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THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS

EDITED BY

RÉGIS BURNET

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INTRODUCTION

For its seventieth edition, the *Colloquium Biblicum Lovaniense* focused on the theology of the Letter to the Hebrews. This testifies to the profound change in the way exegetes look at this Epistle. At least in two ways. Firstly, this is the first time that the *Colloquium Biblicum* has been devoted entirely to the Epistle. Of course, this does not mean that the text has never been discussed in the past 70 years. But it shows the special status of the Letter, its peripheral position, somewhat on the edge of the canon, since it is not a Gospel, it is outside the Pauline corpus, it does not have the magnetism of the Apocalypse and, above all, it develops a complex message. The “new perspective” had to develop before we could really grasp the extent to which this text is rooted in the Judean context. Second, the questioning of the theology of Hebrews also reflects a change in the way we look at the text. Whereas the questioning has long focused on historical issues such as the determination of the author or the place of the letter in the “parting of the ways”, it is only recently that the text has been considered for itself, as the work of an original theologian and writer of great talent.

In his presidential address, *Régis Burnet* reviews the history of readings of Hebrews in order to take stock of its exegesis. He shows the considerable influence of the interpreter’s decision regarding the author and the purpose of the Epistle. For a long time, the attribution of the Epistle to Paul led to it being regarded as a supersessionist document (“leaving Judaism” to found “Christianity”). With the abandonment of Pauline authorship, everyone was tempted to read into it the preoccupations of their own time: the danger of falling back into apostasy in the missionary discourses of the nineteenth century, the fear of moral decline in the 1920s, the metaphor of resistance to Nazism in Käsemann’s famous book *Das wandernde Gottesvolk* (1939). At the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, a new way of looking at the text emerged. Recognition of the diversity of Judaism provided a solution to the problem of supersessionism, while the Epistle came increasingly to be seen as a literary, rhetorical text with a distinct theological voice.

Harold Attridge analyses the use of intertextuality in the Epistle to the Hebrews. For the *auctor ad Hebraeos*, Scripture is truly the voice of God. But that does not mean he does not use it creatively: making connections between passages is the way to hear the message of Scripture. He reads

Scripture with a Christological lens and can combine texts and make connections between different corpora. For example, Psalm 40 is read in the light of Jeremiah and Exodus in Hebrews 9, or Ps 110,4 in the light of Gen 14,17-20 in Hebrews 8. H. Attridge concludes that this use of Scripture plays a direct role in the work of engaging and inspiring the addressees: the audience is led to witness a dialogue between the Father and the Son, to hear the voice of the Holy Spirit, to become part of the heavenly polyphony.

Drawing on the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, *Gabriella Gelardini* shows that in ancient times people were not only aware that they inhabited the earth (γῆ), but also believed that they lived in χθών, the outside of the lower world, or the earth from the surface down. This belief established a link with the world of the dead and united the present with the past. She draws two conclusions from this. First, the omnipresence of the dead in Hebrews: the author devotes the whole of chapter 11 to praising the virtue of the ancestors. This allows him to contrast the righteous behavior of the dead with the lack of virtue of his audience, especially because they are impatient and have lost the virtue of hope. The *anamnesis* is therefore the remedy for the lack of virtue. On the other hand, G. Gelardini proposes a challenging comparison between cosmology and ethics. The incorporation of the dead into the world in which the living ones also find themselves, and the hope of seeing them reunited in heaven, links past, present and future in a vast ethical movement. What cosmology can do ethically on the vertical axis, remembrance or commemoration can do on the horizontal axis.

Steeve Bélanger's article, the result of a workshop he coordinated, shows that the figure of Melchizedek has enjoyed a rich reception in various religious, spiritual and esoteric communities. Using a multidisciplinary approach that combines textual and iconographic analysis, he presents some milestones in the reception of the figure of Melchizedek from antiquity to the present day. Bélanger focuses above all on the textual reception of the figure of Melchizedek in Jewish and Christian communities between the second century BCE and the end of the second century CE. By way of conclusion he also adds some contemporary echoes of the reception of the Melchizedek figure, notably in René Guénon's "Primordial Tradition" and in the cosmogony of *Urantia*. In annex, Bélanger summarizes contributions by members of the workshop paying attention to various aspects of the reception history of Melchizedek.

