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THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS

EDITED BY

RÉGIS BURNET

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WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS?

A HISTORY OF READINGS OF THE INTERPRETIVE FRAMEWORK OF HEBREWS' THEOLOGY

What is the purpose of the Epistle to the Hebrews? The answer is difficult, since the epistle combines the most varied themes. The text mentions divine revelation (God has spoken), the superiority of the New Covenant over the Old, the priesthood of Christ, the return of the traveling people to the heavenly sphere, the opposition between earthly shadows and eschatological realities[1]. Moreover, as Hans Windisch noted more than a century ago, these reflections are not coherently linked; on the contrary, the writer jumps from one point of view to another, repeats himself several times, and more than once proves to be clumsy (*ungeschickt*[2]). Claiming to define "the" theology of the Epistle to the Hebrews is like playing that game we all played as children, "connect the dots", but without the numbers to draw the figure. Does this absence of points prevent us from producing interpretations? Quite the opposite, as Alain Lhomme says, "It seems that we only interpret what we understand partially, imperfectly, or not at all"[3]. It is precisely because Hebrews resists our elucidations that we continue to interpret it. However, we are not starting from scratch. As always, the text itself gives us the method. Luke Timothy Johnson has noted with his usual finesse in his commentary that the theology of Hebrews consists not of a set of propositions about God that can be drawn from its pages, but Hebrews is characterized by a relationship between the text and its reader. A "theological voice" runs throughout the letter and takes the hearer to task[4]. It is therefore this

1. Listing in A. VANHOYE, *La structure littéraire de l'Épître aux Hébreux* (Studia Neotestamentica, 1), Paris – Bruges, Desclée de Brouwer, 1963, p. 12.

2. H. WINDISCH, *Der Hebräerbrief* (HNT, 14), Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 1913, p. 10.

3. A. LHOMME, *Peut-on lire sans interpréter? Réflexions sur la lecture et l'analyse des textes philosophiques*, in *Méthodos* 20 (2020 [online: www.journal.openedition.org]).

4. "The theology of Hebrews consists not of a set of propositions about God that can be drawn from its pages, but of the entire argument that engages the hearer. In the case of Hebrews above all, it is appropriate to speak of a 'theological voice', which speaks in its own distinctive manner throughout the composition". L.T. JOHNSON, *Hebrews: A Commentary* (NTL), Louisville, KY, Westminster John Knox, 2006, p. 44.

voice that makes the unity of the epistle. But is this enough to interpret it? Can we be satisfied with this voice without seeking to know its origin – who is speaking – and who are those who receive it – its addressees? This article would like to reflect on this literary utterance framework. To that end, it demonstrates in the first part that it is impossible to understand the epistle without assumptions about the author and his addressees, even if we leave an era that may have believed it. In the second part, the history of readings of the epistle emphasizes on the crucial importance of making these assumptions about the enunciation setting explicit, because they shape the interpretation we make. In other words, the enunciative framework is an interpretive framework. Finally, the third part will suggest some orientations concerning our current interpretive framework, which will allow me to survey the present research on the Epistle to the Hebrews.

I. Can We Avoid Any Assumption about the Enunciation Framework of a Text?

To demonstrate the necessity to make explicit our hypotheses about the framework of enunciation, i.e., the author, his addressees, and the goals he pursues, a *reductio ad absurdum* can be useful. What happens when we resist making assumptions about the context of production of the writing and claim that the text itself will provide us with answers?

1. *Albert Vanhoye or the Illusions of the Immanence Principle*

A very famous case illustrates this methodology: Albert Vanhoye. Vanhoye attempted to find an irrefutable plan of the epistle from its composition, and thus to discover the true meaning of the epistle. According to him, this meaning remained hidden to the previous interpreters because of their prejudices about the text[5]. Relying on the works of François Thien and Léon Vaganay, he asserts that the text provides clear indications about its concentric structure, the apex of which is Heb 9,1-14[6]. Since this apex is supposed to convey the core of the message, he deduces that Hebrews is a Christocentric epistle of five parts, organized

5. Vanhoye, *Structure littéraire* (n. 1), p. 11.

6. *Ibid*., pp. 238-240. See F. Thien, *Analyse de l'Épître aux Hébreux*, in *RB* 11 (1902) 74-86; L. Vaganay, *Le plan de l'Épitre aux Hébreux*, in L.-H. Vincent (ed.), *Mémorial Lagrange*, Paris, Gabalda, 1940, 269-277.

by temporality. The turning point of the sacrifice of Christ articulates two eras[7]. The purpose of Hebrews is therefore to build a priestly Christology: "the sacrifice of Christ is a covenant sacrifice, which constitutes him as a mediator. In the covenant, Christians become participants in Christ"[8].

Seemingly, nothing could be more objective: the text itself guides its readers to tell them how to read it! However, as Craig Koester points out in an article published in the book edited by Gabriella Gelardini and Harold Attridge[9], this literary analysis corresponds to Pope Pius XII's call (in the encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu*) to revitalize the biblical sciences using literary genres. Moreover, Vanhoye emphasizes priesthood and mediation, at the very moment when this question is at the center of the debates in the Catholic Church about the liturgical renewal. We can go further than Koester himself. A year after the publication of the book, the dogmatic constitution *Lumen Gentium* was promulgated, which affirms the common priesthood of the baptized in a paragraph that begins with a quotation from Heb 5,15 (*LG* 10). Besides, the conciliar document repeats five times that Jesus is the only mediator (*LG* 8, 28, 41, 49, 62). The least we can say is that this priestly Christology was in the air at that time. Vanhoye's reading was already prepared by the analysis of his fellow Jesuit Joseph Bonsirven[10] as well as by a book by the Protestant pastor Jean-Samuel Javet, *Dieu nous parla* [*God Spoke unto Us*], which Vanhoye invokes extensively[11]. A few years later, Fr. Lussier[12] read the Epistle to the Hebrews as a Catholic – he was a member of the Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament – and never ceased to refer to the Council and to linger on the great themes: the priestly ministry, the participation of everybody in the priestly ministry, Christ the mediator. Fifty years after his work, in a new commentary on the epistle, Vanhoye reveals himself to be much more explicit: "The definition [that the author] gives of the high priest is innovative in comparison with the Old Testament, because it insists on the solidarity of the high priest with

7. VANHOYE, *Structure littéraire* (n. 1), p. 249.

8. *Ibid*., p. 254.

9. C.R. KOESTER, *"In Many and Various Ways" : Theological Interpretation of Hebrews in the Modern Period*, in G. GELARDINI – H.W. ATTRIDGE (eds.), *Hebrews in Contexts* (AJEC, 91), Leiden – Boston, MA, Brill, 2016, 299-315, p. 310.

10. J. BONSIRVEN, *Épître aux Hébreux* (Verbum Salutis, 12), Paris, Beauchesne, 1943, pp. 5-14.

11. J.-S. JAVET, *Dieu nous parla* (Les livres de la Bible), Paris, Je Sers, 1941.

12. E. LUSSIER, *Christ's Priesthood according to the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Collegeville, MN, Liturgical Press, 1975.

men, whereas the Old Testament indicated a separation"[13]. This definition of the priesthood as the solidarity of the priest with humanity, for which Christ is the model, evokes the theological core of *Lumen Gentium*.

We can therefore conclude that the reason why Vanhoye placed the center of his structure in chapter 9 is that he expected it to be there. More exactly, his history, his education, his environment meant it for him.

An excellent illustration of this phenomenon is provided by another exegete who proceeded from the same principles, Johann Albrecht Bengel (1687-1752). In his *Gnomon Novi Testamenti*, written 220 years before Vanhoye (who quotes him profusely[14]), he relies on the clues offered by the text to discover its purpose. For him, Heb 8,1 is the linchpin, since the author speaks of the κεφάλαιον ἐπὶ τοῖς λεγομένοις. Bengel describes the content of this chapter 8 as the substantiation of Christ's glory and states that its argument alternates between demonstrative and exhortative parts[15]. This is for him the interpretation key of the Epistle, and this is not surprising. Acknowledging subjectively the glory of Christ and putting his faith into practice in his everyday life: what better definition of Pietism of which Bengel is one of the great representatives in the eighteenth century? Like Vanhoye, Bengel reads in Hebrews what his historical situation allows him to read.

