Hebrews, thought-patterns and context: Aspects of the background of Hebrews

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ABSTRACT

The 'religious' or 'philosophical' background of Hebrews has often been called a riddle. Several attempts have been made to unravel this riddle with various suggestions for Hebrews' background, including Platonism, Philo or Middle-Platonism, the Qumran community, Gnosticism, Jewish Apocalypticism. Hebrews, however, shares the thought-patterns of not one but a number of contemporary movements and traditions. The overriding concern of and reason for Hebrews' employment of these traditions is considered, with the suggestion that the Christian church of today should do likewise.

The symbolism of Hebrews is complex, deriving from a variety of traditions (Johnson 1986:420).

1 INTRODUCTION

Johnson (1986:412) contends that one of the major reasons Hebrews today 'goes largely unread' by many Christians, is because the world of thought contained in it is thoroughly different from today's modern world: 'the symbolism of the ancient world is foreign to our own' (cf Williamson 1969–1970:371–376). This perception of foreignness encountered in Hebrews is aggravated by numerous unsuccessful attempts to delineate the specific world of thought underlying this document, leading to the background of Hebrews being called 'a riddle'.

The perception might exist that the 'religious-philosophical' context of a writing, like Hebrews, would be easier to describe had we known the

1 Many important and interesting issues fall outside the discussion: the status of the writing as either letter/epistle or homily, authorship, etc. As will become clear, I have assumed certain positions on specific issues; only where these were important to my argument, have I elaborated on them. A comprehensive and recent overview of scholarship on the Epistle to the Hebrews can be found in Koester (1994:123–145).

2 Schenke, quoted in Hickling (1983:115 n 1); Thompson (1982:1). Lotgengnecker (1975:159) calls the identification of the background a 'perennial problem'. Hebrews' literary genre and integrity has also been called a riddle (Attridge 1989:13), as well as the letter as a whole (Scott, quoted in Barclay 1957:xvii).

3 It is difficult to find an adequate way to refer to the 'philosophical' and religious
identity of its author. Many centuries ago, however, even Eusebius-despaired of establishing who the author of this document was when he said regarding the author of Hebrews: 'only God knows' (Eusebius HE 6.25.13, quoted in Johnson 1986:415-416). The four oldest existing manuscripts on which the text of the New Testament of today is based, treat this document as a letter of Paul, placed in the middle of the corpus (Trobisch 1994:11). However, as Johnson (1986:415-416) makes clear, neither Paul nor John can be identified as the author of Hebrews although a number of theological elements certainly correspond to those of Paul and John respectively. Similarly, Barnabas and Luke, as possible authors, cannot be considered for want of evi-

The corollary is perhaps more prevalent: determining the identity, background, thought, and world view of the author based on an analysis of the nature of the writing. E.g., the attempt by Vanhoye (1989:5) to establish the identity of the author of Hebrews depends on reconstructing the background of the writing. Isaacs (1992:45) considers such a modus operandi 'prudent'. However, such arguments eventually lead to not only background identifying author, but identified author in turn clarifies background. The identification of the recipients has also been pointed out as the 'most crucial question historically' (Longenecker 1975:160), and thus in a similar way, Attridge (1989:9) argues that 'it is generally presumed that some understanding of the intended audience of Hebrews would contribute to the understanding of the work'; cf Lindars (1991:136) '...the argument has been constructed with the specific needs and assumptions of the original readers in mind'. E.g., the link between the writing and its (probable) audience suggests for Thompson (1982:14) that the readers were 'Christians who operated within a frame of religious thought comparable to that of Philo'; Murray (1982:205) suggests an audience of 'dissenting Hebrew' background; Isaacs (1992:45) is more hesitant on this matter. For earlier versions of connecting audience or destination with the thrust of Hebrews, cf Bruce (1969:260-261); for an overview, cf Guthrie (1970:698-716) who distinguishes between 'readers, purpose and destination'. Cf the summary of Attridge (1989:10, 11, esp notes 85-95) for suggestions on the 'ethnic' identity of the audience, linked to 'the assessment of the issues being addressed in the text'. Also Yeo (1991:2-3).

However, the order of Erasmus' 1516 edition of the Greek New Testament—with Hebrews following after the Pauline corpus—based on late Byzantine manuscripts (12th and 13th century) still dominates the 'leading editions of the Greek New Testament' today (Trobisch 1994:11).

Hebrews shares certain concepts and themes with both Paul and John. Cf Guthrie (1970:722-724); Johnson (1986:415). In 1967 Cullmann argues that Hebrews will be understood better if the relationship between it and the Fourth Gospel is investigated (Bruce 1969:264). Cf notes 95, 101 below.
The link between the style, content and nature ('feel') of a document and its author is not denied or downplayed, but its usefulness for identifying the author of the document is in question. It is arguably in any case more justified to scrutinise the richness of the document itself for clues to its 'philosophical' context.

This article will argue that the suggestion of direct (mechanical) influence by one (or more) particular philosophical trend of version thereof on Hebrews, or the literary dependency of Hebrews on a particular kind of writing emanating from a specific worldview, or the restriction of possible influence on Hebrews to only a single worldview or set of thought-patterns, is misguided. Different suggestions and possibilities regarding a philosophical setting, a conceptual or thought world for Hebrews will be reviewed. It will be claimed that Hebrews exemplifies how theology is done with a pluralism representative of the pluralistic world of its origin, and as such cannot be separated from the specific life setting in and for which it is done.

2 COMPOSITION, SYMBOLISM AND STYLE

Hebrews resembles a homily more than an example of the standard epistolary type. The only aspects which might have identified Hebrews as a letter are encountered in the final chapter and are not really decisive. The rhetorical nature of the document is obvious and the rhetorical organisation 'masterly', with all kinds of rhetorical techniques in use (Kümmel 1975:394-395; Johnson 1986:413; Rissi 1987:24; Cosby 1988).

Lindars (1991:21-22, 128) following Spicq, suggests that 'some degree' of education, especially 'rhetorical training', can be found in Hebrews. The

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7 Both Spicq and Montefiore, amongst others, who stressed the similarities between Hebrews and Philo have identified the Hebrews' author as Apollos, who hailed from Alexandria, Acts 18:24 (Guthrie 1970:695; Hughes 1989:355; cf Lo Bue 1956). See also below.
8 Even Priscilla has been suggested as author. Cf Buchanan (1985:266); for an overview of this position, Guthrie (1970:696, 697). Contra this, cf Stedman (1992:12) referring to the masculine participle which refers to the author in 11:32, διηγομένων.
9 Especially if one takes it serious that a 'text', once produced (i.e. orally or written), becomes distanced from its 'original author, audience, and situation'. Cf Schneiders (1991:142-144) on inscription and distancing.
10 The reasons for viewing it as a homily and not a 'theological treatise' concerns its 'intense, immediate, and consistent pastoral orientation' (Johnson 1986:413). Cf also Vanhoye (1989:2-6) calling it a 'priestly sermon'; Lane (1985:13-18).
11 It concerns the lack of standard epistolary elements except for the ending of the document, the scant information on the author, and very few biographical references (only about Timothy). Cf Johnson (1986:413).
kind of persuasive techniques used in the document indicates some 'rhetorical skill'. Discussing Hebrews from the perspective of deliberative rhetoric, Lindars (1989:404) states that Hebrews 'is an outstanding example of the art of persuasion'. Klijn (1974:158) argues that the allegorical and typological aspects which characterise Hebrews were certainly not restricted to Alexandria, specifically not to Philo with his consistent allegorical interpretation, but were typical for the Hellenistic-Jewish church.

In general then the language, style and rhetorical composition of Hebrews lead the way in investigating the background of the document. These elements, although in no conclusive way, argue for a background familiar with Hellenistic thought-patterns and eventually for a Hellenistic oriented document. Whether this is necessarily the case, remains to be seen.

3 HEBREWS AS ' HELLENISTIC' OR ' HEBREW' DOCUMENT

Hebrews seems to represent a kind of Jewish Christianity quite at ease in the Hellenistic world (Barr 1995:437).

Court and Court (1990:322) ascribe Hebrews' distance from 'orthodox Judaism' to the 'Diaspora into Hellenistic culture'. Isaacs (1992:46–48) considers various indications found in Hebrews that the author was not only 'Greek-speaking', but also proficient in the language—more so than any other New Testament author—and 'at home in the general cultural milieu of the Graeco-Roman world'. She considers the language and style of Hebrews as an indication of Greek education. More importantly, Isaacs (1992:48–49) mentions a number of incidences of the reading of the Scriptures found in Hebrews which would indicate the use of the Greek Septuagint rather than

12 '...being concerned with persuading the audience to accept a policy decision' (Ellingworth 1986:383). Cf Collins (1988:42–47), Barr (1995:429). The unconvincing attempt of Yeo (1991:2–33) to cast Hebrews in the mould of polemical writing, aiming to challenge and contradict the audience's 'misleading and wrong world view' (3) would have—even when the overlap of categories of rhetorical speech is granted—required rather forensic or legal rhetoric.

