Don’t You Love It, Don’t You Hate It? An Old Testament Reading of Hebrews

One of the recent symposia on Hebrews begins by noting a contrast between Hebrews’ relative neglect in biblical scholarship and its profound effect on Christian thinking over the centuries.[[1]](#footnote-1) In this paper I focus on the way it has affected Christian understanding of the Old Testament: not its exegetical method, but its hermeneutics and influence. Much of that influence has been negative. This fact is not exactly its fault; Hebrews has significant positive implications for Christian thinking about the Old Testament, but these have been less influential.

Hebrews has had two negative effects on Christian reading of the Old Testament, arising from the way it speaks of sacrifice and the way it uses Old Testament figures as models of faith.

In Christian thinking it goes without saying that the Old Testament sees sacrifice as the necessary way Israelites got right with God. It thus follows Hebrews’ declaration, “Without bloodshed there is no remission of sin” (9:22). Hebrews makes that point in the course of using sacrifice as a way of understanding the significance of Jesus’ death. The ultimate way we get right with God is that in dying, Jesus offered himself as a sacrifice for us; it is on that basis that we find forgiveness.

But in the Old Testament itself, there is little link between sacrifice and sin or forgiveness. Sacrifice is a religious practice with a wide variety of meanings, like other religious actions such as standing or kneeling or raising one’s hands. The Old Testament rarely makes the meaning of sacrifice explicit, though in the systematic instructions about sacrifice in Leviticus 1—7 several features are noteworthy. First, there is no reference to sin in the instructions regarding the regular sacrifices, the burnt offerings, grain offerings, and fellowship offerings. The instructions for the burnt offering do make one reference to its capacity to make expiation, but most Old Testament references to burnt offerings do not suggest that expiation is its main significance.[[2]](#footnote-2) For the fellowship offering, the traditional translation of *zebah shelamim* is “peace-offering,” which could give the impression that the sacrifice related to obtaining reconciliation with God, but even a traditional commentary such as Matthew Henry’s recognizes that this is not so.[[3]](#footnote-3) In modern translations “sacrifice of well-being” is the chief alternative to “fellowship-offering” as a rendering of *zebah shelamim.*  When Leviticus goes on to spell out its significance (7:11-18), it notes three reasons for making this offering. It can be an expression of thankfulness for some blessing, such as the birth of a child. It can be offered in fulfillment of a promise: for instance, a promise made in connection with a prayer for healing. Or it can be a “freewill offering,” made voluntarily, simply because a person wants to do so. In none of these connections is it anything to do with sin.

Following on the general instructions about burnt offerings, grain offerings, and fellowship offerings in Leviticus 1—3 are instructions regarding two further sacrifices, which have been traditionally designated the sin offering and the guilt offering, but the kind of sins that these relate to are largely accidental infringements of the rules that bring uncleanness on an individual or on the community. They are not designed to deal with deliberate sin. A person cannot bring one of these offerings in order to get right with God in connection with worshiping another god or making an image or working on the Sabbath or committing adultery. In such circumstances, all you can do is repent and cast yourself on God’s mercy, as is recognized in prayers such as Psalm 51 or Lamentations. Your hope then is that God may “carry” your sin—the literal meaning of the verb most commonly translated “forgive,” the verb *nāśa’*. Carrying someone’s sin implies accepting responsibility for it instead of making the other person do so. Israelites plead with God to pay the price for their sin in this way, on the basis of God’s being a person full of compassion and mercy. No sacrifice on the part of the sinful person is involved.

God’s willingness to carry responsibility for human sin and pay the price for it comes to its apogee in his willingness to let humanity kill his Son, and then raise him from death. Metaphorically speaking, God indeed thereby sacrifices himself for humanity. Hebrews thus uses the familiar imagery of sacrifice to help readers understand the way Jesus’ death puts things right between humanity and God. But it is not the case that God inspired the sacrificial system so that people would understand Jesus’ death. God indeed inspired Leviticus to adapt the conventional sacrificial system of a traditional society to work within faith in Yahweh in a way that could express that faith. And God then inspired Hebrews to use its framework because its readers knew it.[[4]](#footnote-4) One can imagine that this form of communication was effective in relation to Jews and others who were familiar with sacrifice, though it is worth noting that elsewhere in the New Testament sacrifice is nowhere near as common as a model for understanding Jesus’ death as it is in Hebrews. Conversely, the New Testament does make use of the metaphor of sacrifice in connections other than explaining the significance of Jesus’ execution. It thus reflects the broadness of the significance of sacrifice in the Old Testament. Romans, for instance, speaks of believers offering themselves to God as a living sacrifice, and of the Gentiles becoming an offering acceptable to God (Rom 12:1-2; 15:16).

