

A NEW COVENANT HERMENEUTIC: THE USE OF SCRIPTURE IN HEBREWS 8–10

Steven K. Stanley¹

It is impossible to study Hebrews in any depth without considering its use of Scripture. In Hebrews the relationship between the old and the new is a foundational theme, and this relationship is inextricably intertwined with the relationship between New Covenant believers and Old Covenant Scripture. The book of Hebrews speaks more directly to the question of the significance of Old Covenant Scripture in the New Covenant age than any other in the New Testament. Because of this, it is an important source for determining how (at least one leader in) the early church viewed and utilised Scripture.

The author of Hebrews (henceforth 'the author') states plainly and categorically that the Old Covenant is obsolete and that his readers are no longer under its authority. At the same time, he confidently applies Old Covenant Scripture to his readers and their New Covenant situation, accepting its authority as the word of God. This tension generates an obvious question: If the Old Covenant is obsolete in the view of the author, how can he use Old Covenant Scripture as if his readers are under its authority? Answering this question provides insight into the way the author views the Old Covenant and its institutions as well as the hermeneutic that guides his use of Scripture. (I use the word 'hermeneutic' to refer to the method used by the author in his interpretation of Scripture, including the contribution of his theology and exegetical method to his interpretive task.) This study is not the first to ask this type of question in relation to Hebrews, but it is the first to base its investigation on a detailed analysis of the

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central chapters of the book, where the backbone of its theology is worked out.

For the author, Scripture is the word of God, and its message has as much authority for his Christian readers as it did for its original, Old Covenant readers, even if its application is different in the new, Christian situation. The main contributions of Hebrews to New Testament theology are easily discernible: the priesthood of Christ is developed only here in the New Testament, and, more than any other book of the New Testament, Hebrews expounds the relationship between the Old and New Covenant economies, and in this process comes nearest to defining the relevance of Old Covenant Scripture for New Covenant believers. In the structure of Hebrews, both the priestly work of Christ and the relationship between the old and new ages are developed most extensively in chapters 8–10, the three chapters that, as argued in *Chapter One*, contain the theological climax and the paraenetic core of Hebrews. A close reading of these chapters, therefore, with a view to discovering how the author uses Scripture in the development of his argument, provides valuable information regarding not only the author's use of Scripture, but also the hermeneutic which underlies it. Although the author never offers an explicit statement of the relevance of Old Covenant Scripture to New Covenant believers, his own use of Scripture in the light of what he says about the Old Covenant and its institutions, especially in Hebrews 8–10, provides many clues to the discovery of the hermeneutic he employs. Concentrating on these chapters in view of their centrality to the theology and message of the book, makes a significant contribution to understanding the use of Scripture in Hebrews as a whole, and provides a more detailed exegetical base from which to draw conclusions.

Chapter One suggests an approach to determining the structure of Hebrews and argues that Hebrews 8–10 constitute the theological heart and paraenetic core of the book or homily. *Chapter Two* investigates the use of Scripture in Hebrews 8:1–13, with its allusion to Psalm 110:1, 4 and its citations of Exodus 25:40 and Jeremiah 31:31–34. This chapter asserts that Hebrews 8 serves as an introduction to the material in Hebrews 9 and 10, setting out the three main topics dealt with in detail in these

chapters under the rubric of the priestly work of Christ: sanctuary, sacrifice and covenant. *Chapter Three* works through the main theological section of Hebrews 9:1–10:18, in which the old and new sanctuaries, sacrifices and covenants are compared. In this section our author alludes to various passages in the Pentateuch and to Psalm 110, utilises quotations from Exodus 24:8 and Psalm 40:6–8 and re-quotes with modifications part of the Jeremiah 31 passage he used in Hebrews 8. *Chapter Four* completes the exegetical task with its examination of Hebrews 10:19–39, a section of paraenesis that grows out of the preceding theological discussion of Christ's superior priestly ministry. The practical application in this section includes both encouragement and warning, and for this the author relies on reference to the law of Moses, citations from Deuteronomy 32:35, 36 and Habakkuk 2:3, 4 and the possible citation of three words from Isaiah 26:20 (LXX). *Chapter Five* concludes the study by describing matters relevant to the author's use of Scripture in Hebrews 8–10, largely matters having come to light in the exegesis of those chapters such as textual issues, technical concerns—including the introduction of quotations and the influence of contemporary Jewish interpretation—and theological presuppositions. From this, certain hermeneutical principles underlying the author's use of Scripture emerge, supporting a framework of prophetic, typological and universal fulfilment.

The author clearly asserts that the Old Covenant is obsolete. How, then, can he rely on Old Covenant Scripture as an important source for his message, and how can he rely on its authority to strengthen his persuasive power with Christian readers? The answer is that the author understands the Old Covenant as fulfilled in the New Covenant and the Christ-event, and Old Covenant Scripture as fulfilled in the age of the New Covenant. Furthermore, for the author, it is impossible to understand or appreciate fully the significance of the spiritual realities of the New Covenant, the Christ-event or the relationship between God and his New Covenant people apart from their concrete prefigurements in Scripture. Therefore, filtered through the grid of 'fulfilment', God's revelation in Scripture still has meaning, significance and authority for the readers of Hebrews as New Covenant believers.