13 Although one should here take into account the profile of the audience (whether real or implied!), space does not allow it. Cf note 4 above; also, Attridge (1989:10–11); Stedman (1992:11–12).

14 Admitting that 'even among the general populace there would have been a smattering of the language', Isaacs (1992:47–49) ascribes the 'fluency' of Hebrews to the author's education and having Greek as his mother tongue. Murray (1982:205) argues that author of Hebrews and its audience were 'well educated in hellenistic rhetoric', probably belonging to a 'dissenting synagogue in Rome'. Eccles (1968:207–226) argues that Hebrews portrays thought-patterns characteristic of a Hellenistic setting—because to its audience it 'would seem most convincing'. Cf note 16.
Vorster (1990:81) suggests that although Hebrews contains and uses the Old Testament and motifs derived from it, its background suggests an affinity for Hellenistic thought. The way in which the Old Testament motifs are applied in Hebrews, belies in the view of Vorster a Palestinian-Jewish setting as the background for Hebrews. A good example is the idea that the λαὸς θεοῦ (people of God) could enter the Holy of Holies (Heb 10:19-20), which cannot be seen as typically Jewish. To Vorster, Hebrews is in all probability a document crafted in a Hellenistic setting.

The influence of Hellenism in Palestine is accepted and certainly Palestinian and Hellenistic Judaism were not diametrically opposed, but in as far as different lifestyles and worldviews did exist this is a functional distinction. Lately this distinction, as employed above, has been questioned.

Murray (1982:196,201-202) contends that the distinction between Palestinian and Hellenistic Judaism is not 'basic', arguing for other 'fundamental' distinctions having different origins. The 'heirs of ancient Israel' were divided into certain groups of which the primary distinction had to do with the particular group's orientation and 'relationship' to Jerusalem, its temple and scribal establishment. This leads Murray to advise against the use of the terms 'Hellenistic and Palestinian' to identify distinctive groups.

E.g. of 38 quotations and 55 allusions cited by Longenecker (1975:164-166) only six do not agree with (a version of the) LXX; the use of διαθήκη (9:16) makes sense only in the Greek dual sense of covenant and/or testament (unlike the Hebrew תּוֹרָה), mentioned already by Calvin (1963:2); texts (like 1:16) quoted found in the LXX, but not in the MT; and, the choice in favour of the LXX's reading of Ps 104:4 against the MT. Stedman (1992:11) is bold: 'Hebrews quotes the Septuagint without exception'; Ellingworth (1993:37) argues that no 'compelling evidence' exists that Hebrews used the Hebrew Old Testament. Against this opinion, cf Bruce (1962-1963:219), Combrink (1971:23) and Buchanan (1975:317). Cf Combrink (1971:23) for different counts of quotations recorded by scholars, ranging from 26 to 36.

Whether merely the use of the Greek version of the Old Testament by Hebrews places the latter in a 'Hellenistic' category, as Vorster (1990:83) argues, is debatable. 'Hellenistic' certainly embraced more than the common use of the Greek language, although Murray (1982:196) insists it meant 'Greek language and education'; also, the LXX was used in the 'less-Hellenised' Palestinian-Jewish setting as well (Müller 1989:65). Silva (1991:220-223), referring also to Sevenster, Fitzmeyer and Mackowsky, argues for the pervasive influence of Greek in Palestine.


Cf Lieu, North & Rajak (1992:4). Murray (1982:202) uses the examples of Philo and the epistle to the Hebrews, both of which clearly exhibit Hellenistic thought patterns, while the former 'look to Jerusalem as its focus' in contrast to the latter.
opting rather for groups designated as 'Jewish', and 'dissenting' or 'Hebrew'.

The position on Judaism and Hellenism as expressed by Murray, naturally weakens the significance of the identification of Hebrews as 'Hellenistic', and allows for locating Hebrews almost anywhere in the ancient world. Indeed, Lindars (1991:22) argues that although the Alexandrian influence in Hebrews is clearly visible, this does not necessarily suggest Alexandria as its origin. To the contrary, Lindars suggests Jerusalem as possible place of origin for Hebrews (the traditional view, cf Attridge 1989:11). The Hellenistic influence in Jerusalem during the first century CE could easily be seen to account for the allusions in Hebrews to Greek composed writings like Wisdom 7:25-26 (cf Heb 1:3) and 2 Maccabees 6-7 (cf Heb 11:25).

More important than physical location (see Attridge 1989:10-11 for a summary of possible locations), however, is that in assuming the pervasiveness of Hellenism in all of the ancient world, the 'unique' elements of Hebrews should not be labelled 'hellenist' for fear of redundancy. In this matter it becomes helpful to understand Hebrews as indeed a 'dissenting Hebrew' writing, distancing itself from Jerusalem and all it embraces, especially the priesthood. However, perhaps the most profitable course as well as starting point in describing the thought of Hebrews will be to hold onto both descriptions: Hebrews as 'hellenist' (in terms of style, language and thought categories) and 'hebrew' (in terms of thrust and 'theological' orientation).

Although admitting to the traces of 'characteristics of Hellenistic Judaism' in Hebrews, Lindars (1991:25) contends that 'there is no sign of more radical ideas imported from an extraneous religious system'. This statement will implicitly be tested in what follows. At this stage suffice it to say that this statement fails to take the situation of 'religious pluralism' during the first century CE into account (cf Evans 1992:163; North 1992; Rajak 1992).

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20 The latter would include groups such as the Samaritans, Qumran community and others. As so often, terminology becomes a problem: Brown (1982:21) employs a radically different distinction, when referring to 'Hellenists' as 'Christian Jews who spoke Greek', and 'Hebrews' as Christian Jews who spoke Hebrew (perhaps Aramaic) and who remained fiercely loyal to the temple and its cult (my emphasis).

21 With the pervasiveness—both in geographical range and extent of influence—of Hellenistic thought also during the first century CE, the actual locality or place of origin of Hebrews becomes at best a secondary factor for establishing the background of thought influencing Hebrews.

22 The similarities—especially the anti-Jewish sentiment—between the speech of Stephen in Acts, and Hebrews are often noted. One of the earlier, and more detailed accounts is found in Manson (1951:23, 25-46). Cf Neil (1955:19-20).
4 HEBREWS AND 'ALEXANDRIAN THOUGHT'

The rhetorically crafted nature of Hebrews suggests an Alexandrian background of thought. However, the Alexandrian nature of the document is seen also in its worldview and thought. Perhaps the most persistent search\(^{23}\) for the source of the thought in which Hebrews' theological ideas are cast, has been along the avenues of Platonism, specifically the version found in Philo, the Hellenised Jew *par excellence*.\(^{24}\) De Villiers and Du Toit (1990:90) argue that the number of scholars declining to acknowledge the influence of Alexandrian thought on Hebrews is constantly diminishing.

The endurance of this approach to Hebrews is explained by Vorster (1990:82) with reference to the very limited number of contemporary Hellenistic-Jewish writings, which amplifies the value of Philo. Vorster also points out that the attempts to describe the possible relationship, or lack thereof, between Philo and Hebrews have been various, ranging from direct influence of Philo on Hebrews,\(^{25}\) to accepting that Philo and the Hebrews author share the same (Alexandrian) thought world, to disavowing the value of even comparing Hebrews with Philo.

4.1 Platonist philosophy and thought: main emphases

The Platonism in existence from approximately 50 BCE until the second century CE is called Middle Platonism and apparently originated in Alexandria. Eventually this version of Platonism would provide the bridge to Neoplatonism, 'the dominant philosophy at the end of paganism'. Unlike the earlier tendency of distance between philosophers and religion, from the first century CE, religion is increasingly viewed as a 'source of enlightenment' (Ferguson 1993:364).

Although many different positions existed on many issues within platonic thought in general—because its philosophers made use of a variety of sources—certain common elements can be identified. Very often Platonist philosophy is described by its pervasive dualism: material and spiritual.\(^{26}\)

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\(^{23}\) Since the time of Hugo, the Great (1583–1645), according to Vorster (1990:82). In 1644 Hugo Grotius remarked, regarding Heb 4:11, that the author of Hebrews 'must have read Philo' (Ellingworth 1993:45).

