# Response to “The Use of the Old Testament in the Letter to the Hebrews”

[The paper is a response to Baruch Maoz’s paper with this title in *Mishkan* 3 (1985), 46-63]

I agree with many of the major concerns of Mr. Maoz’s article, but I have questions about one central feature of it, and it is on this central feature that 1 therefore concentrate.

I share Mr. Maoz’s concern to affirm the fact and the importance of the intrinsic link between the Testaments (and his dislike of the term “Old Testament”, which I therefore avoid here!).

Mr. Maoz also wishes to emphasize a further point, that each specific NT reference to a biblical text must be “truly in accordance with its native, objective and necessary meaning.” “The writer to the Hebrews treats the Old Testament in the most scientific, objective manner possible, never adding to a text, never distorting it, never denying or ignoring its native sense.” In principle, this seems a rather twentieth century thing to claim for the writer, and it is difficult to reconcile with his actual use of scripture.

Let us consider the opening chapter of Hebrews, with its seven biblical references. I have checked how these are treated in two commentaries on Hebrews which 1 find useful, the ones by John Brown and F. F. Bruce. In each case Brown affirms that the biblical text quoted in Hebrews bears the original reference to Christ which Hebrews seems to attribute to it and which Mr. Maoz believes it must have if that use of scripture, and our Christian claim to the Hebrew scriptures, are to be judged valid. In each case, Bruce infers that Hebrews’ application of the biblical text does not correspond to its original meaning.

*Heb. l:5a — Ps. 2:7.* Brown takes the psalm as directly messianic. Bruce refers sympathetically to the view that the psalm relates to the coronation liturgy of the Davidic dynasty, and sees the messianic interpretation as a later development.

*Heb. l:5b — II Sam. 7:14.* Brown takes as a directly messianic promise. Bruce sees the original reference as to David’s actual son Solomon, though he does not see the promises as “exhausted” in the reference to him.

*Heb. 1:6 —Ps. 97:7 LXX (also Deut. 32:43 LXX).* Brown refers to “the kingdom of Christ”, Bruce to the reign of Yahweh, the God of Israel.

*Heb. 1:7—Ps. 104:4.* Brown takes the psalm to denote the fact that angels are merely created beings. Bruce assumes that the original refers to God using the elements as his agents.

*Heb. 1:8-9 —Ps. 45:8-9 (EW 6-7).* Brown declares that the original is messianic, Bruce that it celebrates a royal wedding.

*Heb. 1:10-12—Ps. 102:25-27.* Brown infers that the passage refers to the messiah, Bruce that is refers to Yahweh the god of Israel.

*Heb. 1:13—Ps. 110:1.* Brown takes this as an originally messianic psalm, Bruce as a royal psalm which later came to have a messianic application.

Each commentator maintains a con­sistent line of interpretation through Hebrews 1; each is working out a principle of interpretation. Brown believes that the NT’s interpretation invariably corresponds to the text’s original meaning. Bruce distinguishes between what the passages would have meant when they were written, and what they came to mean to the NT writers and other Jews of their day. Brown, like Mr. Maoz, is troubled at the idea that there might be a difference between what Hebrews meant and what the texts it quotes originally meant; for him, this would threaten Hebrews’ inspiration and its authority. Evidently Bruce does not feel this.

I believe that Bruce is correct in the principles and in the application of his exegetical method. Mr. Maoz notes that scripture uses earthly, not heavenly languages and has to be understood by means of earthly grammatical rules in the light of earthly historical contexts. It is precisely these principles that lead Bruce to his kind of understanding of the texts which Hebrews quotes. Mr. Maoz believes that texts such as the passages from the Psalms listed above are to be interpreted according to usual historical and grammatical rules, *and* that Hebrews’ use of such texts must reflect the objective meaning which these grammatical, historical methods seek to discover. These two views are not incompatible in theory, but are so in practice. Bruce’s exegesis reflects the fact that the application of usual grammatical, historical methods of exegesis to the Psalms produces an understanding of them which is different from the one which Hebrews gives us. Brown, and I take it Mr. Maoz, maintain that the result of applying grammatical, historical methods to the Psalms is other than Bruce believes. I can only invite the reader to consider the passages listed above and see which approach gives a more plausible account of their historical meaning. For myself, I am clear that Brown is reading into the Psalms meanings that are not natural to their historical context, on the assumption that Hebrews presupposes a grammatical, historical exegesis of the Psalms.