2. *From the Death of the Author to the Birth of the Author Function*

Albert Vanhoye was not only the child of the theological doctrine of his time, but also of its literary history. His belief that one must rely on rhetoric to discover the sense of the text and his refusal to go beyond the

13. "La définition [que l'auteur] donne du grand prêtre est innovatrice par rapport à l'Ancien Testament, car elle insiste sur la solidarité du grand prêtre avec les hommes, alors que l'Ancien Testament marquait la séparation". A. VANHOYE, *L'"Épître aux Hébreux", un prêtre différent* (Rhétorique sémitique, 7), Pendé, Gabalda, 2010, p. 119.

14. VANHOYE, *Structure littéraire* (n. 1), pp. 60-63, 69, 96, 162, 176, 196.

15. J.A. BENGEL, *D. Joh. Alberti Bengelii Gnomon Novi Testamenti*, Tübingen, P. Schramm, 1759, pp. 993-995. See p. 993: *Totus in id incumbit, ut fratrum fidem in Jesum Christum* confirmet*, cap. 13,8 s. Confirmat autem eam per demonstrationem Gloriae ipsius. Caput hoc ipse appellat, c. 8,1. Itaque omnes partes epistolae, monitis acerrimis et stimulis efficacissimis praeditae, una eademque sermonis forma edisseruntur, et doctrina ususque quovis loco per* ergo *conjunguntur*. "The whole purpose [of the discourse] is to *confirm* the faith of the brethren in Jesus Christ, 13,8f. He confirms it, by demonstrating His glory. He calls this the main point, 8,1. Thus all the divisions of the epistle, in which the liveliest admonitions and most powerful inducements abound, are set forth in one and the same form of discourse; and doctrine and practice are everywhere connected by *therefore*".

limits of the literary realm reflected a *doxa* that prevailed on both sides of the Atlantic at that time; it challenged the relevance of the Romantic idea of the author's intention in order to focus on the description of the work's meanings. In other words, the interpreter had to stay within the text, this is what is called the *immanence principle*. This opinion is condensed in the phrase repeated *ad nauseam* about the death of the author, a slogan coined by Roland Barthes who proclaimed that we will never know anything about the author since he remains forever elusive, hidden by his text which operates more like a screen than as a revelation[16]. On the other side of the Atlantic, we find in the manifesto article *The Intentional Fallacy* the same declaration on the death of the author: "The poem is not the critic's own and not the author's (it is detached from the author at birth and goes about the world beyond his power … to control it)"[17].

I will discuss at the end of this paper the radical questioning of these theories since the turn of the 2010s. It is sufficient to say that the principle of immanence puts to death the auctorial institution and specifically the myth of the "great writer". But it cannot deprive the reader of the necessity to attribute the text – and what it says – to an author. Barthes himself acknowledges this:

> As an institution, the author is dead: his civil status, his biographical person have disappeared; dispossessed, they no longer exercise over his work the formidable paternity whose account literary history, teaching, and public opinion had the responsibility of establishing and renewing; but in the text, in a way, *I desire* the author: I need his figure (which is neither his representation nor his projection), as he needs mine (except to "prattle")[18].

If the author institution is undermined, the "author function" as defined by Michel Foucault in *Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?* [*What Is an Author?*][19] serves to replace it. This function does not describe the psychological or legal link between the author and the text, but a cultural and semantic relationship between the reader and the text. The author is

16. R. Barthes, *La mort de l'auteur*, in *Manteia* 5 (1968) 12-17. Republished in Id., *Essais critiques IV: Le Bruissement de la langue*, Paris, Seuil, 1984, 61-67.

17. W.K. Wimsatt – M.C. Beardsley, *The Intentional Fallacy*, in *The Sewanee Review* 54 (1946) 468-488. Republished in Iid., *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry*, Lexington, KY, University of Kentucky Press, 1954, p. 5.

18. R. Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte* (Tel quel), Paris, Seuil, 1973, pp. 45-46; Id., *The Pleasure of the Text*, trad. R. Miller, New York, Hill and Wang, 1975, p. 27.

19. M. Foucault, *Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?*, in *Bulletin de la Société française de philosophie* 63 (1969) 73-104. Republished in Id., *Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?*, in D. Defert – F. Ewald (eds.), *Dits et écrits I* (Bibliothèque des sciences humaines), Paris, Gallimard, 1994, 789-821.

above all a hermeneutic category. Authorship is inevitable because it is a figure of the text[20].

It is appropriate to go one step further and assert that authorship is but one dimension of a larger category that links an image of the author (Foucault's "author function" or Booth's "implied author") to a representation of its recipients and of the context that triggered the writing. This kind of "implicit writing situation", often described in the introductory paragraph on "the author, the addressees and the purpose of the writing", constitutes the hermeneutic key to all exegetical commentaries, as Helmut Feld confirms[21]. It is the very key that makes it possible to unify all the interpretations scattered throughout the text; it condenses the interpretative framework. This key best reveals the historicity of the understanding and, consequently, all prejudices and all historical pre-comprehensions.

II. From the Enunciative to the Interpretative Framework: Why the Enunciative Framework of the Epistle to the Hebrews Must Be Made Explicit

A little detour through the history of readings can prove what I have just stated. Doing this *Auslegungsgeschichte* is not a pleasant excursion into history[22], it will give us the opportunity to overturn the prejudices maintained by certain commentators around Pauline authorship, to demonstrate the link between the historical situation of the interpreter and his interpretation, and to prepare the final reflections on our contemporary interpretative context.

1. *Pauline Auctoriality or the Complexities of the Theory of Substitution*

The first step in this history of the reading is to overturn a prejudice often expressed in commentaries: namely, that ancient exegesis would have used Hebrews to justify massively and indiscriminately a theology of substitution (a supersessionism). This prejudice can be found in

20. G. Leclerc, *Le Sceau de l'Œuvre* (Poétique), Paris, Seuil, 1998, p. 61.

21. H. Feld, *Der Hebräerbrief* (Erträge der Forschung, 228), Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1985, p. 4.

22. Voir R. Burnet, *Exegesis and History of Reception: Reading the New Testament Today with the Readers of the Past* (WUNT, 455), Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2021.

numerous works[23]. The point here is not to deny that early Christians sought to define the church as the *Verus Israel*, nor that some did not think within the framework of a theology of substitution[24]. However, the attribution to Paul did not lead to a uniquely substitutive reading.

Because of the slow acceptance of the epistle in the East[25], Hebrews was first commented on in the West. During the first three centuries, it was mainly invoked in the debate on the possibility of repentance for offenses committed after baptism. Indeed, Heb 6,4-6 strongly asserts that mankind cannot find the μετάνοια a second time, for it is impossible to re-crucify the Son of God. This rigorism was at turns challenged by writings such as the *Shepherd of Hermas* arguing for the possibility of repentance and confirmed by more rigorist authors such as Tertullian (*On Modesty* 23.3); it gained singular salience in the quarrel over the *lapsi*[26]. In the East, it was above all the Christological questions that occupied the commentators. Heb 1,3 served to counter the formulations of the Arians[27]. More broadly, Athanasius of Alexandria used the epistle to support the *homoousion*, insisting on the full divinity of the *Logos* and the necessity of that full divinity to effect redemption. The Antiochians, on the other hand, used the same epistle to affirm that the union of the *Logos* and humanity was only of grace and will and not of substance, lest these formulations imply that there would be a change in the divinity[28].

The homilies of John Chrysostom, quickly translated into Latin at the instigation of Cassiodorus by Mutianus, which constitute a basis for all subsequent interpretation in both the Greek and Latin worlds[29], are good

23. See for instance J.G. GAGER, *The Origins of Anti-Semitism: Attitudes toward Judaism in Pagan and Christian Antiquity*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1983, pp. 180-184; W. KLASSEN, *To the Hebrews or against the Hebrews? Anti-Judaism in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, in S.G. WILSON (ed.), *Anti-Judaism in Early Christianity: Separation and Polemic* (Studies in Christianity and Judaism, 2), Waterloo, ON, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1986, 1-16. For a review of this prejudice: C.M. WILLIAMSON, *Anti-Judaism in Hebrews?*, in *Interpretation* 57 (2003) 266-279.

24. See J.-M. AUWERS – R. BURNET – D. LUCIANI, *L'Antijudaïsme des Pères: mythe et/ou réalité?* (Théologie Historique, 125), Paris, Beauchesne, 2017.

25. R. BURNET, *La finale de l'Épître aux Hébreux: une addition alexandrine de la fin du II^e siècle?*, in *RB* 120 (2013) 423-440.