\(^{24}\) Ferguson (1993:450) describes Philo as first a 'biblical commentator', then an 'apologist for Judaism' and only in the final instance a 'philosopher'. Using existing Greek philosophic thought, Philo attempted to commend Judaism as 'a rational religion', and even to show the universality and superiority of Judaism's worldview (Barr 1995:432; Evans 1992:81; Sowers 1965:137).

\(^{25}\) Spicq referred to the author of Hebrews as 'a Philonist converted to Christianity' (quoted in Ellingworth 1993:47). Spicq (1952) even suggested that the author of Hebrews possibly knew Philo personally and was influenced by him! (Montefiore 1964:8—Isaacs 1992:51 n 5 erroneously offers this as Montefiore's own opinion).
According to this view of reality two worlds exist, the phenomenal or material, 'characterized by movement, change and corruption', and the noumenal or spiritual, 'characterized by changelessness and incorruptibility'. The two worlds are distinguished and divided on metaphysical, epistemological and axiological grounds giving rise to the following respective contrasts: apparent as opposed to real; 'approximate perceptions' or 'opinions' as opposed to 'truly known ideas'; and, 'bad' as opposed to 'good'—or at best, 'not as good' as opposed to 'excellent'. Naturally then the spiritual realm is considered more important and significant than the earthly or material: the latter is 'derivative' and contains only the antitypes of the authentic and 'ideal models' of the former which is 'primordial'. Human beings access the noumenal through intellectual knowledge, διάνοια, because the mind (νοῦς) is at the 'pinnacle of knowledge'.

A number of typical expressions exemplifying the Platonist world of thought with its emphasis on the inferiority of the μίμησα are encountered in Hebrews: ἀπαντάργασμα (reflection, 1:3), χάρακτρα (direct representation, 1:3), ύποδειγμα (example, 4:11; 8:5; 9:23), σκιά (shadow, 8:5; 10:1), ἀντίτυπος (representation, 9:24; see Johnson 1986:420–421; Lindars 1991:23; Isaacs 1992:51–55; Guthrie 1982:43, as indeed do others, calls these 'superficial parallels').

Although this dualism persists in Middle Platonism its thought world was penetrated by a number of other philosophical patterns: 'Stoic ethics, Aristotelian logic and Neopythagorean metaphysics and religion'. In an attempt to reconcile Plato and Aristotle, Plato's Good (the first principle of

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26 In Williamson's 1963 study on Hebrews and Plato, he assumes the 'Theory of Ideas (Forms)' to be the 'central and characteristic element in Plato's philosophy'. Neil (1955:17, 22) says that 'copious use of the Platonic contrast between shadow and reality' is made in Hebrews, and that this is 'the major motif' of its argument. Ferguson (1993:364) contends that the 'soul as distinguished from the body' became the 'basis of patristic and medieval philosophy'. Cf Barclay (1957:xiv–xv); Guthrie (1970:719).

27 Cf Williamson (1963:415–417). Interestingly, the term Plato uses for human perception of the phenomenal world is πίστις (commonly used in the New Testament for 'faith').

28 Probably the passive sense of 'reflection' rather than the active in the sense of 'radiance', to fit better with χάρακτρα with which it is paired. For these two possible translations, cf Louw & Nida (1988:175).

29 Louw & Nida group the concept expressed by these words in the same semantic field: 'Nature, class, example', with the subfield: 'Pattern, model, example, and corresponding representation' and, in the case of ἀντίτυπος, subfield: 'Archetype, corresponding type (antitype)'. Only ἀπαντάργασμα is put into a different field: 'Physical events and states (Light)'.

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world forms) and Aristotle’s Supreme Mind (the Unmoved Mover) were identified, and Platonic ideas became the ‘thoughts within the divine mind’: \textsuperscript{30} the absolute transcendence of the Supreme Mind (God) was stressed in Middle Platonism (Ferguson 1993:364-365).

In his investigation of the possible influence of Platonism on Hebrews, Williamson (1963:415-424) argues that Hebrews ‘did not borrow anything, ideas or terminology, directly from Plato’s own writings’. Rather, Hebrews is thought to stand ‘well within the main stream of Christian tradition’. Commentators\textsuperscript{31} who have argued for anything amounting to sustained influence of Platonic ideas in Hebrews, are reproached by Williamson for reading ‘Christian conclusions out of philosophical statements of Plato’, and missing ‘the profoundly historical, theological and eschatological character’ of Hebrews.

Although Williamson is at great pains to point out that even in the specific passages\textsuperscript{32} often thought to display some Platonic influence, none is present, he is at times less than convincing. The absence in Hebrews of (e)\textit{idēa} (form) and e\textit{idōc} (form), which were used frequently in Plato, the different use of Platonic terminology in Hebrews, and the expressing of ‘un-Platonic’ convictions constitute enough reason for Williamson to conclude against Platonic influence in Hebrews. He admits though that in one of the passages (9:23-24) Hebrews comes close to Platonism, but not in a ‘fundamental’ sense. Unfortunately, Williamson seems bent on denouncing any possible influence of whatever kind by Platonic ideas on Hebrews,\textsuperscript{33} which distracts him from showing how Hebrews uses and manipulates—contextualises—Platonic terminology and concepts for Christian use.\textsuperscript{34} Clothing Platonic terms and ideas with a Christian content, leads him to deny Platonic influence instead of noting Hebrews’ innovative and creative employment of existing contemporary categories (cf especially Williamson’s notes regarding 8:1, 5; 1963:418-419).

\textsuperscript{30} Of the latter, Philo was the first (extant) author to give expression to this: the Platonic ideas are the thoughts of Judaism’s God (Ferguson 1993:365).

\textsuperscript{31} Williamson (1963:415,423) refers to WF Howard, CH Dodd, V Taylor and Rawlinson specifically.

\textsuperscript{32} Eight verses: 8:1, 5; 9:11, 23-24; 10:1; 11:1, 3 (Williamson 1963:418-422).

\textsuperscript{33} Although he is certainly correct in denying a ‘thorough-going Platonism in Hebrews’, Williamson (1963:421, 423) seems to imply that admitting to Hebrews’ usage of Platonic words and ideas—particularly when reinterpreted according to Christian tradition—would be tantamount to the ‘distortion’ of the Christian message.

\textsuperscript{34} In his 1969-1970 study (:371-376) this is exactly what Williamson pleads for in order to render Hebrews serviceable, indeed, ‘relevant’ to the 20th century church. However, cf below (8.2) for Williamson’s virtual denial of ‘contextualising’ in Hebrews while insisting on the need for contextualisation today.
4.2 The case for Middle Platonism and Philo

The question of Hebrews' religious-historical dependence has often been discussed, for the most part by entertaining or rejecting direct influence from Philo (Käsemann 1984:67).

...the writer of Hebrews drew upon the same wealth of literary vocabulary and moved in the same circles of educated thought as a man like Philo (Williamson 1970:96, quoted also in Isaacs 1992:49).

...there are undeniable parallels that suggest that Philo and our author are indebted to similar traditions of Greek-speaking and -thinking Judaism (Attridge 1989:29).

Johnson (1986:420) regards the 'kind of Platonic worldview' revealed in Hebrews of such magnitude and significance that he has no hesitation in viewing the author of Hebrews as 'first among the Christian Platonists of Alexandria'. However, Johnson also hastens to add that the worldview of Hebrews more closely resembles the one found in the writings of Philo (cf also De Villiers & Du Toit 1990:90), which can be called a hybrid of 'Platonic metaphysics' and 'Semitic cosmology', the latter as presented in the Genesis creation stories. Montefiore (1964:9) puts it very strongly when he, quoting an old tradition, describes the author of Hebrews as 'a philonian converted to Christianity'.

Johnson (1986:421-422) finds reason for his typology of Hebrews as middle-platonic on three grounds: Hebrews shares the language, historical consciousness, and certain 'fundamental' perceptions displayed in the writ-

35 Worldview in the sense of a 'common consciousness' which, Johnson (1986:420) argues, was by the first century as much present as was a 'theoretical doctrine' of Platonism.


37 This 'mixture' was found also in the Hermetic literature (Johnson 1986:421). The Hermetic literature was popular Greek theosophical writings of the first three centuries CE, ascribed to Hermes Trismegistus. Consisting of a blending of Egyptian religion and Greek dualism, in the form of platonic dialogues, it has a syncretistic and Gnostic mood (Huey & Corley 1983:94; Ferguson 1993:294-295). See section 5, below, on the possible similarities between Hebrews and Gnosticism. Thompson (1982:11) despairs of distinguishing 'Gnostic metaphysic' from 'Platonic metaphysic'; Barclay (1957:xv) argues that 'the thinkers of the ancient world all had this idea, that somewhere there is a real world, of which this world is only a kind of pale shadow, an imperfect copy'. Cf Ferguson (1993:454).