In a later Christian context, the focus on the way sacrifice can illumine the significance of Jesus’ death thus has two disadvantages. One is that people are no longer familiar with sacrifice. The practice that was well-known and provided an illuminating metaphor is now unfamiliar, so that it becomes an obstacle rather than an aid. In order to help people understand Jesus’ death as a sacrifice, one first has to explain sacrifice. But doing so removes the point about the metaphor, which lay in its familiarity. We are trying to explain something difficult by means of something even more difficult. The other disadvantage, which is my more immediate concern, is that this focus on linking sacrifice to sin has skewed Christian understanding of Old Testament sacrifice. One consequential further snag is that it frees Christian worship to be cheap and/or emotional and/or rationalistic, whereas the model offered by the Old Testament is of worship that is costly and involves the whole person.

The other unfortunate feature of Hebrews’ use of the Old Testament is that is has skewed the way Christians look at the stories of people such as Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, and the other figures who appear in Hebrews 11. I should note one respect in which I am grateful for this chapter. Whereas modern Christians are embarrassed by the violence of some Old Testament heroes, Hebrews feels no such embarrassment over these people who “conquered kingdoms…, became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies” (11:33-34).

But in general, these stories in the Old Testament were not designed to provide examples of faith in action, examples for other people to follow. Genesis does not say that Abel’s offering was accepted because it was offered in faith, nor that Enoch pleased God by faith, nor that Noah acted on the basis of faith. I do not question that they did so, but Genesis does not say it, for the significant reason that Genesis is not concerned with providing stories about people who provide human examples for other people to follow. It is an account of God’s relationship with the world, not of people’s response to God.

As is the case with Hebrews’ use of the Old Testament material on sacrifice, in appealing to these Genesis stories, Hebrews is using Old Testament material in order to explicate the point it wishes to make. It wants to urge on its readers in a life of faith; it appeals to the Genesis stories to illustrate its point. Hebrews is often said to do theology by reading scripture. But in doing so it operates like much modern theological interpretation, by bringing in convictions from outside the scriptural text and expounding the text in light of those convictions rather than attending to the scriptures’ own agenda.[[5]](#footnote-5)

In a later Christian context, its interpretation has again skewed Christian reading of the Old Testament, which commonly assumes that stories about Old Testament characters are actually designed to provide us with positive or negative examples. In reality, the Old Testament is more about God than about us. It thinks we need to become aware of God’s ways in the world, and it is for this reason that it talks about these stories. If anyone is the spiritual and ethical model in the Torah, it is God, not some human being. “Be holy like me” (Lev 19:1), the Torah says, not “Be holy like Abraham or Moses.”

My two examples together show the negative results of the Christian assumption that the New Testament provides a hermeneutic for the Old. It does provide *a* hermeneutic, indeed several, but the Old Testament’s horizon needs to be allowed to broaden and correct the pre-understanding with which Christians come to the Old Testament from the New. It is not that the New Testament is wrong but that the significance of its own use of the Old Testament has been misunderstood. It was not providing us with a lens through which we should now interpret the Old Testament. It was not doing exegesis. It was applying scripture to its own questions.

If that were all I had to say, I would likely not have been interested in writing this paper. Poignantly, there is a converse point to be made about Hebrews’ use of the Old Testament. I could wish that this other aspect had been as influential as the first. It is that Hebrews rightly sees the church as in a position in relation to God that is analogous to Israel’s, uses the Old Testament in a way that reflects this assumption, and thereby sets a more promising example to us, but an example of which we have taken less notice.

It involves recognizing a paradox. Hebrews declares that the new covenant of which Jeremiah speaks has been established, through Jesus (8:7-13; 10:15-18). Yet a moment’s reflection confirms that this statement involves at least over-simplification. The new covenant was to effect the writing of God’s revelation into people’s minds, one result of which would be that people no longer needed to teach each other. Yet the very existence and contents of Hebrews show that God’s revelation is not written into people’s minds.[[6]](#footnote-6) Hebrews addresses an audience that needs basic instructions on matters such as love, hospitality, faithfulness in marriage, contentment, and the role of their leaders in teaching them (13:1-25). People who have experienced that of which Jeremiah 31 speaks are not vulnerable to the comment about needing their faculties to be trained to distinguish good and evil (5:14).[[7]](#footnote-7) Those instructions in Hebrews 13 are not far from being a restatement of the Ten Commandments. Whatever new potential there is in Jeremiah’s new covenant, it is not realized in the congregation that Hebrews addresses, nor in other New Testament congregations such as that at Corinth. Nor does the church today look like an embodiment of the new covenant. In this sense, the new covenant has surely not been established.