Jason A. Whitlark focuses on the political thought of the author of Hebrews. Contrasting its statements with the imperial discourse of the time, J. Whitlark shows that the homilist's aim is to give his listeners an

identity in a heavenly *polis*, to make them citizens living under the constitution of the new covenant prophesied by Jeremiah. This contradicts imperial Rome's claims to an unattainable utopian past. J. Whitlark concludes with an actualization: the Letter to the Hebrews has implications for modern refugees, who can have hope that the coming city of God is not closed to them and that, thanks to the fulfilment of the new covenant through Jesus, they too can become citizens of a better *polis*.

Thomas Witulski continues this political interrogation by extending it to time and space. He shows that Hebrews combines the two categories of space and time to ground his Christology and soteriology. The two concepts are combined to show that the Christ event has a salvific capacity in every place and time. The figure of Melchizedek makes it possible to construct a dialectic between temporality and what Th. Witulski calls "over-temporality" (*Überzeitlichkeit*). This ontological synthesis finds its ultimate fulfilment in eschatology.

Eric Mason devotes his article to the key discussions in Hebrews about faith, faithfulness and unfaithfulness. The author exhorts his audience to unwavering perseverance, inspired by the faithfulness of Jesus. Through his own experience in human flesh, Jesus was prepared, or "made perfect", to serve as the heavenly high priest who prepares the entrance of his people into God's presence by offering himself as a sacrifice of atonement. Jesus' priestly ministry – and ultimately human faithfulness – is based on the absolute faithfulness of God, whose glorious purposes for humanity can only be realized by those who remain faithful to the end.

David M. Moffitt complicates the common understanding of the soteriology of the text. A first reading would suggest that Hebrews draws heavily on the Pentateuch, especially the story of the Passover and the exodus into the desert, to explain salvation as the future attainment of the inheritance that God promises his people. But how is it possible to understand the wandering through the actual space and time of the desert? It runs counter to the contrast that Hebrews draws between present access to heavenly realities and future salvation through the return of Jesus to his people. We must assume, then, that Hebrews does not see the ascension of the soul to heaven as the final hope of the people of God, but rather as a feature of the present time that should give the church hope and encouragement to persevere in their reunion with one another and in their commitment to their confession of Jesus. Salvation, on the other hand, is the inheritance of a reality that is not yet fully accessible. The present time, with its access to the heavenly realms, is only the penultimate stage of salvation. This interpretation helps us to understand the

tension often noted between present access and future salvation. Deeply influenced by the cosmologies, anthropologies, and eschatological hopes of Jewish apocalyptic texts, the Letter to the Hebrews formulates the belief in Jesus' ascension and entry into the world to come.

Brian C. Small shows that the text characterizes God as a God who communicates. Throughout the epistle he notes the many instances of this communication and shows the complexity of the portrait of God. While God has communicated with humanity over many centuries, in a fragmentary way and by various means, he has finally done so through his ultimate revelation, his Son. God's extraordinary efforts testify to his desire to communicate with humanity, but with the reciprocal requirement of a response of faith and obedience. Ignoring God's communication will have disastrous consequences. The frightening portrait of God that emerges from the warning passages is that of a wrathful, angry, vengeful God who judges and punishes those who disregard his word and respond with disobedience, sin, and unbelief. However, this portrait of God is counterbalanced by other passages that reference God's communication. He is a God who makes promises and fulfils them. This complex portrait of God is a part of the author's rhetorical strategy. On the one hand, the terrifying portrait of God he paints in the warning passages is used to instill fear in his audience to dissuade them from falling away. On the other hand, the more reassuring portrait of God that the author paints in other parts of the discourse is designed to instill confidence in the audience to persevere in their faith.

Gert J. Steyn clarifies his previous contributions on the question of the auctorality of Hebrews. Taking up the very first testimony concerning the identity of the *auctor ad Hebraeos*, that of Clement of Rome, who claims that the author is Paul, G. Steyn confirms that for him it can only be an author from Pauline circles. He then constructs a kind of "sketch" of the author: he has a "Judeo-Hellenistic" profile, he has a very specific hermeneutic and he has links with Paulinism. The peculiarities of the document, in particular the use of the first-person plural, bring it closer to the *First Letter of Clement*. Moreover, the proximity of the themes present in Hebrews and *I Clement* may suggest that the readership is the same and comes from the Corinthian region. If this is the case, we still do not know who the author was, but Clement of Rome might suggest a connection with Rome and Corinth.