38 Neil (1955:22) states that Philo 'had already shown how Plato and the Law and Prophets of Israel could be reconciled'.

39 Originating with Spicq who composed in 1952, 1953 'by far the most extensive and scholarly commentary of the twentieth century' (Buchanan 1975:306). Cf note 25 above.
ings of Philo. (1) Similarities exist in vocabulary, rhetoric, and the use of the Old Testament. E.g. in terms of language, the heavens and earth of Semitic cosmology are equalled to the worlds of form and matter. (2) The 'ahistorical and static character' found in Philo, necessitates the allegorical reading of the 'timeless messages whose original context is not critical': literal (material), moral (psychic) and allegorical (spiritual) senses are simultaneously present in the same words. (3) The typical Platonism with its customary dualism is quite forcefully present in Hebrews as well.

Ellingworth (1993:47) explains the similarities between Hebrews and Philo by tracing it to 'common Jewish exegetical tradition' as well as to 'hellenistic (or more specifically Alexandrian) Jewish tradition'. It is especially in the eschatology of Hebrews that a number of writers have suggested a common conceptual world, based on Platonic dualism, for Hebrews and Philo (Isaacs 1992:57).

Thompson (1982:44-52) argues that a clear Platonic, cosmological dualism is reflected in Hebrews, especially in Heb 12:18-29: 'the unstable inferior world of sense perception and the unshakeable, changeless, superior

Studies have been done on specific terms used in Hebrews and Philo, e.g. Peterson (1982) in his study on 'perfection' investigates the possible influence of 'Philonic patterns of thought'. Cf. Barr (1995:436) who sees Hebrews' notion of perfection tying in with Jewish Mysticism. Thompson (1977:223) concluded in his study on the 'conceptual framework' in which Hebrews uses the figure of Melchizedek, that the closest analogies are with Philo, consisting in 'the dualistic reading of the Old Testament, use of Hellenistic terminology, and the focus on the abiding of the exalted one'.

These senses were used but probably not recognised as such by Philo (Carny 1988:33) and were to develop later as the quadriga or fourfold sense of Scripture, continuing until and reaching its zenith in the Middle Ages: literal (historical), allegorical (spiritual-mystical), tropological (moral), and anagogical (eschatological). For the ahistorical character of Hebrews, see also Vorster (1990:85-86) where he finds the same tendency in the way Hebrews uses the Old Testament quotes and references. Contra the ahistorical character of Hebrews, cf., e.g. Williamson (1970), Hughes (1979), Isaacs (1992:52, 58-59).

That is, the noumenal or idea-world is the real reality with the earthly reality being mere shadows and traces of it. As explained above, in Philo the heaven becomes the ultimate, the real reality. Equally in Hebrews the earthly sanctuary is a shadow of the heavenly (cf. 8:5; 9:23ff; 10:1), with the heavenly surpassing the earthly in significance (8:2ff; 9:11ff, 23ff; 10:1ff, 11ff, 19ff): the heavenly reality has a (secure) basis (θεμέλιον, 11:10), is a better homeland (κρείττων ... πατρίς, 11:15), and is an enduring kingdom (βασιλεία ἀσάλευτος, 12:28). Cf. Perkins (1988:272-273), who refers to the 'contrast taken from philosophical thought'; De Villiers & Du Toit (1990:90).

Isaacs (1992:57-58), while admitting to the timeless, spatial movement ('change of location') and concepts (e.g. 6:5; 10:19-22 and 13:8), characterises these as instances of 'realised eschatology' and not of Hebrews' employment of Platonic metaphysics. She strengthens her argument by referring to Jewish apocalypticists (4 Ezra, 2 Baruch) employing both 'parallel worlds and successive ages'.

40 Studies have been done on specific terms used in Hebrews and Philo, e.g. Peterson (1982) in his study on 'perfection' investigates the possible influence of 'Philonic patterns of thought'. Cf. Barr (1995:436) who sees Hebrews' notion of perfection tying in with Jewish Mysticism. Thompson (1977:223) concluded in his study on the 'conceptual framework' in which Hebrews uses the figure of Melchizedek, that the closest analogies are with Philo, consisting in 'the dualistic reading of the Old Testament, use of Hellenistic terminology, and the focus on the abiding of the exalted one'.

41 These senses were used but probably not recognised as such by Philo (Carny 1988:33) and were to develop later as the quadriga or fourfold sense of Scripture, continuing until and reaching its zenith in the Middle Ages: literal (historical), allegorical (spiritual-mystical), tropological (moral), and anagogical (eschatological). For the ahistorical character of Hebrews, see also Vorster (1990:85-86) where he finds the same tendency in the way Hebrews uses the Old Testament quotes and references. Contra the ahistorical character of Hebrews, cf., e.g. Williamson (1970), Hughes (1979), Isaacs (1992:52, 58-59).

42 That is, the noumenal or idea-world is the real reality with the earthly reality being mere shadows and traces of it. As explained above, in Philo the heaven becomes the ultimate, the real reality. Equally in Hebrews the earthly sanctuary is a shadow of the heavenly (cf. 8:5; 9:23ff; 10:1), with the heavenly surpassing the earthly in significance (8:2ff; 9:11ff, 23ff; 10:1ff, 11ff, 19ff): the heavenly reality has a (secure) basis (θεμέλιον, 11:10), is a better homeland (κρείττων ... πατρίς, 11:15), and is an enduring kingdom (βασιλεία ἀσάλευτος, 12:28). Cf. Perkins (1988:272-273), who refers to the 'contrast taken from philosophical thought'; De Villiers & Du Toit (1990:90).

43 Isaacs (1992:57-58), while admitting to the timeless, spatial movement ('change of location') and concepts (e.g. 6:5; 10:19-22 and 13:8), characterises these as instances of 'realised eschatology' and not of Hebrews' employment of Platonic metaphysics. She strengthens her argument by referring to Jewish apocalypticists (4 Ezra, 2 Baruch) employing both 'parallel worlds and successive ages'.
immaterial world of heaven'. This imagery would indicate 'greater concern with Greek metaphysics than with the end time of Jewish apocalyptic writings'. The reshaping of the Jewish apocalyptic pattern by metaphysical interests is of 'decisive importance' for understanding the eschatology of Hebrews. Barrett (1956:390-393; cf Bruce 1969:264) argues for the Platonic scheme used in Hebrews as enabling Hebrews to address not only the age to come in conjunction with the current age, but also the invisible world with the visible one.

Thompson (1982:10) reasons that for all the effort of Williamson—perhaps the most vociferous advocate in denying Platonic influence in Hebrews—in comparing Hebrews and Philo, Williamson 'has not demonstrated that the two writers do not belong to a common conceptual world'.

4.3 The case against Middle Platonism and Philo

...the Writer of Hebrews had never been a Philonist, had never read Philo's works, had never come under the influence of Philo directly or indirectly (Williamson 1970:579; cf Hughes 1989:356-357).

However, that Philo and the author of Hebrews shared a particular worldview cannot summarily lead to a claim of literary or other dependence: a mutual setting certainly 'does not...demonstrate that the author (sc of Hebrews) was "a Philonist", and one should note the 'fundamental differences' between them (Isaacs 1992:49, 51). The similarities between Hebrews and Philo should not blind one to the dissimilarities (Chadwick, quoted in Isaacs 1992:51).

The differences between the author of Hebrews and Philo are attributed by Ellingworth (1993:47) to the former being a 'Jewish Christian', whereas the latter was a 'philosophical minded diaspora Jew'. Longenecker (1975:174) adds that whereas both interpreted the Old Testament, Philo did so according to Platonist philosophy but Hebrews from 'a Christocentric perspective and in continuity with Christian exegetical tradition'.

Similarly, while Käsemann (1984:67,78) affirms the similarities between Hebrews and Philo in terms of 'concepts and ideas', he rejects any notion of

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44 Contra this, cf, e.g, Strachan, quoted in Guthrie (1970:721-722).
45 Montefiore (1964:8) describes the differences between Philo and Hebrews in outlook and attitude also as 'fundamental'; and, Hughes (1977:29), although granting that Hebrews and Philo might have been from the 'same or similar background' argues that 'the differences between Philo and Hebrews are as fundamental as the affinities are peripheral'.
46 This distinction, however, is less than helpful, and rests on certain a priori assumptions. Cf also note 19, in light of which it can be argued that Philo was much closer to
direct dependency of the former on the latter. He motivates this by referring to different 'orientations', especially in 'cosmological, psychological philosophy and soteriology'. Käsemann also disavows Michel's distinction between form and content, as the boundaries between the two tend to overlap and become vague.