26. B. POSCHMANN, *Paenitentia secunda: Die kirchliche Buße im ältesten Christentum bis Cyprian und Origenes* (Theophaneia, 1), Bonn, Hanstein, 1964.

27. See the numerous quotations found by E.M. HEEN – P.D. KREY, *Hebrews* (Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, 10), Downers Grove, IL, InterVarsity, 2005, pp. 10-18.

28. R.A. GREER, *The Captain of Our Salvation: A Study in the Patristic Exegesis of Hebrews* (Beiträge zur Geschichte der biblischen Exegese, 15), Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 1973, pp. 120-129.

29. E. RIGGENBACH, *Historische Studien zum Hebräerbrief*. I. Teil: *Die ältesten lateinischen Kommentare zum Hebräerbrief: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Exegese zur*

representatives of the patristic exegesis of Hebrews rather unconcerned with substitution. They do not focus on replacement, but rather on the Christological debates between humanity and divinity[30]. John Chrysostom speaks primarily as a pastor who seeks to praise the deeds of Jesus Christ described by Hebrews and to delineate their implications for his Christian listeners, focusing on the priesthood "according to the order of Melchizedek"[31].

During the Early Middle Ages, the Epistle to the Hebrews was not used to discuss the relationship between Jews and Christians either, as evidenced by the influential commentary of Alcuin, published under the name of Ambrose, Ambrosiaster or Claudius of Turin, but written by Charlemagne's counselor[32]. As Raffaele Savigni shows, Alcuin uses the superiority of the New Covenant over the Old Covenant to emphasize on questions of priesthood and liturgy[33]. He does not seek to engage in a polemic on the relationship between Jews and Christians. His purpose is to be consistent with the Eucharistic doctrine which was being gradually developed at that time. Jesus is a priest through the oblation of his blood and flesh in the Eucharistic oblation. Alcuin therefore belongs to the new sensitivity to the Eucharistic sacrament coined by Paschase Radbert and Hincmar of Reims. What was once seen as participation in a bloody sacrifice is replaced by the spiritual oblation of oneself, by *confessio* (both confession of sins and praise to God) and *cumpunctio cordis* which leads to the gift of tears.

The reading of Thomas Aquinas could be considered the epitome of the theology of substitution. Indeed, commenting on Heb 8,13, the *Doctor communis* boldly states:

> *Now that which decayeth and waxeth old is ready to vanish away* (Heb 8,13); if, therefore, the Old Covenant is old, it must be rejected. Lev 26,10:

Literaturgeschichte des Mittelalters (Geschichte des neutestamentlichen Kanons, 8.1), Leipzig, Deichert, 1907, p. 11. Concerning the history of this text: P. ALLEN – W. MAYER, *The Thirty-Four Homilies on Hebrews: The Last Series Delivered by Chrysostom in Constantinople?*, in *Byzantion* 65 (1995) 309-348.

30. F.M. YOUNG, *Christological Ideas in the Greek Commentaries on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, in *JTS* 20 (1969) 150-163.

31. C. KANNENGIESSER, *'Clothed with Spiritual Fire': John Chrysostom's Homilies on the Letter to Hebrews*, in J. LAANSMA – D.J. TREIER (eds.), *Christology, Hermeneutics, and Hebrews: Profiles from the History of Interpretation* (LNTS, 423), London, T&T Clark, 2012, 74-83.

32. RIGGENBACH, *Die ältesten lateinischen Kommentare zum Hebräerbrief* (n. 29), pp. 19-22; M. FOX, *Alcuin's Expositio in epistolam ad Hebraeos*, in *The Journal of Medieval Latin* 18 (2008) 326-345.

33. R. SAVIGNI, *Le commentaire d'Alcuin sur l'Épître aux Hébreux et le thème du sacrifice*, in *Annales de Bretagne et des pays de l'Ouest* 111/3 (2004) 245-267.

> When the new fruit comes, you shall reject the old. Thus, by calling the second Testament "New", he designates the cessation of the first (*cessationem veteris*)[34].

In reality, the opinion of the author of the *Summa Theologica* is more complex than it may seem at first sight. Recent exegetes of Thomas Aquinas such as Antoine Guggenheim or Matthew Tapie note that he does not promote a "punitive" supersessionism, but an "economic" one, according to the terminology of Kendall Soulen[35]. He does not condemn the Jewish law, but for him the certainty of Christ's fulfillment of the Mosaic rituals makes their observance obsolete[36]. The two covenants are thus in a relationship of perfection and not of suppression: the revelation of the divine word in Christ brings to perfection its expression and transmission in Creation and in the Old Covenant[37]. As Antoine Guggenheim puts it:

> What is perfect is other than the imperfect which announces it, prepares it and figures it, not because it would destroy it, but because it inaugurates its consummation. The indissoluble unity of the imperfect and the perfect characterizes and helps to understand the biblical concepts of old and new and therefore the theological concept of history[38].

For Aquinas, the purpose of the epistle is more ecclesiological than identitarian, since it shows the excellence of Christ who is transmitted to the church[39]. The heart of the argument is Christ's superiority over all other mediators[40].

34. *Quod autem antiquatur et senescit, prope interitum est. Si ergo illud est vetus, abiiciendum est. Lev. c. XXVI, 10: novis supervenientibus, vetera proiicietis. Dicendo ergo novum, designat cessationem veteris.* Thomas de Aquino, *Super Epistolam S. Pauli ad Hebraeos lectura*, ad 8,13, ed. R. Cai, Torino, Marietti, 1953.

35. R.K. Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology*, Minneapolis, MN, Fortress, 1996, p. 30.

36. M.A. Tapie, *Aquinas on Israel and the Church: The Question of Supersessionism in the Theology of Thomas Aquinas*, Eugene, OR, Pickwick, 2014, p. 20.

37. A. Guggenheim, *Jésus-Christ, Grand prêtre de l'ancienne et de la nouvelle Alliance: étude théologique et herméneutique du commentaire de saint Thomas d'Aquin sur l'Épître aux Hébreux* (Thèse de l'École cathédrale), Paris, Parole et Silence, 2004, pp. 728-730.

38. A. Guggenheim, *Le Christ grand prêtre et l'unité de l'ancienne et de la nouvelle alliance dans le commentaire de Saint Thomas d'Aquin sur l'Épître aux Hébreux (8–10)*, in *Revue des Sciences Philosophiques et Théologiques* 87 (2003) 499-523, p. 519 (my translation).

39. F. Ryan, *Thomas Aquinas and the Priesthood of All the Believers: Aquinas' Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, in *Biblica et Patristica Thoruniensia* 9 (2017) 133-148.

40. D. Keating, *Thomas Aquinas and the Epistle to the Hebrews: 'The Excellence of Christ'*, in Laansma – Treier (eds.), *Christology, Hermeneutics, and Hebrews* (n. 31), 84-99.

Another peak of supersessionism could be John Calvin. In his 1559 commentary, the Geneva Reformer speaks incessantly of the *cessatio* or *abrogatio caeremoniae*, the end of Jewish ceremonies, the obsolescence of worship[41]. But a remark he makes in his introduction gives the key to his attack on Jewish worship. Noting that the author to the Hebrews never endeavors to demonstrate that Jesus is the Christ, he concludes that this very author spoke to already converted Jews who have not drawn all the consequences of their adherence to Christ, specifically about their participation in Jewish worship. He adds: "Our business with the Papists is similar in the present day; for they confess with us that Christ is the Son of God, the Redeemer who had been promised to the world: but when we come to the reality, we find that they rob him of more than one half of his power"[42].

Knowing Calvin's constant debates with Catholics on the worship issues, it is clear that the Jews he evokes are only an abstract figure to deal with the far more urgent question of worship. In his commentary on chapter 8, he insists on the uniqueness of the mediation of Christ and on the uniqueness of the priesthood, and concludes with this sentence which expresses the depth of his thought: "let us hence learn that there are no true symbols of religion but those which conform to what Christ requires. We must then take heed, lest we, while seeking to adapt our own inventions to Christ, transfigure him, as the Papists do, so that he should not be at all like himself"[43].