Joseph Verheyden undertakes a lexicographical analysis of the use of the privative α in Hebrews. After an overview of the expression of negation in the New Testament, a survey of how grammars characterize the use of the privative α , an analysis of some examples drawn from

Aeschylus, and a study of the occurrence of this vocabulary in the New Testament, he offers an analysis of particularly salient passages from the first four chapters of Hebrews (Heb 1,9; 2,2-4; 2,8; 3,12-19; 4,6.11.13). This allows him to conclude that this usage is not simply an imitation of the Old Testament or a mere stylistic embellishment, but serves to strengthen an argument or express the apodictic character of God's plan for humanity.

Starting from the assertion of Heb 4,12 that "the living ... is the word of God", *Antoine Paris* redefines Julia Kristeva's concept of the "productivity" of the text, extending its scope to intertextuality and the meaning of words. On the basis of this revised concept, the article then proposes to consider the life of the word embodied in the Letter to the Hebrews in two ways: as the transformation of the text into an oral word open to dialogue with the readers, as if the text were its interlocutor; as the partial transformation of the text into a person and, conversely, of persons into texts.

Martin Karrer achieves the *tour de force* of articulating textual criticism and theology by arguing that the manuscripts represent a reception of the texts in the same way as the commentaries or uses of the text by the Church Fathers. His close analysis of the manuscripts leads to the following conclusions. Firstly, Hebrews is very well preserved in the papyri, demonstrating its central importance in Egyptian Christianity, and well preserved in the uncials, confirming its central place in the canon, far from the somewhat marginal place the text occupies in our contemporary perception. Secondly, the thesis that Hebrews owes its place in the canon to its inclusion in the Pauline collection is inaccurate, since the text was recopied independently or included in third-party collections. Similarly, critical editions of the text need to be revised: the history of editing has exacerbated the reproach of the patriarchs of Israel in Heb 3,16, whereas the important variant of Heb 1,1 shows that the author urges his hearers to identify themselves with the fathers and mothers of Israel; the combination of Melchizedek's Christology with the memory of Samuel in Heb 7,1-2 is secondary but theologically interesting; the evaluation of the law in Heb 10,1 needs to be re-examined. Finally, certain questions which have been the subject of lengthy research (notably the adventitious character of Hebrews 13) and classical dogmatic questions (the harshness of the theology of penitence or the Christological formulation of Heb 3,1ff.) have left no significant traces in the history of the text.

During the *Colloquium Biblicum* several short papers were presented, four of which have been selected. *Valentina Duca* presented the commentary on the Letter to the Hebrews by Isaac of Nineveh (seventh century):

a spiritual commentary that uses the letter to translate a contemplative experience. Isaac insists on the value of the fragile flesh through which salvation takes place and defines faith as an inner and intimate “persuasion”, a state of trust that indicates a different way of knowing than that of reason. *Vadim Wittkowski* proposes to relate Hebrews to two recently published sixth-century Christian inscriptions found at Ancyra (Mitchell-French 347-348). These present a list of biblical models (*exempla biblica*), which is certainly influenced by Hebrews. *Jean Valentin* studies the Arabic translations of the Epistle, focusing on two passages (Heb 1,1-4 and Heb 2,9) and comparing the lessons of the ms. Vat. Ar. 13 with the Greek and Syriac. He concludes that this version was probably translated from the Greek. *Armin Kummer* explains that the enigmatic expression κοίτη ἀμίαντος (Heb 13,4b) does not refer to extramarital sex, but intramarital sexual practices informed by the discourse of sexual purity prominent in Second Temple Judaism. Indeed, sexual purity practices inspired by Leviticus 15 were a major concern in Second Temple Judaism at the time Hebrews was written, and despite the gradual emergence of a distinct group identity among Christ followers, sexual purity practices were not an area in which they distinguished themselves early on from other Jewish communities.

This seventieth meeting of the *Colloquium Biblicum Lovaniense* was held from 22 to 24 July 2021, in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic. We were therefore forced to hold it online. My thanks go to the *Colloquium* Secretary, Professor Reimund Bieringer, for the extraordinary efforts he had to make, with the help of many of his KU Leuven students, to ensure that the *Colloquium* ran smoothly.

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