According to Williamson the significance of the sharing of common themes and ideas by Hebrews and Philo lies in the different ways in which they are used. Williamson (1970:142-149) argues that although similarities between Hebrews and Philo's writings exist on a lexical level, they differ conceptually. This is primarily founded on the belief that Hebrews 'has not abandoned the Jewish eschatological concept of two ages in favour of the Platonic two coexistent spheres of the Ideal and the copy'.

Longenecker (1975:173) argues that while Philo 'thought in terms of cosmology', Hebrews did so 'in terms of historical redemption', leading to the contrast in Philo between 'prototype and transcript' while in Hebrews the contrast is between 'prophetic anticipation and consummation'.

In similar fashion, although he finds strong resemblances to Middle Platonist symbolism in Hebrews (see above), Johnson (1986:422) argues that these are 'entirely reworked' by the Hebrews author. The adaptation of Platonism in Hebrews centers around its Christology: 'Platonism is here stretched and reshaped around belief in a historical human savior whose death and resurrection made both his body and time axiologically rich'. Johnson argues that in the following ways, Hebrews presents a modified Platonism:

First, Hebrews shows a very acute awareness of history...
Second, the distinction between heaven and earth is not only cosmological, it is also existential.
Third, Hebrews exalts rather than denigrates the physical.
Fourth, Hebrews emphasizes change... (Johnson 1986:422).

Jewish tradition than Hebrews.

47 A good example is the concept of βασιλικὴ δόξα, the Kingly Highway—a dominant theme in Philo, derived from Num 20:17 LXX. The concept of sojourn, although present in Hebrews, never adopts the full regalia of Philo's position. Cf Käsemann (1984:75-78).

48 According to Michel (1936, quoted in Käsemann 1984:67) Hebrews is similar to Philo in terms of form; Michel holds that although in content Hebrews differs from Hellenistic thought, in form Hebrews resembles Hellenistic ideas. However, Michel holds that the apocalyptic imagination of Hebrews stands at odds with Hellenism. In the words of Cosby (1988:10), Michel refers to Hebrews as 'Jewish theology expressed with a Hellenistic form'.

The spatial categories of 'here' and 'there' which are used in the eschatology of Hebrews are described by Isaacs (1992:56) as a 'striking feature'. Yet, she remains unconvinced by the arguments of Thompson regarding the influence of Platonic metaphysics being stronger than the traditional Jewish apocalyptic view and argues for the Heb 12:18–29 imagery (i.e., the earthly Sinai and heavenly Zion) having a typological function.

De Villiers and Du Toit (1990:90–91) and Attridge (1989:29) contend that although a Philo-like deemphasis on the historical seems to cause the historical to bow the knee before spatial components, the spatial should not be viewed as forming the 'core' or 'center' of Hebrews. Whereas the vertical or spatial dimensions serve the purpose of contrasting the two covenants, the horizontal or historical dimension is dominant—and while avoiding Platonic dualism, this links up with Jewish thought. The thought of Hebrews rests on notions like 'the last days', 'the end of time', God's addresses 'in the past' and 'now, in the last days', the 'living God' active in history (3:12; 7:18; 8:13; 9:14; 10:31), and, of course, the strong views related to eschatology and the final judgement (1:6; 9:28; 10:37 and 6:2,8; 9:27; 10:25,27ff; 12:25ff).

Van Zyl (1991:443–445; 463 n 6) argues against the notion of dualism in Hebrews—which to him implies issues which are mutually exclusive of one

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50 For Thompson's views, cf above. Isaacs (1992:56–57) contests the reading of Thompson by referring to the lack of 'antipathy between spirit (or soul) and flesh' in Hebrews and, moreover, does not locate in Hebrews any 'anthropological or cosmological dualism between the material and immaterial'. Although Isaacs (1992:61) pleads for eschewing the 'either-or approach' regarding the background of Hebrews, and agrees to the influence of Jewish and Greek thought (e.g.:67) while admitting to Hebrews originating from a world pervaded by Middle-Platonic philosophy, she seems reluctant to admit to the presence of Platonic metaphysics in Hebrews. Isaacs probably needs to argue for a traditional Jewish worldview (whatever this might mean!) in order to establish her reading approach of 'sacred space' ('which the worshipper wishes to approach in order to gain access to the deity'). To her this becomes christologically defined, replacing Judaism's sacred spaces, e.g. the wilderness tabernacle, and the Temple. In the end, this thesis rests upon Hebrews being written after the 70 CE destruction of the Jerusalem temple (Isaacs 1992:61–67ff). Cf Lindars (1991:131) who argues that the 'particular interest of Hebrews is access to the presence of God'.

51 Similarly Lindars (1991:24) who sees these as typological elements of 'the plan of God and its fulfilment'.

52 Conzelmann & Lindemann (1988:264) argues that 'philonic teaching contains no eschatology'.

53 Ellingworth (1986:337–350, esp :349–350) identifies in Hebrews a spatial language with horizontal (typological) and vertical emphases: the former 'expresses nature or origin' and the latter 'location'. He concludes that the vertical language is 'more truly cosmological'. Cf Hughes (1979:35–74) on 'history' in Hebrews, and Rissi (1987:35–41) who argues that Hebrews' ideas on the 'himmlische Welt' is based on 'frühjüdischen Konzeptionen'.

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another—because in Hebrews opposing issues are inextricably linked.\textsuperscript{54} However, because this term is so generally adopted, Van Zyl uses dualism to affirm that both the vertical (spatial) and horizontal (historical) dualisms in Hebrews are continuously and jointly present throughout Hebrews. He does not want to choose between the vertical or horizontal dimensions to indicate the dominant dimension in Hebrews, because this would lead to unwarranted and distorted emphases. Although Van Zyl does not articulate it in so many words, it is exactly this double dualism—not only vertical, but also horizontal—that distinguishes Hebrews from Philo’s writings.\textsuperscript{55}

In using and interpreting these ideas and themes from the Old Testament, both Philo’s writings and Hebrews portray a high regard for Scripture (Guthrie 1982:42). However, many scholars assume a different \textit{modus} of interpretation in Hebrews when compared to Philo: typological as opposed to allegorical. Especially with the historical aspects outweighing the spatial elements, scholars believe Hebrews to be typological in nature rather than allegorical.\textsuperscript{56}

\textsuperscript{54} Whether the opposing pivots of a dualism need necessarily be ‘un-linked’, is debatable. It seems indeed that Hebrews successfully holds on to both sides of the dualism, without dissolving the tension inherent to the dualism. Opposing matter can be exclusive without being disconnected, indeed, can presuppose one another—as seems to be the case in Hebrews, and as is argued in the rest of Van Zyl’s study.

\textsuperscript{55} Whether it is correct to argue for the subsumption of the vertical into the horizontal (Van Zyl 1991:445), is questionable. Theologically this is explained with the theological construction employed in the New Testament to explain the different eschatological conceptions manifested therein, \textit{viz} the tension between ‘realised’ and ‘future’ eschatology. Isaacs (1992:58–59) argues that Hebrews is not in this way unique in the NT, however, what is unique is the specific combination of ‘spatial, timeless imagery with the linear language of history’. Cf also Isaacs (1992:58) referring to Jewett’s comment on Heb 12:22–23b as ‘one of the most dramatic and radical statements of realized eschatology in the N.T.’

\textsuperscript{56} Lindars (1991:24) finds Hebrews’ allegorising to be on a different level than Philo’s, because Hebrews’ allegorising is based on a promise-fulfilment scheme (the literal meaning of Scripture has been superseded by the transition from old to new covenant in Jesus Christ and the spiritual meaning relates to the promised fulfilment of the plan of God) and ‘does not deny the historical process’. Cf Conzelmann \& Lindemann (1988:266); Attridge (1989:29). According to the same distinction, Barrett (1956; cf Buchanan 1975:310) relates ‘Philo’s allegory’ to ethics and ‘Hebrews’ typology’ to exegesis. Bruce (1964:1–11) adds ‘metaphysics’ to Philo’s aim with his allegorising—what Barrett (1956:377) calls a ‘metaphysical twist’ to Philo’s preoccupation with ethics. As seen in Sowers (1965:89–126; cf Bruce 1969:263) who maintains that in Hebrews Philo’s allegorical exegesis was abandoned for typological exegesis emphasising the ‘history of salvation’, and Hughes (1979:65), who contrasts Philo’s allegorising with Hebrews’ typological emphasis on the ‘Christ event,’ Hebrews’ allegorising is often defended as ‘typology’. However, Thompson (1982:10–11) argues that the categorising of the two authors in terms of typology and allegory rests on oversimplification; Kümmel (1975:395–396) reasons that Hebrews interprets the Old Testament ‘in the same way as the Alexandrians’ which implies being ‘unconcerned
4.4 Hebrews and Philo: conclusion

The difficulty in pronouncing the verdict on Hebrews' relationship to the Platonic-Philonic train of thought, is perhaps well exemplified in Barrett's (1956:371) remarks on the issue: '(b)etween Philo and Hebrews there is no resemblance at all', yet later he (:393) insists not only that Hebrews' author might have read Platonic works, but also 'must have known that his images and terminology were akin' to the Platonic.