What can we infer from this quick overview? That Hebrews' seemingly substitutionary formulations such as the comparative πλείων in relation to Moses (Heb 3,3), the comparative κρείττων applied to hope (Heb 7,19) or to the covenant (Heb 7,22; 8,6), the comparative τελειότερος applied to the tent (Heb 9,11), the word σκιά (Heb 10,1) were never understood as expressing a superiority relationship? Certainly not. It is easy to find examples of the contrary, such as this violent diatribe of Bede the Venerable commenting on Heb 8,13:

> Is it not that, by the time our Lord appeared, the tongue of the ancient priesthood had to a large extent become mute as regards the spiritual sense

41. See J. CALVIN, *Ioannis Calvini commentarii in epistolam ad Hebraeos*, Genevae, Ioannem Gerardum, 1559, pp. 2, 48-49, 111-113, 121-124, 185, 207-210.

42. *Eiusmodi hodie negocium nobis est cum Papistis. Nobiscum enim fatentur, Christum esse Filium Dei, qui redemptor mundi promissus fuerat. Sed cum ad rem ventum est, eum plusquam dimidia virtutis suae parte nudant. Ibid.*, p. 3.

43. *Hinc discendum est, nulla esse vera religionis symbola nisi quae ad Christum conformantum. Sed cavendum est, ne dum volumus figmenta nostra Christo aptare, ipsum, ut Papistae faciunt transfiguremus: ita ut iam non sit sui similis. Ibid.*, p. 105.

> of the law's teaching, since the scribes and those learned in the law were only concerned with teaching the keeping of the letter of the law? Moreover, in a number of instances, they were even falsifying the letter of the law by substituting their own traditions, as is proven by our Lord's having rebuked them more than once in the Gospels[44].

It remains true, however, that the passage from the Old to the New Covenant constituted a general framework which was not systematically invested with a substitutive aim, but could even be re-semantized, for example, to characterize the relations between the churches of the Reformation and the Catholic Church. As Hannah Arendt had noted, intellectual anti-Judaism was born late, in the eighteenth century, since the Enlightenment despised the Jews in whom they saw the survivors of medieval obscurantism[45]. This hostility can be found in Dom Calmet who evokes with great disdain the "uselessness of legal ceremonies"[46]. The theology of substitution is not where one might expect it to be, and we are far, in any case, from a monolithic use of Hebrews.

2. *An Interpretative Framework Constantly Affected by the Historicity of Understanding*

If the interpretation of Hebrews is affected by the commentator's image of Paul, what happens when he abandons the Pauline authorship? The interpretive framework does not cease to be constantly exposed to the historicity of the interpreter; the commentary on the epistle does not stop answering questions whose scope goes far beyond the simple commentary on what it says. The exegesis of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries demonstrates this over and over again. At that time, scholars had abandoned Pauline auctoriality. After the doubts expressed by Semler and Michaelis at the end of the eighteenth century, giving up on Paul was the great conquest of the nineteenth century, which was accomplished by

44. *Ipso apparente Domino, lingua iam sacerdotii veteris magna ex parte a doctrina sensus spiritalis obmutuerat, solam litteræ custodiam curantibus ac docentibus scribis et legis peritis, immo et ipsam litteram plerisque in locis per suas traditiones corrumpentibus, iuxta quod eis Dominus in Evangelio saepius inproperare probatur?* Beda Venerabilis, *Homeliarum euangelii* II, 20, l. 92-97, ed. D. Hurst (CCSL 122, 1955). Trans. Heen – Krey, *Hebrews* (n. 27), p. 128.

45. H. Arendt, *Antisemitism: Part I of The Origins of Totalitarianism*, New York, Harcourt, 4th ed., 1968, p. 46.

46. "L'inutilité des cérémonies légales". A. Calmet, *Commentaire littéral sur tous les livres de l'ancien et du nouveau Testament*, vol. 20, Paris, Emery, 1730, p. 567.

the central work of Friedrich Bleek[47]. Yet, if all assume that Hebrews could not be by Paul, they do not all give the same coloring to the author's aim, and it is precisely in this nuances that historicity is revealed.

Historically, the first hypothesis on the context of enunciation portrays an undecided community which threatens to fall into apostasy, i.e., to return to Judaism. This is the option taken by Bleek who uses *Rückfall zum Judenthume*[48], by Tholuck who insists on the hesitation of faith[49], and especially by Lünemann and Stuart who speak explicitly of apostasy, as do all their successors: Turner, Delitzsch, Brown, Kendrick, Zahn, Goodspeed, and Wickham[50]. Why such an assumption? The nineteenth century is at the confluence of several seemingly unrelated movements, but stemming from the new worldview that stirred the historical convulsions of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic conquest, as well as the Revolutions of 1848. The ideas of the Enlightenment and their political implementation constituted an undeniable trauma for the churches (not only in the Catholic Church, even if Popes Pius VII and Pius IX were emblematic figures of the reaction), which got the impression of witnessing a profound questioning of their very existence and the beginnings of a disaffection of their adherents. This triggered a large movement of "reconquest", both in the Catholic world and in the Protestant world, both within the countries of old Christendom and overseas. At the time of the missions, the concepts of conversion and apostasy, the consideration of hesitations between cultures, as well as the conviction that the Christian faith is the one and only truth, tended to grow in power.

47. S.J. Baumgarten, *D. Siegmund Jacob Baumgartens Erklärung des Briefes St. Pauli an die Hebräer, mit A.G. Maschens Anmerkungen und Paraphrasi auch J.S. Semlers Beiträgen zu genauerer Einsicht dieses Briefs*, Halle, Gebauer, 1763; J.D. Michaelis, *Einleitung in die göttlichen Schriften des neuen Bundes*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, [4]1788; F. Bleek, *Der Brief an die Hebräer erläutert durch Einleitung, Übersetzung und fortlaufenden Commentar*, vol. 1, Berlin, F. Dümmler, 1828.

48. Bleek, *Hebräer* (n. 47), pp. 63-64.

49. A. Tholuck, *Kommentar zum Briefe an die Hebräer*, Hamburg, Perthes, 1840, pp. 80-82.

50. S.H. Turner, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, New York, Stanford and Swords, 1852, pp. 55-59, 77-82; F. Delitzsch, *Commentar zum Briefe an die Hebräer: Mit archäologischen und dogmatischen Excursen über das Opfer und die Versöhnung*, Leipzig, Dörffling & Francke, 1857, pp. 27, 124, 168, 221-229, 491-509, 695; J. Brown, *Hebrews* (Geneva Series of Commentaries), London, Banner of Truth, 1st ed. 1862, 1972, pp. 178-187, 281-306, 451-487, 609-622; G. Lünemann, *Handbuch über den Hebräerbrief* (KEK, 13.3), Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1867, p. 56; A.C. Kendrick, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (American Commentary on the New Testament), Philadelphia, PA, American Baptist, 1889, pp. 5, 15-22, 77-79, 135-141, 167-172, 180-187; T. Zahn, *Einleitung in das Neue Testament*, vol. 2, Leipzig, G. Böhme, 1897, pp. 25-26; E.J. Goodspeed, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, New York, Macmillan, 1908, pp. 17-18; E.C. Wickham, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, London, Methuen, 1910, pp. xxxviii-xl.

The image of the Hebrew community constructed by the exegetes borrowed its features from contemporary situations, in India or Madagascar, in Quercy or Swabia. The portrait of a sclerotic and archaic Judaism is certainly a continuation of the prejudices of the eighteenth century[51] – they configure the movements pushing for the conversion of European Jews at the time[52] – but they also coincide with the vision of indigenous peoples portrayed as barbarians or village communities described as superstitious. They also correspond to churches that make missionary zeal a touchstone of their faith. The American Moses Stuart (1780-1852), who was one of the guiding figures of the American Protestant foreign missions, is particularly illustrative in this respect. In his commentary, he declares from the second sentence on that the congregation of the Hebrews is in danger of apostasy, and he repeats no less than 54 times the words "apostasy", "defection", "unbelief"[53]. He therefore reads the Epistle to the Hebrews as a model of missionary discourse that must stand firm in the face of the threat of the "natives" falling back into their polytheism.

One hundred years later, the picture is changing. Abandoning apostasy, the commentaries describe the wanderings of a disoriented community; breaking up with the image of a church of relapsed Jews, they sketch the portrait of a misguided congregation seeking their security in the Jewish religion. Here again, a change of historical context explains the change in exegesis. An exegete like James Moffatt bears witness to an epoch experiencing the triumph of scientism and a general decline in morals[54], or believing living such an experience. He depicts a community in which the author's "friends" (his expression) are jaded because they suffer from the ordinary temptations of debauchery, producing a weakening of attachment to God, to which the epistle intends to respond[55]. Nothing is more

51. An excellent demonstration of this end of tolerance in relation to Judaism can be found in Lessing's *Nathan der Weise*, see P.R. ERSPAMER, *The Elusiveness of Tolerance: The "Jewish Question" from Lessing to the Napoleonic Wars* (University of North Carolina Studies in the Germanic Languages and Literatures, 117), Chapel Hill, NC, University of North Carolina Press, 1997.