There is a converse point. Jeremiah 31:31-34 was a promise made to Israel on the verge of the fall of Jerusalem or during the exile. It would not be particularly good news to its hearers if it was destined for fulfillment only six centuries later. And it did not wait six centuries. A few decades later, there was again a worshiping community in Jerusalem living as Yahweh’s people with Yahweh as their God, one that in due course showed itself to be a community with the Torah written into its minds—people no longer worshiped other gods, made images, neglected the Sabbath, and so on. I don’t know that they avoided adultery or covetousness, but then, neither does the church in the New Testament, or today.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The exhortations in chapter 13 show that the problem here is not that Hebrews is unaware of the facts about the church that belie its declaration that the new covenant has been implemented. As is the case with the language of sacrifice, Hebrews’ concern is to help people understand the monumental implications of Jesus’ death, and one might indeed say that Jesus has opened up the possibility of a new covenant, or has acted in such a way as to guarantee the implementing of a new covenant, for people who did not benefit from what Yahweh did in the sixth and succeeding centuries—people such as Gentiles like most of us. It is worth noting that Paul also quotes Jeremiah 31, in Romans 11:27, and does so in connection with what God will do at the End, not what God has already done

The fact that the new covenant has not been effectively implemented in the church means that we are not in so different a situation as Israel. Our lives do not look to be morally superior to Israel, nor do we seem to have a closer relationship with God than the one the Old Testament speaks of. And that is how Hebrews itself speaks in its telling exposition of Psalm 95. When it refers to the way the wilderness generation failed to enter God’s rest, and goes on to take “rest” as an image for salvation in Christ, one might have expected it to be implying that the church has entered this rest, but in fact it urges people to make sure that they don’t follow the wilderness generation’s example. They could fail to enter this rest as that generation did, and as in effect later generations of Israel could, notwithstanding their being physically in the land. Believers in Jesus are not in a superior position to Israel’s. They are in the same position.

A similar implication emerges from the exhortation in Hebrews 12. The chapter reminds readers that they have not come to a frightening physical mountain burning with fire, but to the heavenly Jerusalem. I am attracted to the idea that Hebrews here refers to the objective difference that Jesus’ death and resurrection make: he opens up the possibility of *eternal* salvation, which the Old Testament does not speak of.[[9]](#footnote-9) Yet the implication is not that people can therefore relax in a way that Moses could not. We are still to worship God with reverence and awe, because it is still true that our God is a consuming fire. In this respect we are in the same position as Old Testament Israel.

There is a related observation to be made about the opening verses of Hebrews. God spoke through the prophets in different times and many ways, but then at the end of the days spoke through a Son. Calvin comments that where there was an “imperfection” about God’s speaking through the prophets, we now have a “fuller revelation.”[[10]](#footnote-10) John Webster adds that whereas God’s spoke “through” the prophets, his message was therefore “an indirect word,… not itself directly and immediately God’s word”; hence what God says through the prophets was characterized by “relativity and imperfection.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Now Hebrews indeed affirms that God’s speaking through Jesus was superior to that through the prophets, but it does not say that it was fuller, nor that the prophets’ teaching was relative or imperfect, nor that it was less direct. Hebrews uses the same proposition *en* of God’s speaking through the prophets and through Jesus. The distinction it makes between the two revelations is that the one is piecemeal and the other is embodied in one person. But it’s the same revelation. The journey of God’s pilgrim people is “irreversibly enlightened” by Jesus, Markus Bockmuehl comments; but it continues the same journey.[[12]](#footnote-12) Jesus’ death has issued in the annulling of specific commands within the terms of the old covenant (7:18), but not in the annulling of the covenant itself or of the instructions it gives for the people’s life.[[13]](#footnote-13)

So Hebrews speaks with two voices about our relationship with the old covenant and with the old covenant scriptures. Graham Hughes long ago noted that the tension we have been examining is one between the theological-Christological statements in Hebrews and the parenetic statements. The theological statements declare that Jesus has done something final and complete. The parenetic parts picture Christians standing “exactly where hearers of the Old Testament Word were placed (2.2f).”[[14]](#footnote-14) Hughes implies that this analysis resolves the problem of this tension, but I am not sure it does so. Alexander Wedderburn has suggested that the way Hebrews talks about sacrifice saws off the branch on which it is sitting.[[15]](#footnote-15) If Hebrews sees people as in a new theological situation but one that does not make a difference to their lives, is it not taking the same risk? Perhaps the way to approach the question is to appeal to deconstruction, which can have a positive significance for biblical interpretation. The scriptures’ theological statements often involve it in making strong assertions that risk oversimplification, and the reader needs to look for the concealed other truth that must modify the strong assertion if one is seeking balance. Preachers and biblical writers often need to make unbalanced statements in order to get their point home.