On the basis of not having the complete picture of the contemporary religious-historical setting, and while accepting the infiltration of all kinds of non-Jewish and non-Christian elements via Hellenistic Judaism, Vorster wants to put the question of the relationship between Hebrews and Philo to rest with the concluding assumption that this relationship does not consist in literary dependency but in the sharing of the same 'thought and spiritual climate' (Vorster 1990:82; cf McCullough 1980:145).

'(The Hebrews author is) no doubt...a man affected by linguistic habits and intellectual traditions similar to those which contributed to Philo's development' (Ellingworth 1993:47). The extent to which these traditions were shared is still hotly debated. However, no one can deny that 'the works of Philo will continue to be useful in general for studying Hebrews, because they represent a part of the Jewish thought of the period...' (Buchanan 1975:311).

Barr (1995:432), for instance, contends that the typical Philonian images, like for example of the world as a reflection of the 'heavenly reality', 'help clarify the meaning of Hebrews' especially in certain sections of the document, for example chapter 8.

about the historical sense of the words', devoting attention to 'uncovering the deeper true meaning'; and, Guthrie (1970:720) contends that at times (especially when dealing with Melchizedek) Hebrews 'comes near to' 'strict allegorising'. Sharp (1986:101) also finds it difficult to defend 'some of the forms of the typology used in Hebrews'. Furthermore, the question is whether the 'fine line' between allegory and typology, i.e. the (supposed) historical link in the case of the latter, is not in any case an 'interpretive construction or device'? Cf e.g Young (1994).

57 Sharing the view of Conzelmann & Lindemann (1988:264) who make a similar point 'with some certainty'.

58 Ellingworth cautions that one might be so impressed by the 'change of scale' when turning from a study of Hebrews' use of the Old Testament to a comparison with Philo, that 'the real points of contact with Philo' might be underestimated.
5 HEBREWS AND GNOSIS

5.1 Gnostic thought as Hebrews' frame of reference

Evans (1992:163) is representative of the opinion held by many scholars that Gnosticism is mistakenly seen as a Christian heresy emerging in the late first and early second century. The roots of Gnosticism, according to Evans, are diverse—geographically, culturally and religiously—and should be traced back to the first century CE and even earlier. Lindars (1991:24-25) regards the possible influence from Gnostic groups on the thought of Hebrews 'theoretically possible'. Kümmel (1975:396) puts it much stronger when he argues that Hebrews 'shows a clear connection with Gnostic conceptions'. However, the distinction between Gnosis—as a particular 'intellectual and religious atmosphere'—and Gnosticism—as 'developed system' of the second century—should be adhered to (Wilson 1972-1973:67, 70-71; Ellingworth 1993:44).

Käsemann's (1984) study ranks prominently as one who has promoted Gnosticism as the background of thought for Hebrews, with Hebrews—as representative of this movement—providing a 'Gnostic interpretation of Christianity'. The dominant line in Hebrews is the image of the 'wandering people of God', which he understood as a Gnostic 'journey of the soul', from the dark material world of the demons to the heavenly city of light. The contrast between the old covenant and its sacrifices and the new covenant with Christ teaches a 'spiritual religion with no material elements'.

Many concepts in Hebrews could indicate Gnostic influence or even Gnostic affiliation, for example the σωγγένεω-concept contained in the phrase εξ ἐνὸς πάντες (2:11) which would stress that God and people are from 'the same stock'. However, at times Philo can also 'ascribe a very

59 It would be possible to view Gnostic thought and the second century 'system of thought' called Gnosticism as a category of Middle Platonism, as Thompson (1982:15) following Dillon, argues; to claim that due to Platonism being no unified movement, one cannot distinguish its metaphysic from the Gnostic version thereof is perhaps too cautious. The metaphysical dualism, accompanied by a cosmological dualism is common to both Gnostic and Platonic thought. However, the way in which certain concepts feature in each differs. As referred to above, Johnson (1986:420) considers the possibility of a theoretical 'Platonic doctrine' likely, which might be pushing it a bit too far. Schmithals (quoted in Ellingworth (1993:43) describes Gnostic thought in terms of two elements: one, 'a particular understanding of the world and the human self'; two, 'a characteristic mythology to express that understanding'. The human being imprisoned in this alien world is on a journey to be reunited with the divine nature in which it participates.

60 Because these groups 'began as Platonising theosophical groups directly influenced by Judaism'. Belonging to 'the fringe of Diaspora Judaism', they 'reflect Philo's spiritualising outlook and mystical interest'.

61 Käsemann's proposal for viewing the relationship between 'Son' and 'sons'
exalted status to men who seek God rightly', and one could then argue that with the use of this phrase Hebrews portrays evidence of 'contact with a community influenced by Judaism of a Philonic kind' (cf Hickling 1983:113, 115 n 3, 116 n 11).

Ellingworth (1993:44) has no doubt that certain terms in Hebrews can be associated with Gnosis in the broader sense of the word, and thus refers to a number of typical Gnostic concerns found in Hebrews: the role assigned to Jesus Christ, fear (2:15; 4:1; 10:27, 31), bondage (2:15), alienation from the resting-place (3:7-4:10), and homeland (11:13f). The major Gnostic elements, however, are absent (see below).

Although admitting to the speculative nature of the perceived influence of pre-Christian Gnosticism on the New Testament writings, Vorster (1990:82) nevertheless points to the above mentioned concepts, quite significant to the larger argument of Hebrews, which are also found in Gnostic, specifically the Nag Hammadi, writings. Admitting that these elements need not necessarily be seen as 'gnostic', Vorster contends that one should establish whether Gnostic patterns did not perhaps pave the theological road of Hebrews.

There is yet another way in which Gnosis was seen to be helpful in clarifying the Hebrew letter's background. Koester (1982:272-276) also reads Hebrews in the light of Gnostic influences, albeit in the negative sense: he sees it as an attack on Gnosticism. The image of the journeying people of God is counterbalanced by the 'insistence upon the human sufferings and death of Jesus (2:10-18)' and 'the apocalyptic view of future judgement (10:27)'. Hebrews is then seen as challenging the Gnostic views of the readers, in particular their supposed denial of the 'salvatory significance of Jesus' death'.

5.2 Against Gnosis as background

Although Grässer (1986:162ff) agrees to the pilgrimage-motif in Hebrews being central to the whole document, he argues that this should not be viewed as an indication of Gnostic influence.

according to the 'gnostic idea of identity between the redeemed and the redeemer', is called 'improbable' by Conzelmann & Lindemann (1988:264).

62 Ἀρχιερεύς (2:17, high priest), ἀρχηγός (2:10, 12:2, initiator), πρόδρομος (6:20, forerunner).

63 Cf also the warning of Wilson (1972–1973:66) that elements which are later interpreted gnostically, need not have been subjected to this interpretation at an earlier stage.

64 Cf Jewett, quoted in Brown (1982:43) who sees in Hebrews an attempt to correct the 'Lycus Valley heresy', which supposedly also caused the problems addressed in Colossians.
In similar vein, although Ellingworth (1993:44-45) points out certain possible shared traits between Hebrews and Gnosis, he argues that one can view the almost deliberate omission of certain very prominent themes in Gnosis 'paradoxically' as an indication of the awareness of Gnostic terms. These themes would include for example γνῶσις (knowledge, insight), πληρωμα (completeness), φῶς (light), σκοτία (darkness), and σωτήρ (saviour). Other important motifs which are lacking are the central Gnostic ideas of 'creation by the Demiurge', and 'the world as the prison of the soul'.

Ellingworth (1993:45) is also at pains to show that even shared themes are interpreted differently in Hebrews when compared with the Gnosticism of the second and later centuries. However, any discussion of possible influence of Gnostic writings and/or ideas on the New Testament documents, will have to take the latest research on the dating of Gnostic tendencies into account.65

One should, as stressed above, guard against viewing the sharing of certain phrases and ideas as an indication of a 'historical link'. Hebrews indeed made the best of the available conceptual and thematic reservoir of the first-century. Gnostic themes are certainly present in Hebrews and as such these "...terms were...open to a Christian revalidation..." (Ellingworth 1993:44).