52. At the end of the century, the "case" Alphonse Ratisbonne is topical, but the movement is broader: J.I. HELFAND, *Passports and Piety: Apostasy in Nineteenth-Century France*, in *Jewish History* 3 (1988) 59-83; P.-E. LANDAU, *Se convertir à Paris au XIX^e siècle*, in *Archives Juives* 35 (2002) 27-43.

53. M. STUART, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, vol. 2, Andover, MA, Codman, 1828, pp. 13, 14, 33, 36, 38, 41, 65, 67, 86, 97-105, 109, 114-118, 137, 144, 146, 151, 237, 241, 244-248, 250, 280, 288-289, 300, 308, 361-366.

54. KOESTER, *"In Many and Various Ways"* (n. 9), p. 303.

55. J. MOFFATT, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (ICC), Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1924, p. xxiii.

characteristic of the 1920s than the impression that immorality is raging and intelligence is disappearing. The proof that Moffatt voices a social vision as much as an exegetical option is his French quotation of the most fashionable author of the time, the anticlerical Anatole France, in a sentence from *The Garden of Epicurus*: "Une chose surtout donne de l'attrait à la pensée des hommes: c'est l'inquiétude. Un esprit qui n'est point anxieux m'irrite ou m'ennuie" ("Here is one thing in especial that gives a charm to men's reflexions – and that is a sense of disquietude. A mind that is not anxious I find either irritating or tiresome"[56]). The general idea that European civilization is going astray for lack of intelligence, because Europe has lost the way to God, permeates late Victorian Anglican circles, and is found in Moffatt's teacher, Alexander Balmain Bruce, who as early as 1899 sees in "free unrestricted access to God" the heart of the message of Hebrews[57]. This feeling is obviously accentuated after the 1914 war, considered as the spiritual collapse of European culture; as evidenced by the famous poem "The Second Coming" by Yeats or Paul Valéry's text, "We civilizations, now know ourselves mortal"[58]. It was clearly expressed by Alexander Nairne who, in 1921, dates the epistle to the 60s CE because it seems to him to manifest the disorientation of a community immersed in war[59].

In Germany at the end of the 1930s, there was a new upheaval. Nazism taking control of the state put the churches in front of a drastic choice: either collaborate with the regime or withdraw into silent opposition. Ernst Käsemann was on the side of the *Bekennende Kirche* (confessing church) resisting Nazism. He saw in chapters 10 to 13 of the Epistle to the Hebrews the heart of the author's message: they portray a suffering, pilgrim and confessing church. For Käsemann, the wandering church in the desert, following the Pathfinder of Faith described in *Das wandernde Gottesvolk* of 1939, forms a metaphor for the resistance to Nazism[60]. For Otto Michel, the situation is much more complex. In his post-war preface (1949), he claims that studying Hebrews was a way for the professor he was to preserve his faith and to be part of the resistance movement:

56. A. FRANCE, *Le Jardin d'Épicure*, Paris, C. Lévy, 1895, pp. 115-116. Translation: ID., *The Garden of Epicurus*, trans. A. ALLINSON, London, J. Lane, 1908, p. 100.

57. A.B. BRUCE, *The Epistle to the Hebrews, the First Apology for Christianity*, Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1899, pp. 15, 66, 272, 317.

58. W.B. YEATS, *The Second Coming*, in *The Dial*, November (1920); P. VALÉRY, *La Crise de l'esprit*, in *Nouvelle revue française* (1er août 1919).

59. A. NAIRNE, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1921, pp. lv-lvi.

60. E. KÄSEMANN, *Das wandernde Gottesvolk: Eine Untersuchung zum Hebräerbrief* (FRLANT, NF 37), Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1939.

> It was especially important to me that my work on the Letter to the Hebrews accompanied the path of the confessing church and the student generation associated with it, who, in all their human breaking and dying, also stood for the unification of this very letter. The new edition remains especially connected to them[61].

The sincerity of this preface is questionable, and it disappears from subsequent editions of the commentary. Michel was indeed a member of the NSDAP since 1933, as were many scholars of Jewish studies in Tübingen, including Adolf Schlatter and Gerhard Kittel[62]. Who are we to judge the depth of his commitment in this troubled period[63]? However, one must examine the reliability of what is said in this preface, given that the first edition of the commentary dates from 1935.

3. *The Exegesis of the Second Half of the Twentieth Century, Forerunner of Our Own*

The same Otto Michel leads us into the third part of this section focusing on the significance of the historical situation of the commentator in the writing of his commentary. After the 1949 edition, his book had a second update (the 10th of vol. 13 of Meyer's series), which expresses a confusion at the turn taken by exegesis in the second half of the twentieth century:

> Even if the new findings from Qumran are only of limited fruitfulness for the understanding of the Letter to the Hebrews, they nevertheless contribute in the present to a closer definition of the basic Jewish-Christian character of our letter. The priestly-cultic character of the Letter to the Hebrews, to which one's attention is drawn anew in the present, is also closely related to older traditions, including certain political decisions of Judaism. The eschatological and original Christian character of the Letter to the Hebrews must not be weakened. All previous stages and preliminary stages of the history of salvation are surpassed by an event that is completely uncultic in

61. "Besonders wichtig war es mir, daß meine Arbeit am Hebräerbrief den Weg der Bekennenden Kirche und der ihr verbundenen studentischen Generation begleitete, die in allem menschlichen Zerbrechen und Sterben auch der Verheizung gerade dieses Briefes standen. Ihnen bleibt die Neuauflage besonders verbunden". O. MICHEL, *Der Brief an die Hebräer* (KEK, 13.8), Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1949, p. iii. Cf. KOESTER, *"In Many and Various Ways"* (n. 9), p. 306.

62. M. MORGENSTERN – R. RIEGER, *Das Tübinger Institutum Judaicum: Beiträge zu seiner Geschichte und Vorgeschichte seit Adolf Schlatter* (Contubernium, 83), Stuttgart, Steiner, 2015. See also M. MORGENSTERN, *Gerhard Kittel (1888-1948) et l'antisémitisme chrétien*, in *Tsafon* 80 (2020) 97-114.

63. R. BRAUN, *"Anpassung oder Widerstand?": Zur Diskussion um Otto Michel und den Nationalsozialismus*, in *Theologische Beiträge* 43 (2012) 290-304.

> a human sense, but contains a final cultic relationship in a divine sense: Jesus' sacrifice on the cross and his ascension to the Father[64].

This was written in 1956, Otto Michel was only 53 years old, but was already part of the previous generation, the one that valued the *sui generis* character of the Christian doctrine and had not renounced the theological discourse inside the historical perspective.

The historicist turn in exegesis, which was not limited to Qumran or Philo of Alexandria (as thought the sometimes overenthusiastic pioneers, Ceslas Spicq, Joseph Coppens, Frederick Fyvie Bruce[65]), but extended to all that is now called "Second Temple Judaism" (as Lincoln Hurst's synthesis recalled half a century later[66]), had one major advantage: it made the author's situation a mirror of the reader of the second half of the twentieth century. Indeed, it portrayed an author living in a world with a plurality of religions, none of which had a monopoly, who performed a skillful syncretism. It matched the multicultural and multi-faith world of the second half of the twentieth century, where the institution of the State of Israel, the East/West confrontation, the decolonization then the nonalignment movements, the feminist then homosexual claims rose against the backdrop of a gradual adjustment of the place of the churches in society. This redefinition made it possible to renounce the primacy of Christian truth and its transcendental origin.

The second half of the twentieth century witnessed a blurring of the usual boundaries between Judaism and Christianity. The address "Hebrews" evaporates, because the subscription is "*in keiner Weise authentisch*" since it appears late in the manuscripts[67]. If it is still to be

64. "Mögen die neuen Funde von Qumran auch nur begrenzt für das Verständnis des Hebräerbriefes fruchtbar sein, so tragen sie doch in der Gegenwart dazu bei, den judenchristlichen Grundcharakter unseres Briefes näher zu bestimmen. Auch der priesterlich-kultische Wesenszug des Hebräerbriefes, auf den man in der Gegenwart aufs neue aufmerksam wird, steht ja in engster Beziehung zu älteren Überlieferungen, auch zu bestimmten politischen Entscheidungen des Judentums. Dabei darf man den eschatologisch-urchristlichen Charakter des Hebräerbriefes nicht abschwächen. Alle bisherigen Stufen und Vorstufen der Heilsgeschichte sind durch ein Geschehnis überboten, das in menschlichem Sinn völlig unkultisch ist, in göttlichem Sinn aber eine letzte kultische Beziehung enthält: Jesu Opfer am Kreuz und sein Hingang zum Vater". O. MICHEL, *Der Brief an die Hebräer* (KEK, 13.12), Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966, p. 6.

