TEMPLE, SACRIFICE AND PRIESTHOOD IN THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS AND THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS

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INTRODUCTION

Ask any Dead Sea Scrolls scholar about Hebrews, and you will immediately get a one word response—Melchizedek. This alleged parallel, and a number of supposed others, triggered various exaggerations regarding the relation of Hebrews to the scrolls. Since the fundamental issues of the authorship and audience of Hebrews, not to mention its literary form and Sitz-im-Leben, remain undecided, the scrolls appeared to some to be a panacea. Indeed, Hebrews has been subjected in modern times to a string of such panaceas, as Philo,1 the scrolls,2 and Gnosticism3 has each been used to develop mega-theories that have, in turn, been the basis of scholarly commentaries. Recently, more sober approaches have become the norm.4 Qumran scholars may be surprised to learn that parallels that they take as a given have been either rejected or severely nuanced as a result of detailed study by New Testament colleagues not part of the Qumran cabal.5 In fact, little remains of the way-overstated relationship that was assumed in our field.6

Nonetheless, I have decided to devote a study to the questions of temple, sacrifice, and priesthood in this text. We will not seek to find direct influence but rather to compare the approaches of Hebrews to those of the scrolls, and to see what can be learned about the knowledge, understanding and interpretation of sacrificial worship by the author

1 L.D. Hurst, The Epistle to the Hebrews, Its Background of Thought (SNTSMS 65; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 7–42.
2 Hurst, Epistle, 43–66.
3 Hurst, Epistle, 67–75.
of Hebrews. We are interested here not so much in his interpretation of Christianity, but rather in his interpretation of the Judaism that in his view Christianity superseded. After investigating these issues, we will see how they relate to the general views of eschatology in Hebrews and the scrolls.

1. Temple

Hebrews concentrates on the notion of a heavenly sanctuary paralleling the earthly, indeed as a kind of model reflected in the earthly (8:2, 5). Jesus is pictured as officiating in the true heavenly sanctuary (9:24), representing the people before God. For Hebrews, reference is always to the desert Tabernacle, not to the First or Second Temples. We will return to this feature below.

The command to build the Tabernacle is found in the Torah, called here the “first covenant” (9:1). The Tabernacle is described in Hebrews (9:1–5) as consisting of two tents: the outer with the menorah and table for the showbread, known as the holy place (qodesh). The second, inner tent was the Holy of Holies (qodesh ha-qodashim), separated from the first by a curtain (cf. 10:20) enclosing the golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant, covered in gold, that itself contained a golden urn of manna (Exod. 16:33–34), Aaron’s blossoming rod (Num. 17:23), and the Tablets of the Law (the Ten Commandments; Exod. 25:16; Deut. 10:2). The Cherubim were above the ark. The author also mentions the “mercy seat,” kaporet, the cover of the ark, using the term hilasterion, literally “that which expiates.” A fragmentary Leviticus Targum from Qumran reads kasya’ for the “mercy seat” indicating that, like the medieval Jewish commentaries, the Qumran Targum takes it as “cover,” not connecting it with acts of expiation. According to Hebrews, priests are permitted regularly in the outer chamber, but only the high priest enters the inner Holy of Holies once yearly on the Day of Atonement, and then only with the blood of the offering for himself and the errors of the people (9:6–7, 25; cf. Lev. 16:11–16). The statement that sacrifices

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7 These terms are curiously reversed in Hebrews. See Attridge, Hebrews, 230, 233–4.