I am sad that we have listened mainly to the voice in Hebrews implying that the scriptures associated with the old covenant and the physical Zion belong only to an earlier stage in the story of God’s people, and that we have thereby done ourselves a disservice in our own self-understanding as well as encouraged anti-Judaism. I’m sad that in picking up this aspect of Hebrews, we have missed its encouragement to listen to these scriptures, and deprived ourselves of the resource comprised by the old covenant scriptures.

I have not done my own work on the process whereby Hebrews came to be part of the New Testament, but the conventional wisdom says that for several centuries churches in the east accepted Hebrews, appreciating its significance for Christian pilgrimage, whereas churches in the west were more suspicious of it until they came to value its contribution to trinitarian thinking.[[16]](#footnote-16) Conversely, churches in the west accepted the Revelation to John, but churches in the east came to accept it only later. It’s almost as if the eastern churches were saying, “We’ll accept Revelation if you accept Hebrews,” and the western churches were saying, “We’ll accept Hebrews if you accept Revelation.” I wonder how history might have been different if the eastern churches had given up Hebrews and the western churches had given up Revelation? Christian faith in the United States would certainly have been different, and so would Christian (mis)-understanding of the Old Testament.

I do assume that God’s providence was involved in the decision the churches made. I’d just like to see an upending of the unbalanced way Hebrews has influenced interpretation of sacrifice and of Old Testament characters, and a realization of the positive potential of Hebrews for an appreciation of the Old Testament.

1. See Jon C. Laansma, “Hebrews: Yesterday, Today and Future,” in Jon C. Laansma and Daniel J. Treier (eds.), *Christology, Hermeneutics, and Hebrews* (London/New York: Clark, 2012), 1-32 (1-2). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See e.g., the discussion in Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1—16* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 174-77. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible* (reprinted Wilmington : Sovereign Grace, 1972) on Lev 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Cf. Stephen R. Holmes’s comments, “Death in the Afternoon,” in Richard Bauckham and others (eds.), *The Epistle to the Hebrews and Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2009, 229-52 (249). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. E.g., Andrew T. Lincoln, “Hebrews and Biblical Theology,” in Craig Bartholomew and others (eds.), *Out of Egypt: Biblical Theology and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan/Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2004), 313-38 (330-31). Cf. Luke Timothy Johnson, “The Scriptural World Of Hebrews,” *Interpretation* (2003), 237-50. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Cf. Craig R. Koester, *Hebrews* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Mark D. Nanos, “*New* or Renewed Covenantalism?” in Richard Bauckham and others (eds.), *The Epistle to the Hebrews and Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2009), 183-88 (186). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. I thus approach Jer 31:31-34 in a diametrically opposite way to Susanne Lehne, who suggests that “it is only when the prophecy is appropriated by Christians (and probably by the members of the Qumran community) for their own times that the problematic nature [of the promises in Jer. 31.31-34] becomes apparent because of their failure to be realized” (*The New Covenant in Hebrews* [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990], 34). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Cf. I. Howard Marshall, “Soteriology in Hebrews,” in Richard Bauckham and others (eds.), *The Epistle to the Hebrews and Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2009), 253-77 (268-69), following K. Grayston, *Dying, We Live* (Oxford/New York: OUP, 1990), 266-67. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Commentaries of the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews* (reprinted Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 22-23. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. John Webster, “One Who Is Son,” in Richard Bauckham and others (eds.), *The Epistle to the Hebrews and Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2009), 69-94 (75-76). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Markus Bockmuehl, “Abraham’s Faith in Hebrews 11,” in Richard Bauckham and others (eds.), *The Epistle to the Hebrews and Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2009), 364-73 (369). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Against Ernst Käsemann, *The Wandering People of God* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 57. See further Barry C. Joslin, “Hebrews 7—10 and the Transformation of the Law,” in Richard Bauckham and others (eds.), *A Cloud of Witnesses* (London/New York: Clark, 2008), 100-17 (102); Clark M. Williamson, “Anti-Judaism in Hebrews?” *Interpretation* (2003), pp. 266-79. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *Hebrews and Hermeneutics* (Cambridge/New York: CUP, 1979), 68-69. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. A. J. M. Wedderburn, “Sawing Off the Branches,” *JTS* 56 (2005), pp. 393-414. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See e.g., Koester, *Hebrews*, 19-27. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)