65. F.F. BRUCE, *'To the Hebrews' or 'To the Essenes'?*, in *NTS* 9 (1963) 217-232; J. COPPENS, *Les affinités qumrâniennes de l'Épître aux Hébreux*, in *Nouvelle revue théologique* 84 (1962) 128-141 and 257-282.

66. L.D. HURST, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: Its Background of Thought*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990.

67. Cf. E. GRÄSSER, *An die Hebräer: Hebr 1–6* (EKK, 17/1), Zürich, Benziger Verlag; Neukirchen-Vluyn, Neukirchener Verlag, 1990, p. 26.

retained, it is only as a symbolic designation, as Käsemann and Spicq claim[68], to signify a wandering people like the Hebrews in the desert. Or, as Bruce asserts, it refers to an alternative Judaism, which has nothing to do with the normative Judaism represented by the rabbinic tradition; a Judaism which he calls "non-conformist", whose eminent embodiments could be the Essenes and the Qumran community, but not the only ones[69]. But perhaps, like William L. Lane, we should give up defining the very limits of this public. The audience of Hebrews is a group in crisis – one recognizes in it our churches whose principal characteristic seems to be in perpetual crisis – because of a multiplicity of factors which shift the focus of the researchers' interest from the first chapters, as in the exegeses which preceded them, to the last chapters: Delay of the Parousia (10,35-39), social ostracism and impending persecution (12,4; 13,13-14), general decline of enthusiasm and erosion of confidence (3,14; 10,35)[70].

Alternative personalities were chosen, such as the revival of the old hypothesis of Apollos, which was proposed by Luther in a sermon on 1 Corinthians 3 and a lecture of Genesis[71], and of which Feld affirms that nobody knows where he found it[72]. Promoted by Spicq[73], taken up by Montefiore[74] and more recently by Cockerill[75] and Johnson[76] or by Gert Steyn in a colloquium we organized in Louvain-la-Neuve[77], it has a double advantage. On the one hand, even if the figure of Paul has long been neutralized, Apollos still allows us to link the letter to the Pauline universe. On the other hand, as he is a much less well-known character – and accordingly someone to whom much can be attributed – halfway

68. Käsemann, *Das wandernde Gottesvolk* (n. 60), p. 156; C. Spicq, *L'Épître aux Hébreux*. I: *Introduction* (EBib), Paris, Gabalda, ^{3}1952, pp. 243-244.

69. F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (NICNT), Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans, 1964, p. xxix.

70. W.L. Lane, *Hebrews 1–8* (WBC, 47A), Dallas, TX, Word Books, 1991, p. lxii.

71. WA 45 (1911), 389.34-35; 44 (1915), 709.19-20.

72. H. Feld, *Martin Luthers und Wendelin Steinbachs Vorlesungen über den Hebräerbrief: Eine Studie zur Geschichte der neutestamentlichen Exegese und Theologie*, Wiesbaden, Steiner, 1971, pp. 22-34.

73. Spicq, *Hébreux I* (n. 68), pp. 217-219.

74. H. Montefiore, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (BNTC), London, Black, 1964, pp. 9-11.

75. G.L. Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (NICNT), Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans, 2012, p. 9.

76. Johnson, *Hebrews* (n. 4), pp. 40-44.

77. G. Steyn, *Hebrews in an Egyptian Setting?*, in R. Burnet – D. Luciani – G. Van Oyen (eds.), *The Epistle to the Hebrews: Writing at the Borders* (CBET, 85), Leuven – Paris – Bristol, CT, Peeters, 2016, 103-122.

between the Greek and Hebrew worlds, Apollos can become a herald of multiplicity and multiculturalism.

These hesitations are combined in Harold Attridge's careful commentary from 1989. He acknowledges the plurality of potential contexts of *Sitz im Leben* and basically expresses avoidance to take sides, perhaps also a refusal to build an authorial figure and even to construct what he himself calls a scenario[78]. He therefore prefers to retain an existential situation: an author who is himself ignorant, whose knowledge of the disaffection of his addressees is not clear. It is possible that he detected, presumed or feared a rather complex conjuncture, in which various factors were at work.

> From the response he gives to the problem, it would appear that the author conceives of the threat to the community in two broad but interrelated categories, external pressure or "persecution" (10:36–12:13) and a waning commitment to the community's confessed faith. To the first he responds with his stern warnings and his exhortations to faithful discipleship. To the second he proposes a renewed and deepened understanding of the community's confession that will inspire covenant fidelity[79].

The same prudence and existential understanding of the community's situation can be found in Gräßer's commentary, whose description of a fin-de-siècle global church corresponds perfectly to the one of his time:

> Despite occasional direct addresses and concrete allusions (5,11f.; 6,10; 10,32-34; 13,7), we are not confronted with the issues of a specific local church, but with the typical behavior of a general Christianity at the end of the first century, which our author tries to counter, not so much with specific than with "typical" statements, as they are relevant for many churches in (approximately) the third Christian generation (2,3). The power of the beginning has been used up. Therefore, our author seeks to reactivate the tired hope of faith[80].

Gräßer's way of characterizing the purpose of the epistle also takes up themes that would not be disowned by the catechists of the 1990s, who,

78. H.W. ATTRIDGE, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Hermeneia), Philadelphia, PA, Fortress, 1989, p. 12.

79. *Ibid*., p. 13.

80. "Trotz gelegentlicher direkter Anrede und auch konkreter Anspielungen (5,11f.; 6,10; 10,32-34; 13,7) stehen damit gleichwohl nicht die Probleme einer bestimmten Ortsgemeinde, sondern die typischen Verhaltensweisen einer allgemeinen Christlichkeit am Ende des 1. Jh.s vor Augen, denen unser Verf. weniger mit gezielten als mit 'typischen' Aussagen zu begegnen sucht, wie sie 'in (etwa) der dritten christlichen Generation (2,3) für viele Gemeinden von Belang sind'. Die Kraft des Anfangs hat sich verbraucht. Darum sinnt unser Verf. auf Reaktivierung der ermatteten Glaubenshoffnung". GRÄSSER, *Hebr 1–6* (n. 67), p. 26 (my translation).

both in Protestantism and in Catholicism, strove to propose the faith "differently".

> [the author] does not expect [the Faith] from a mere repetition of the old beliefs or by a renewed tractation of the initial reasons (5,12; 6,1), nor from mere slogans of perseverance, but he expects it from a new interpretation of the confession of Christ crucified and exalted[81].

III. What Interpretative Framework for the Twenty-First Century?

This glimpse of the twentieth-century theology allows us to anticipate our conceptual framework at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Indeed, this is the other advantage of a history of reception: it allows us not only to specify where we are starting from, but also to take a step back on our practice, to try to grasp its perspective. We shall retain three elements: the importance of the diversity of Judaism as a solution to the problem of supersessionism, the comeback of the author and the return of theological questions.

1. *Diversity in Judaism as a Solution to the Problem of Supersessionism*

Historical studies begun in the 1950s have continued their work of blurring boundaries and identities; we live in a world that is no longer merely multicultural, but also multiconvictional, multi-identitarian, to which the multiplication of possible influences for Hebrews refers. This situation of hybridity allows us to resolve the question we began to ask at the start of this article – the supersessionism of Hebrews. Indeed, while the distancing from antisemitism began as early as the 1950s and culminated for instance in the Catholic world with the declaration *Nostra Aetate*, the full awareness of the Shoah widespread during the 1970s and became prevalent until the mid-1980s[82], making the very concept of supersessionism intolerable. Based on the historical data which reveal a deeply diverse Judaism experiencing many controversies (including

81. "Er verspricht sie sich nicht von einer bloßen Wiederholung der alten Glaubenssätze bzw. durch ein erneutes Traktieren der Anfangsgründe (5,12; 6,1), auch nicht von bloßen Durchhalteparolen, sondern er verspricht sie sich von einer Neuauslegung des Bekenntnisses zum gekreuzigten und erhöhten Christus". *Ibid.* (my translation).

