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Use of the Old Testament in Hebrews

The Letter to the Hebrews refers to Old Testament Scriptures more frequently than any other New Testament writing except the Gospel of Matthew. All the quotations are from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Bible that was used primarily by Diaspora Jews who could no longer read Hebrew. This explains why the quotations do not always match word for word what the Old Testament texts actually say in our Bibles.

Scholars have devoted considerable attention to understanding how this letter employs these texts. The following tendencies are often noted:

- The author makes widespread use of typology, according to which persons and events in the Old Testament are thought to correspond to persons and events in the present era.
- Hebrews evinces a broad understanding of prophecy (as something more than just literal prediction).
- Hebrews exhibits an exegetical tendency to interpret specific texts in light of the full sweep of God's dealings with God's people (i.e., in light of what is sometimes called "salvation history").
- The author likes to use catenas (chains) of verses that are connected by the occurrence of a common word. Thus in

Hebrews 1:1–13, the supremacy of Christ to angels is established by quoting seven Old Testament texts one after the other: Psalm 2:7; 2 Samuel 7:14; Deuteronomy 32:43; Psalms 104:4; 45:6–7; 102:25–27; 110:1.

- The author is also clever in noting the meaning of names and other key words: the name Melchizedek means “king of righteousness,” and his title “king of Salem” also establishes him as “king of peace” (7:2).
- The author is also adept at using certain Scriptures to interpret others. In 3:7–4:13, he uses Psalm 95:7–11 to interpret the meaning of the Moses and Joshua stories: the psalm reveals that the Israelites did not enter God’s rest; still, the plea to listen to God’s voice “today” (Ps. 95:7) implies that God’s rest is still available. This cannot mean a literal exodus from Egypt or conquest of Canaan, so what does it mean? To what rest could it refer? The author of Hebrews looks elsewhere, to Genesis 2:2, which speaks of a “sabbath rest” (Heb. 4:9). This must be the rest that is still available today.

The Word of God

The author of Hebrews clearly believes that the Jewish Scriptures (which Christians now call the “Old Testament”) are authoritative and inspired by the Holy Spirit (3:7; 10:15). Furthermore, biblical passages often can be regarded as conveying the voice of God to

the readers as well as to the ancestors to whom the words were originally addressed (10:15; 12:5; cf. 1:1). In part, this appropriation of the Scriptures seems to derive from the author's conviction that the last days have now dawned (1:2): all the words of God and the entire history of God's dealings with God's people are finding ultimate fulfillment and relevance in the era that heralds the culmination of all things.

Scripture is regarded as a *living* word. One well-known passage in Hebrews says that "the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (4:12). This acclamation could refer to the preached or proclaimed word of God, but surely it refers to Scripture as well. Indeed, whereas Paul typically introduces biblical quotes with the words "It is written," Hebrews introduces quotes with some variation of the phrase "God says" (twenty-three times) or "the Holy Spirit says" (3:7; 10:15, 17; see also 9:8) or "Jesus says" (2:12–13; 10:5). This pattern renders somewhat humorous the one anomalous reference in 2:6: "Someone has testified somewhere . . ." Did the author perhaps forget where the quoted text (Ps. 8:4) was found, or did he just think the particular context (author, book) was irrelevant. Either way, the overall impression of Hebrews is that God speaks through Scripture and that God's words constitute a dynamic force that judges humanity with privileged discernment (4:13–14).

Christological Interpretation

More precisely, interpretation of Scripture is overtly and unapologetically christological: many of the Old Testament passages cited are held to be about Jesus (e.g., 1:6; 10:37–38); some of them are even understood to have been spoken to Jesus (e.g., 1:5, 8–13; 5:5–6) or, indeed, by Jesus (2:12–13; 10:5–7).

One example of christological interpretation is found in 11:24–26, which talks about Moses:

By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called a son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to share ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He considered abuse suffered for the Christ to be greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt.

This report draws on the story of Moses in Exodus 2:10–15, but it identifies the hardships he endured as “abuse suffered for the Christ.” How could Moses have suffered for Christ? Was this the preexistent Christ? Moses becomes a paradigm for the readers of Hebrews, who also must endure financial loss and social ostracism as abuses suffered for Christ (10:32–34; 13:13).

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