Actually Hebrews is not trying to do exegesis of this kind. Its scriptural interpretation has a different dynamic. I was helped to appreciate this point by a consideration of John 11:49-52. Here John relates Caiaphas’s suggestion that it is in everyone’s interests if Jesus is killed. Caiaphas is far more right than he realizes: “he did not say this of his own accord,” John comments, “but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus should die for the nation.” John’s approach to interpreting Caiaphas is here similar to the approach the NT often takes to interpreting the Hebrew Bible. Caiaphas’s words have a meaning in the context of his speech to the council, and in this sense he certainly “spoke them of his own accord.” John could also see another Spirit-given meaning to his words, which Caiaphas knew nothing of.

In a similar way, statements in the Hebrew Bible which have a meaning in the context of God’s dealings with Israel (a meaning itself Spirit-given) may sometimes have a second meaning which becomes clear to the person inspired by the Spirit in the light of Jesus’ coming. It is this second meaning (what R. N. Longenecker refers to as a “revelatory” one) which Hebrews offers us. It is not an exercise in historical exegesis. It is a charismatic reading of the Hebrew Bible in the light of the coming of Jesus.

Longenecker believes that we need to come to understand the NT’s method of using scripture, but that this does not commit us to seeing it as a method we should use. That does not imply that “in other words, apostolic practice is faulty, but its conclusions are correct,” as Mr. Maoz suggests. This is to evaluate NT practice on the basis of alien criteria, if it is not aiming at our sort of exegesis.

It is true that the NT’s interpretation of scripture might only convince someone who believed in Jesus already. Mr. Maoz implies that Hebrews’ “exegesis” has to be “objectively” correct in order to be convincing to unbelieving Jews. Yet one reason why NT use of the Hebrew Bible takes the form it does is that in NT times, unbelieving and believing Jews would have agreed that (e.g.) Psalms 2,45, and 110 were messianic. Disagreement con­cerned *who* was the messiah they pointed to. Today, however, Jewish scholars assume as naturally as Christian ones that these royal psalms originally referred to the reigning Davidic king. We may be making it harder to commend Jesus if we insist that Hebrews’ under­standing of the Psalms must be people’s starting-point.

More fundamentally, however, I wonder whether one should expect arguing about scriptural interpretation to be a key factor in bringing Jews to recognize Jesus. In the Gospels, at least, discussion of how Jesus can be the fulfillment of the Hebrew Bible often gets nowhere with those who are not yet believers. People come to believe in Jesus through being confronted by the authority of his words and deeds, or by his appearing to them as the crucified and risen one. It is after they have come to faith in him in this way that their faith is built up and filled out through the study of the scriptures.

Another way to put this point would be to observe that the link between the Hebrew Bible and Jesus has to be understood theologically, not merely exegetically. Whether the teaching of Hebrews mayand must be accepted by Jews depends not so much on the validity of the exegetical techniques which it shares with documents such as the Qumran scrolls, Philo, and the rabbinic writings. It depends on the theological convictions that distinguish Hebrews and other NT writings from these, and in particular on the validity of the NT’s convictions regarding the theological links between faith in Jesus and the faith of the Hebrew Bible. Are these two faiths indeed one? Does the story of Israel come to its climax in the story of Jesus? Does Jesus fulfill the hopes of the prophets? Does his behavioral teaching correspond to and build on that of the Hebrew scriptures? It is these questions that have to be capable of an affirmative answer if believing in Jesus is a Jewish thing to do (and, for that matter, if believing in Jesus is to be possible for gentiles, given that Jesus seems to have assumed that the answer to these questions was “Yes”). Whether the NT’s interpretative techniques correspond to ours is in this connection an indifferent matter.

REFERENCES

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Longenecker, R. N., *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period,* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977.

I have discussed many of the above points further in:

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