82. N. Weill – A. Wieviorka, *La construction de la mémoire de la Shoah: les cas français et israélien*, in A. Kaspi (ed.), *Les Cahiers de la Shoah I. Conférences et séminaires sur l'histoire de la Shoah*, Paris, Liana Levi, 1994, 163-191.

those concerning the Temple and the practice of sacrifice[83]), Pamela Eisenbaum and Richard Hays dismiss any intention of supersessionism on the part of the author to the Hebrews, preferring to compare it with the sectarian functioning of Judaism, in which everyone polemicized, reconciled, or excommunicated one another[84]. This intuition can also be found in Philip Church's book contesting the relapse theory. More than Jews in the process of returning to their ancient worship, Hebrews' audience was composed of Christians who did not enter a cultic perspective. The eschaton comes in the present, God already dwells on Earth, and the people have access to it from the place where they stand[85]. Pamela Eisenbaum makes the somewhat provocative proposal that the "Judaism" described by the author to the Hebrews, with its high priests, sanctuaries and cults, could not be the concrete Judaism, but rather a symbolic and utopian representation of it[86]. This clears the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews of the accusation of being a supporter of the substitution; he is only one of the participants in a vast movement of intra-sectarian polemics present throughout Second Temple Judaism[87].

It is worth mentioning that this vision of a highly competitive plural Judaism has more than just the advantage of addressing the issue of supersessionalism. It also makes it possible to describe an interfaith world in which the various religious convictions are in a kind of competition. Of course, such an interpretive context is perfectly suited to the

83. J. KLAWANS, *Purity, Sacrifice, and the Temple: Symbolism and Supersessionism in the Study of Ancient Judaism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006.

84. R.B. HAYS, *"Here We Have No Lasting City": New Covenantalism in Hebrews*, in R. BAUCKHAM – D.R. DRIVER – T.A. HART – N. MACDONALD (eds.), *The Epistle to the Hebrews and Christian Theology*, Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans, 2009, 151-173; P. EISENBAUM, *Locating Hebrews within the Literary Landscape of Christian Origins*, in G. GELARDINI (ed.), *Hebrews: Contemporary Methods, New Insights* (BIS, 75), Leiden – Boston, MA, Brill; Atlanta, GA, Society of Biblical Literature, 2008, 213-237; A.C. MITCHELL, *"A Sacrifice of Praise": Does Hebrews Promote Supersessionism?*, in E.F. MASON – K.B. MCCRUDEN (eds.), *Reading the Epistle to the Hebrews: A Resource for Students* (SBLRBS, 66), Atlanta, GA, Society of Biblical Literature, 2011, 251-268. The idea had already been expressed by S. LEHNE, *The New Covenant in Hebrews* (JSNT.S, 44), Sheffield, JSOT Press, 1990.

85. P.A.F. CHURCH, *Hebrews and the Temple: Attitudes to the Temple in Second Temple Judaism and in Hebrews* (NT.S, 171), Leiden – Boston, MA, Brill, 2017, p. 434. Same perspective in A.C. MITCHELL, *Hebrews* (Sacra Pagina, 13), Collegeville, MN, Liturgical Press, 2007, pp. 11-13.

86. P. EISENBAUM, *Ritual and Religion, Sacrifice and Supersession: A Utopian Reading of Hebrews*, in GELARDINI – ATTRIDGE (eds.), *Hebrews in Contexts* (n. 9), 343-354.

87. See on this topic L. KIM, *Polemic in the Book of Hebrews: Anti-Semitism, Anti-Judaism, Supersessionism?*, Eugene, OR, Pickwick, 2006; P.J. TOMSON, *Les sources culturelles de l'Épître aux Hébreux et notre carte du monde antique*, in BURNET – LUCIANI – VAN OYEN (eds.), *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (n. 77), 21-52.

first quarter of the twenty-first century, and many interpreters point to the relevance of the epistle as it attempts to resist the versatility of the community[88].

2. *The Return of the Author and His Ethos*

The emphasis on the multiplicity of identities does not only affect the general framework and the recipients of the epistle; it also concerns its author. With Roland Barthes and Michel Foucauld, we had left the author, if not dead, at least painfully dying. But the turn of the millennium has resurrected him, as Kristina Busse explains in a reflection on media auctoriality. Auctorial identity is once again a crucial point in postmodernity, since recovering an identity and a voice is precisely what those who do not occupy the famous dominant position of upper-middle class, white, male, straight, able-bodied, cisgender, are focused on[89]. As Nancy Miller clarifies:

> The postmodernist decision that the Author is Dead and the subject along with him does not … necessarily hold for women, and prematurely forecloses the question of agency for them[90].

It is therefore appropriate to be post-postmodern and to add the political need to establish identities and to speak with voices that had been mostly silenced in Western culture to the indispensable critique of the centralist principles of modernity. This justifies the return of the author. The author is no longer the creator of the author's intention, but the place where the author's identity gives the writing an ethical impulse, a moral character[91]. We thus witness since a few years not one, but several resurrections of auctorial functions, according to the words of Jakob

88. For E. McKnight and C. Church, the community experience a "crisis of commitment": E.V. McKnight – C.L. Church, *Hebrews-James* (Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary), Macon, GA, Smyth & Helwys, 2004, pp. 13-14. See also: D.J. Harrington, *The Letter to the Hebrews* (New Collegeville Bible, 11), Collegeville, MN, Liturgical Press, 2006, p. 8; J. Thompson, *Hebrews* (Paideia), Grand Rapids, MI, Baker Academic, 2008, pp. 6-10; M. Healy, *Hebrews* (Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture), Grand Rapids, MI, Baker Academic, 2016, p. 30.

89. K. Busse, *The Return of the Author: Ethos and Identity Politics*, in J. Gray – D. Johnson (eds.), *A Companion to Media Authorship*, Malden, MA, Wiley Blackwell, 2013, 48-68, p. 55.

90. N.K. Miller, *Changing the Subject: Authorship, Writing, and the Reader*, in Ead., *Subject to Change: Reading Feminist Writing* (Gender and Culture), New York, Columbia University Press, 1988, 102-122, p. 106.

91. Busse, *Return of the Author* (n. 89).

Stougaard-Nielsen or Sandra Heinen[92]. Our time, so eager for the use of the first person singular, seems incompatible with a death of the one who, *par excellence*, can speak, the author. The works of David DeSilva and Garreth Cockerill[93] are in this respect particularly archetypal since they assimilate the community of the author to an oppressed minority: the task that the author has assigned himself is to detach them from the social pressure[94]. The recipients have undergone a rigorous process of socialization into the mindset of the Christian sect and have experienced ritual and ecstatic markers of transition from their former identity and status to achieve their new identity as sanctified "people of God". The rejection of their former values and affiliations, however, has provoked significant reactions from their non-Christian neighbors[95]. The challenge facing the community is not imminent persecution or heretical subversion, but rather a crisis of commitment brought on by the difficulties of remaining honorless in the world for long periods. The believers have lost their status and esteem in the eyes of those around them, and the author seeks to restore their place in society[96].

In the colloquium I mentioned earlier in Louvain-la-Neuve, we agreed on the importance of considering this plurality of identities to understand the Epistle to the Hebrews, and, consequently, the centrality of the notion of frontier in defining it. The late Ellen Aitken and Gabriella Gelardini had made us aware of the question of liminality and the "third-space" necessary to map the world in which the author moves[97].

92. J. Stougaard-Nielsen, *The Author in Literary Theory and Theories of Literature*, in I. Berensmeyer *et al*. (eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Literary Authorship*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019, 253-269; S. Heinen, *Exegesis without Authorial Intention? On the Role of the "Author Construct" in Text Interpretation*, in C. Breu (ed.), *Biblical Exegesis without Authorial Intention? Interdisciplinary Approaches to Authorship and Meaning* (BIS, 172), Leiden – Boston, MA, Brill, 2019, 7-23.

93. Cockerill, *Hebrews* (n. 75), pp. 17-18.

94. D.A. DeSilva, *Despising Shame: Honor Discourse and Community Maintenance in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (SBLDS, 21), Atlanta, GA, Society of Biblical Literature, 2008, pp. 341-342.

95. D.A. DeSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle "to the Hebrews"* , Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans, 2000, p. 11.

