CHAPTER TWO

PREVIOUS THEORIES OF THE BACKGROUND OF THE MOTIF

Numerous opinions have been offered as to the background of the motif of Jesus as priest in Hebrews. Though strict lines of demarcation are difficult to draw, the options essentially fall into the following categories: the motif was largely original to the author, has a background in early Christian thought and exegesis, is derived from Gnostic thought, or comes from some aspect of Judaism. Representative arguments for these major positions are surveyed in this chapter, followed in chapters 3 and 4 by closer examinations of possibilities that Hebrews was influenced by priestly traditions and Melchizedek speculation in Second Temple Judaism.

1. LARGELY ORIGINAL TO THE AUTHOR OF HEBREWS

Numerous scholars have argued that the creativity of the author of Hebrews is primarily responsible for the book’s priestly motif, and a rigorous defense of Hebrews’ originality was offered by Barnabas Lindars in his recent book *The Theology of the Letter to the Hebrews*. Following a theory proposed by Martin Hengel, Lindars posited a relationship between the recipients of Hebrews and the Hellenistic Jews in Jerusalem mentioned in Acts 6-7. He proposed that the recipients of Hebrews were members of a well-educated Jewish-Christian community in the Mediterranean dispersion that resulted from the dispersion of followers of Jesus after the martyrdom of Stephen and the ensuing evangelistic fervor.\(^1\) Lindars argued that an anonymous author, writing between 65-70 C.E., addressed a dissident group that by that time had positioned itself against the leaders of the

community. Members of this group had difficulty dealing with their post-baptismal sins. They felt that Jewish liturgy—with its sacrificial cult—dealt with this issue much better than did the Christian liturgy, thus they were tempted to participate in synagogal meals in order to show solidarity with the temple.  

The challenge facing the author of Hebrews was to convince the recipients that Jesus’ sacrifice, though unrepeatable, is nevertheless continually effective. Lindars asserted that such a task required creativity (“a striking and original presentation of the kerygma that ‘Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures’”), because certainly the leaders of the congregation already had tried unsuccessfully to convey this same point to the dissidents. Describing Jesus as a priest was particularly appropriate—while priests were associated with atonement and empathy in biblical and Second Temple Jewish traditions, the kerygma presented Jesus’ death as a sacrifice, and his suffering was emphasized in the Gethsemane tradition (Mark 14:32-42 and parallels, which Lindars understood Heb 2:18 to evoque). But above all, Jesus was to be understood as priest because Ps 110:4—first read, according to Lindars, by the author of Hebrews as a messianic statement—says the Messiah is also a priest. This, according to Lindars, proved that Jesus really is a priest: “besides these pastoral qualifications, which need not mean anything more than the metaphor of priesthood, Jesus was actually appointed high priest by God, so that his priesthood is real.”

Lindars asserted, “It is my view that Hebrews arrived at this position entirely as a response to the need to find a convincing argument for the benefit of his readers.” Thus he understood Hebrews’ description of Jesus as priest as completely original and without precedent: “It has no echo elsewhere in the New Testament.” Lindars also dismissed notions that the author drew on the priest-king model of the Hasmoneans or the discussions of a priestly Messiah in the Dead Sea Scrolls. In particular, Lindars rejected possible influences from the Damascus Document. Regardless of whether this

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2 Lindars, Theology, 1-25, 59; cf. 120-21, 124.
3 Lindars, Theology, 59-60.
4 Lindars, Theology, 61-63.
5 Lindars, Theology, 62.
6 Lindars, Theology, 64.
7 Lindars, Theology, 126.