6 HEBREWS AND QUMRAN: PALESTINIAN-JEWISH ROOTS?66

The Qumranites...come nearer to the historical and exegetical perspectives of the letter to the Hebrews than any other non-Christian group (Hughes 1979:65).67

65 Contra Vorster (1990:83), one should then rather surmise about the possible influence of Hebrews-like theological notions on Gnosticism.
66 Cf also section 3 above (Hebrews as a Hellenistic document). Longenecker claims on the basis of certain parallels between Hebrews and the Qumran writings that Hebrews is more 'Jewish' than 'Hellenistic'. However, Isaacs (1992:51) agrees only in as far as Longenecker intended 'Gentile' with 'Hellenistic'. Cf Murray above.
67 Cf Schröger, quoted in Klijn (1975:21). Hughes (1977:14) calls this the 'best theory to explain the occasion and purpose' of Hebrews; Fischer (1989:176-187); Barr (1995:437). Or the other way round: amongst the writings of the New Testament, 'Hebrews is the one which gives the fullest answer to the basic tendencies of the sect of Qumran' (Braun, quoted in Bruce 1969:262). Against this position see Bruce (1962-63:218): the 'resemblances of phraseology' put Hebrews closer to Philo than to Qumran, requiring attention to the 'Epistle's purpose and content'; Montefiore (1964:18) calls the comparison of Hebrews with Qumran 'fashionable' and states: 'Indeed, our Epistle seems closer to Philo than to Qumran'; Coppens (quoted in Bruce 1969:263): the 'substantiated contacts' between Hebrews and Philo are more prominent than in the case of the Qumran writings, and Coppens (quoted in Montefiore 1964:17-18): 'the positive doctrinal contacts...are seen to be few and unspecific'; and, Kümmel (1975:396): 'there are no specific contacts between Heb and the Qumranian conceptual world, and...indeed the specific language of Qumran has no analogy in Heb'. Cf also Hughes (1989:353).
This rich Jewish heritage...is an important part of the general background of Hebrews (Attridge 1989:29).

After scholars had access to the Dead Sea Scrolls, some attempted to indicate the Qumran community, or one similar to it, as the theological-philosophical background to Hebrews.68 The effort to compare Hebrews with the Qumran writings is certainly justified when one considers the number of attributes shared on surface level. Whether these mutual characteristics constitute any plausible argument of direct or exclusive influence or dependency is a wholly different matter.

Whereas a number of scholars found shared traits between Hebrews and the Qumran writings, a number of sustained attempts were made to establish a direct literary or theological link of influence between the two. Flusser in 1958 argued that the Hebrews author was indebted to pre-Pauline concepts for his ‘theology’, some of which were also found in the Dead Sea scrolls. Yadin, also in 1958, maintained that the recipients of Hebrews were former Essenes69 who had now become converts to Christianity; and that Hebrews is a polemic against certain beliefs and activities of the Essene community: angelology, the priestly Messiah of Aaron (cf De Jonge & Van der Woude 1965–1966:322), the eschatological prophet and Moses, and residing in the desert. Kosmala in 1959 contended that the recipients of Hebrews were Jews like the Essenes, attached to Christianity and who had begun training in it, but were not yet fully converted to it; in addition Kosmala argues that the author previously was a member of the community, but was now writing to them to persuade them to become Christians (Bruce 1969:261–263; Fensham 1971:9–11; Buchanan 1975:309, 322–324; Buchanan 1985:260ff; Hughes 1989:351–352; Vorster 1990:81).

More frequently, the influence of Palestinian Judaism in Hebrews is accounted for by reference to similar themes and thoughts encountered in Qumran or the Essenes.70 Lindars (1991:23) refers to the analogy between the ‘approach to Scripture in relation to the predetermined plan of God’ in

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69 The consensus that the Qumran community was part of the Essene group, is not unanimous. Cf Barr (1995:433); Evans (1992:49–50); Noll (1993:777).
70 Thus Hughes (1989:352) contends that Yadin’s view should be expanded: Hebrews is directed to ‘Hebrew Christians who, facing hostility in a Jewish setting, were tempted to ease their position by reverting in a compromising fashion to Judaism of the idealistic Qumran type’. Contra this, cf De Jonge & Van der Woude (1965–1966:318). Buchanan (1975:325) reproaches Yadin and Kosmala for not showing upon the ‘similar point’ in Hebrews and the Qumran Scrolls: eschatology.
Hebrews and that detected in Qumran writings: the long-awaited, predetermined plan of salvation which will culminate in the parousia, is witnessed to in the prophetic Scriptures.

A number of other elements are shared by Hebrews and Qumran: vocabulary, angelology, the use of the Old Testament, initiation rites, discipline, morality, earthly representation of the ‘heavenlies’ and cultic issues (Guthrie 1982:40-41; Vorster 1990:81). Still other matters shared by Hebrews and the Scrolls would include the house of God, sacrifice, saints and martyrs (Bruce 1962-1963:218-231).

Apart from similar terminology in places, aspects in the ‘thought world’ of the Qumran documents and Hebrews are quite similar: the emphasis on a ‘New Covenant community’, including initiation rites, discipline and morals; detachment from the cult while retaining its symbols; angelology; the expectation of the Messiah as both priest and king; the interest in the Melchizedek figure;71 use of the Old Testament; and the earthly representation of the ‘heavenly’ (Johnson 1986:420; Vorster 1990:81; Lindars 1991:23).

The study by Fensham (1971) also stresses certain points of connection to Qumran’s symbols—the importance of καθαρίζειν (cleansing), ἁγιάζειν (sanctification) and τελειοῦν (perfection) to the Hebrews author; high-priesthood; and others. Yet, he warns that one encounters a problem with these parallels in that our knowledge regarding first-century Jewish sources is ‘scanty’, foreclosing any ‘categorical pronouncement’ on a possible relationship between Hebrews and Qumran. However, eventually Fensham does tread on dangerous soil in presuming Hebrews to be directed towards a Qumran-like group in Egypt with the aim to ‘evangelize’ them.

The similar concepts and broader lines of thought in Hebrews and Qumran need not, however, be explained simply in terms of direct influence or dependence. No real evidence exists for this, and it is more plausible to accept that these two literary entities came into existence having similar religious-spiritual frames of reference(s), which resulted in some shared traits between the two.72

The dissimilarities between the Qumran views and those found in Hebrews are perhaps even more striking than the similarities: in Hebrews the purity and dietary laws so significant to the Qumran community are absent,

72 Ellingworth (1993:48) argues that the ‘most thorough survey of possible points of contact between Hebrews and the Qumran corpus’ is still that of Braun (1966), concluding that ‘fundamental differences’ existed between the two rather than a ‘close connection’. Many similarities were not distinctive features but ‘common property of first-century Judaism'.

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and in Hebrews a mythic explanation for typical Qumran cosmological
dualism of good and evil is absent (Johnson 1986:420; Lindars 1991:23). The
attitude of Hebrews is 'revolutionary', as compared with the 'reform'
approach of Qumran: the 'inadequacy of the levitical institutions' in
Jerusalem is in question, not its 'contemporary corruption' (Ellingworth
1993:48).73

It is doubtful whether a comparison between the Qumran writings and
Hebrews alone provides the contours for understanding the philosophical
background of Hebrews or the document as such (Johnson 1986:420).74 The
value of comparing Hebrews with the writings of Qumran is possibly to be
found in the gathering of another piece of the jigsaw puzzle that constituted
the worldview and thoughts of early Christianity (Vorster 1988:82).75

7 HEBREWS AND JEWISH APOCALYPTICISM AND MYSTICISM

Another possible worldview which can afford some perspectives for the
understanding of Hebrews' thought can possibly be found in the apocalyptic
and mystic traditions found in first-century Jewish communities. This fol-
lows naturally on the discussion of the relationship of Hebrews with
Qumran, as traits of Jewish apocalypticism and mysticism are found in some
Qumran writings as well (cf Noll 1993:779–780).

Jewish apocalypticism and mysticism were closely related, with 'bodily
ascensions to heaven' more typical of the former and 'out-of-body visions'
more prevalent in the latter (Aune 1993:31). The kinship between apocalyp-
ticism and mysticism, although being two distinct literary genres, rested on
its similar religious experience (Rowland 1990:441; cf Kreitzer 1993:266; Segal
1990:35ff).

73 This view runs parallel to Murray's statements referred to above, in the sense that
Hebrews gives evidence of a 'dissenting, Hebrew' perspective.
74 Lindars (1991:23) notes succinctly that 'recent scholarship refuses to see any real
connection with Qumran'. Similarly, Attridge (1989:29) states that 'positing a direct
and exclusive dependence of Hebrews on either Philo or the Essenes have been easily
refuted'.
75 The redirection of the concern of scholars to a more historical, geographical,
temporal understanding of NT literature is cited by Longenecker (1975:205) as another
(positive) result of the study of the Qumran Scrolls.
7.1 Jewish apocalypticism

Barrett (1956) is often referred to in the context of Hebrews’ possible reliance on Jewish apocalyptic thought (cf, e.g., Klijn 1975:20). Indeed, to Barrett (1956:363–366) the ‘determining element’ in Hebrews is the eschatological.