96. *Ibid*., p. 18. Ethnic questions could have played a role as proposed by S. Kissi – E. Van Eck, *Ethnic Reasoning in Social Identity of Hebrews: A Social-Sientific Study*, in *HTS Theological Studies* 73/3 (2017); A.R. Brunsdon – C. Magezi, *Fostering Embracement, Inclusion and Integration of Migrants in Complex Migration Situations: A Perspective from Matthew 25:31-46 and Hebrews 13:1-2*, in *HTS Theological Studies* 76/2 (2020).

97. E.B. Aitken, *Life on the Frontier: The Transformation of Liminality in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, in Burnet – Luciani – Van Oyen (eds.), *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (n. 77), 205-228; G. Gelardini, *Existence beyond Borders: The Book of Hebrews and Critical Spatiality*, *ibid*., 186-204.

This return of the author through his ethos, i.e., his rhetorical projection, also permits us to adapt the text of Hebrews to postmodernity, whose respect for all opinions and identities does not sit well with divisive positions. And what could be more divisive than the exclamation of Heb 10,31, "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God"? To overcome this difficulty, the ancient hypothesis of Immanuel Berger from the end of the eighteenth century[98] is taken up by Gabriela Gelardini[99], who allows us to solve part of the problems by admitting that we are confronted with rhetorical exaggeration. We are dealing with the rhetoric of the σύγκρισις and the ἐγκώμιον, as Jerome Neyrey puts it, which implies a certain hindsight on how things are formulated[100].

3. *The Comeback of Theological Questions*

The postmodern reclaiming of the author paradoxically grants the comeback of strong hypotheses about his theology that the historicist turn of the 1950s had for a time discarded. Being a minority voice, the speaker assumed a particular theology within the universe of Second Temple Judaism, and made heard that "theological voice" of which we spoke at the very beginning of this article. The return of auctoriality allows scholars to reconsider the balance between participation in the intellectual world of the Second Temple and individual speech. The *auctor ad Hebraeos* stands halfway between the authorial figure from the late 1950s and the genius of an inspired author producing *sui generis* a theology in accordance with the divine design of the ancient theologians. This new acquiescence to theology explains the multiplication of meetings on the theology of Hebrews, I am thinking specifically of those led by Richard Bauckham, Gabriella Gelardini and Harold Attridge, Jon Laansma and David Treier, and David Moffitt[101]: this *Colloquium Biblicum* is, of course, part of this effort.

98. I. Berger, *Der Brief an die Hebräer, eine Homilie*, in *Göttingische Bibliothek der neuesten theologischen Literatur* 3 (1797) 449-469.

99. G. Gelardini, *Verhärtet eure Herzen nicht: Der Hebräer, eine Synagogenhomilie zu Tischa be-Aw* (BIS, 83), Leiden – Boston, MA, Brill, 2007.

100. J.H. Neyrey, *Syncrisis and Encomium: Reading Hebrews through Greek Rhetoric*, in *CBQ* 82 (2020) 276-299.

101. R. Bauckham (ed.), *A Cloud of Witnesses: The Theology of Hebrews in Its Ancient Contexts* (LNTS, 387), London, T&T Clark, 2008; Id. *et al.* (eds.), *The Epistle to the Hebrews and Christian Theology* (n. 84); Laansma – Treier (eds.), *Christology, Hermeneutics, and Hebrews* (n. 31), pp. xvi, 264; Gelardini – Attridge, *Hebrews in Contexts* (n. 9).

As an individual utterance, the Epistle to the Hebrews can be compared to other statements such as those expressed in the Israelite and New Testament Scriptures, but it must also be evaluated from a postmodern perspective as they relate to our present. To reconnect with the theological questions of Hebrews and present them as a "challenge" to modern theology, as Luke Timothy Johnson proposes[102], is at the heart of the current way of doing theology. The results obtained are not considered in a form of systematism, as a kind of *summa theologica*, but rather as a series of challenges. Concerning God, the ancient problem of the supernatural is handled afresh. Does God keep the worlds in order through his word? Does God continue to speak through the Scriptures? Does God intervene to renovate human nature? Brian Small's research understanding God as a *persona* that should be characterized deals extensively with these issues[103]. With regard to Christ, it is obviously the role of suffering that is questioned, but also, as David Moffitt has examined at length in his book, that of the Resurrection[104]. The problem of the two natures is also a difficulty, which Johnson articulates in a perfectly postmodern way as a challenge to the reader in relation to his own experience:

> In the heart of the human Jesus, Hebrews leads the reader to imagine, God increasingly took occupation, carving an ever greater space for God's own presence and freedom. To put it another way, the divine within Jesus progressively found more explicit expression through the freedom of the human person Jesus[105].

There is one last way, which is advanced by Lietzmann's dazzling formula taken up by Gräßer:

> The main theme of Heb is the "theological expansion of the Passion consideration" into a heavenly cult mystery in which the atonement is central[106].

The contributions in this book show the diversity of these theological perspectives.

102. JOHNSON, *Hebrews* (n. 4), pp. 45-60.

103. B.C. SMALL, *The Characterization of Jesus in the Book of Hebrews* (BIS, 128), Leiden – Boston, MA, Brill, 2014.

104. D.M. MOFFITT, *Atonement and the Logic of Resurrection in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (NT.S, 141), Leiden – Boston, MA, Brill, 2011.

105. JOHNSON, *Hebrews* (n. 4), p. 54.

106. "Hauptthema des Hebr ist die 'theologische Ausweitung der Passionsbetrachtung' hin zu einem himmlischen Kultmysterium, bei dem das Sühnegeschehen im Mittelpunkt steht". H. LIETZMANN, *Geschichte der alten Kirche*, vol. 1, Berlin, De Gruyter, ^{2}1937, p. 218; GRÄSSER, *Hebr 1–6* (n. 67), p. 25.

Tell me who the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews is and I will tell you how you understand it. In order to interpret this puzzling writing, every commentator must hypothesize about the conditions of its production, that is to say, who the author is, what his community is, what difficulties they face, and therefore why the author writes. The reconstruction of this enunciative framework expresses above all the historical situation of the interpreter. These assumptions cannot be ignored. As the examples of Bengel and Vanhoye prove, pretending to dispense with these premises does not preserve from the impact of the context of interpretation. Making the history of the readings of the Epistle to the Hebrews is making the history of the historical situation of the interpreters themselves. The first centuries constructed the figure of Paul as a theologian whom they enlisted in their Christological controversies. Contrary to a well-established prejudice, the supersessionist reading was late and in the minority. The nineteenth century abandoned Pauline authorship and imagined a community of addressees echoing the Christian communities emerging from the trauma of the Enlightenment: illuminated by the light of Christian truth, but tempted to return to their old beliefs. When these nineteenth-century exegetes speak of a "return to Judaism", they mean not only the Jewish religion understood in an essentialist way, but also the polytheism of the African or Asian peoples encountered by the missionaries, and even the socialist ideas that pastors and priests in Europe tried vainly to eradicate. The beginning of the twentieth century is more anxious: commentators depicted a disoriented community of addressees, mirroring the questions of this first part of the century. Käsemann's great book, *Das wandernde Gottesvolk*, expresses the wandering of his church persecuted by Nazism. From the 1960s onwards, scholars saw in the addressees of the Epistle to the Hebrews a cosmopolitan milieu with blurred boundaries that suited their age of protest and challenging certainties.

What is the image being built at the beginning of the twenty-first century? Today's exegesis constructs a multicultural community (which makes it possible to solve the old question of supersessionalism) which is addressed by an author who has regained his stature and who does not hesitate to deal boldly with theological questions. This is the approach taken in the seventieth meeting of the *Colloquium Biblicum Lovaniense*. However, a final remark should temper this picture. If current research seems to be articulated around these three directions, it would not be appropriate to ignore the return of the old vocabulary of reversion to ancient beliefs. This is not always expressed in academic publications, but in pastoral commentaries which do not hesitate to speak of

apostasy[107]. It would be wrong to see in these terms merely conservative language. As in previous centuries, this vocabulary is above all the sign of a deep anxiety towards a world in which the churches are seeking their place and in which the faithful believe that the rigorous discourse of the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews will serve as a bulwark against ideas that offend or confuse them.

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107. For instance D. WILSON, *Hebrews through New Eyes: Christ and His Rivals*, Monroe, LA, Athanasius Press, 2008; D.B. MCWILLIAMS, *Hebrews* (Lectio Continua Expository Commentary on the New Testament), Powder Springs, GA, Tolle Lege, 2015.