ANCIENT SYNAGOGUE HOMILY
FOR *TISHA BE-AV*: ITS FUNCTION,
ITS BASIS, ITS THEOLOGICAL
INTERPRETATION

Gabriella Gelardini

Introduction

The thesis of this article is that the book of Hebrews is an ancient synagogue homily. This form-critical claim is not new in Hebrews scholarship, but the original approach here is that known aspects of production and reception aesthetics regarding ancient synagogue homilies are applied to Hebrews. It is firstly asked whether there is textual evidence of the synagogue as its *Sitz im Leben* (1.1 and 2.1). Secondly, the function of the ancient synagogue homily is considered, namely, that it ought to interpret a reading from the Torah and a complementary reading from the Prophets (1.2 and 2.2). Thirdly, the readings from the Torah (1.4 and 2.4) and the Prophets are reconstructed (1.5 and 2.3), and their central and structuring role in the text is shown. Fourthly, the basis of Hebrews in the liturgical reading cycle—in this case the Palestinian Triennial Cycle—and the place of the two readings it contains along with its theological interpretation are analyzed (1.3 and 2.5). And lastly, form-critical aspects are brought into consideration (1.6). The conclusions presented here constitute a distillation of what I have examined in my dissertation, “‘Verhärtet eure Herzen nicht’: Der Hebräer, eine Synagogenhomilie zu *Tischa be-Aw*” (Diss. theol., University of Basel, 2004).

Hebrews

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The "Epistle" to the "Hebrews" by Felix Just, S.J., Ph.D. The 19th book of the New Testament is usually called "The Epistle (or Letter) to the Hebrews." However, its form or genre is not really like an ancient letter (except for the ending), but more like a treatise and a homily (a sermon based on scripture). Moreover, this writing does not explicitly address any "Hebrews" (a title not attached until the second century), and its author was almost certainly not St. Paul (as had been assumed for much of Christian history). Jesus is also called "Lord" three times (2:3; 7:14; 13:20), a title which in Hebrews more often (13x) refers to the Father. Jesus is even called an "apostle" in Heb 3:1 (i.e., a messenger or representative from God), only here in the entire NT! Jesus is superior to all other beings. The Epistle to the Hebrews is perfectly written at the highest intellectual level, and yet its authorship is a complete mystery. Not even modern, sophisticated analysis of authorship can suggest a plausible writer for this great work. Whoever wrote this apparently wrote virtually nothing else. Scholars agree that Paul certainly did not write this. It was written after the Passion of Christ, as made clear by its references in the past tense to Jesus's work, yet before the destruction of Jerusalem in A