Isaacs (1992:61) admits to the tension between ‘inaugurated’ and ‘future eschatology’ in Hebrews, and even that ‘spatial, timeless’ elements are combined with ‘linear, historical’ elements. She therefore insists that ‘Hebrews...seems to be closer to the (sc Jewish) apocalypticists’ world-view than that of Greek metaphysicists’.

Isaacs refers to 4 Ezra and 2 Baruch to substantiate her views that in Jewish apocalyptic writings there also existed simultaneously the ‘depiction of parallel worlds’ and ‘successive ages’. However, this naturally does not entail the ‘classification’ of Hebrews as an apocalypse. Similarly, Grasser (1986:174) contended that, ‘Der Hebr tradiert und modifiziert apokalyptische Motive, aber er ist kein Repräsentant frühchristlicher Apokalyptik.’

Grasser (1986:175) goes on to argue that Hebrews’ dualistic notions regarding eschatology are not to be reconciled with Jewish Apocalyptic thought because Hebrews’ orientation is anticosmic. Whereas in the former—as in Philo—the worldly is the shadow of and thus a sign towards the heavenly, in Hebrews the worldly is ‘good for nothing’ (nichtswürdig). ‘Was der Hebr letztlich dann aber doch von der Apokalyptik trennt, ...ist sein “antikosmisch eschatologischer Dualismus”’.

Klijn (1974:158) regards the strong allegorical line of interpretation which is found in Hebrews as the reason for unconcern with or even lack of a salvation-historical consciousness in Hebrews: the Old Covenant had aged. De Villiers and Du Toit (1990:90), on the other hand, finds the horizontal or historical line in Hebrews to be much stronger than the vertical. They agree that Christ and the new covenant are described in vertical terms—‘to emphasise their transcendence or excellence’—but stress that the ‘theology’ of Hebrews is not ‘determined’ by spatial thought.

76 Reputed for resisting definition, for my purposes apocalypticism constitutes a worldview found in Jewish circles from c 200 BCE to 200 CE, which concentrated on the expectation of imminent divine intervention in human history to save God’s people and punish the wicked and restoring the world to its original good—these notions were communicated secretively by means of dreams and visions, usually pseudonomously. Cf Aune (1993:25).

77 Cf the reference to Michel above. He holds that the apocalyptic imagination of Hebrews stands at odds with Hellenism (Käsemann 1984:67); also Guthrie (1970:721–722) quoting Strachan: Hebrews’ views are ‘based on the Platonic doctrine of the two worlds, but governed by the Jewish apocalyptic view of history’ (my emphasis). Ferguson (1993:450), however, argues that apocalyptic thinking and that of Philo are opposites.
Wright (1992:409-410) rejects the suggestion of Koester that Hebrews be seen as an ‘apocalyptic gnosis’. Wright finds in Hebrews ‘underneath the poetic sequence, ...a clear implicit narrative sequence’, based on a similar pattern found in the Synoptic gospels and Pauline literature: ‘The story of the world, and of Israel, has led up to this point, namely, the establishment of the true worship of the true God’ and ‘Jesus has brought Israel’s history to its paradoxical climax’.

The eschatological and apocalyptic elements in Hebrews cannot be denied; however, to consider the presence of these elements as evidence enough to characterise Hebrews—in the exclusive sense of the word—as a specimen of Jewish apocalypticism, seems too bold.

7.2 Jewish Merkabah mysticism

Although Hickling (1983:112-116) refers to the possibility of Merkabah mysticism explaining aspects of the thought of Hebrews, Williamson (1975-1976:232-236) attempted some years ago to argue the case more extensively. Referring to Schenke and Scholem, Williamson contended that Hebrews shares the major characteristics or ‘essential features’ of Merkabah mysticism: the emphasis on God’s throne (4:16); the interest in angels; the imagery of fire, holiness and transcendent glory of God; and, the idea of the mystic’s journey through the heavens. Rowland (1990:441) argues that the elements of the contrast between heavenly and earthly shrine, as well as Christ’s ascent by way of the cross into the latter, might also reflect Merkabah influence. However, important also and unlike perhaps the modern mystic experience, ‘we find no traces of a mystical union between the soul and God, ...only...the possibility of man’s communion with God...a contact...’ (Williamson 1975-1976:234).

Although the majority of Merkabah mystical writings is dated after the time of the New Testament, and some considerably later, Williamson (1975-1976:235) argues that probably 3 Enoch is evidence of ‘a system which had already developed to a considerable degree’. Some rabbis of the first and

78 In this tradition those mystics with extraordinary spiritual talents and experience would transcend the earthly existence to enter the heavens and ultimately participate in the heavenly liturgy.
79 Williamson (1975-1976:235) quotes Goodenough who argued that Philo ‘was essentially mystical in outlook’.
80 However, the ‘merkabah’, הָרְכָּבָה (chariot-throne) of Ezekiel and elsewhere, is not found in Hebrews.
81 ‘...developed in the Hekhalot (divine palaces) literature of the Talmudic age (200-700 CE)...’ (Isaacs 1992:61) However, Rowland (1990:441) argues in favour of its pre-700 CE existence.
second centuries can also be tied to mysticism, in some Qumran writings82 themes related to Jewish mysticism are present, and even in Philo’s writings mystical elements can be identified, which leads Williamson (1975–1976:235) to contend: ‘It is not impossible that there was in the first century A.D. a mystical segment of Hellenistic Judaism which concentrated its attention on the throne of God and ministering angels’.

Williamson (1975–1976:235) adds that in those cases where the mystical tradition seems to have influenced Hebrews, the parallels are derived from the Old Testament (e.g., Dn 7, Is 6, Ps 97, Ezk 1).

Perhaps the major characteristic of Merkabah mysticism was that it ‘took the form of supernatural, heavenly vision’, and it is exactly this which Hebrews does not ‘lay claim to’ (Isaacs 1992:61). Although Merkabah mysticism fails to account for all of Hebrews’ peculiar thought, it certainly enables one to explain certain elements in Hebrews with greater ease and coherency (cf McCullough 1980:151).

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8.1 Relevant or irrelevant?

Spurgeon’s teenage feelings on Hebrews—that the Hebrews should have kept the Epistle for themselves!—probably articulate the feelings of many contemporary readers of it. Brown (1982:20–26), who refers to Spurgeon, stresses the relevance of Hebrews for today if the epistle is not read ‘hastily or superficially’ which will lead to imagining its ‘themes’ to be ‘antiquated, irrelevant or even esoteric’. Brown identifies a number of current concerns upon which a careful reading of Hebrews might cast some light: the present ecology debate, liberation theology and religious pluralism—to name a few.84

Stedman argues that the readers of the book of Hebrews in both the first and twentieth centuries are equally caught up in the ‘midst of growing world chaos and powerful cultural pressures to return to a more comfortable past’, while trying to keep to their faith in Christ. Whether or not Stedman’s generalising identification of the experiences of people divided by almost two millennia is convincing, it is clear in any case that in Hebrews ‘appear flesh-

82 Especially some fragments from Cave 4 referring to ‘the throne of the chariot’. Williamson (1975–1976:235) refers to studies on this by Strugnell and Scholem. Naturally certain recurrent phrases or themes would not necessarily imply influence or dependency.

83 Some scholars would probably elect to refer to Hebrews as ‘contextualised religion’. Cf Johnsson (1978a:107).

and-blood believers struggling to overcome the stranglehold of past traditions and adjust to the fresh movements of God in their fast-changing world' (Stedman 1992:9; cf Stibbs 1970:9–12).

Perhaps this kind of generalisation of Hebrews—‘a book that has clearly lost its relevance it once no doubt possessed’—attempts to overcome the feelings of ‘many twentieth-century readers’ who find it to be ‘an irrelevant and almost incomprehensible book’ (Williamson 1969–1970:372). The reason for this negative evaluation of Hebrews can be found in the apparent influence of many ‘first-century Greek and Hebrew thought-forms’ which gave rise to the ‘strange language’ of this book. Williamson approvingly quotes Hatch’s opinion of 1888, viz the Greek theories and Greek usages which have received a Christian ‘form and flavour’ yet remain ‘in their essence Greek still’.

8.2 Contextualising in/of Hebrews

In criticism of much of the ‘background of Hebrews’ dialogue, it seems an eagerness persists to prove or disprove direct or exclusive dependency of Hebrews on particular contemporary religious traditions or traditions of thought—‘philosophies’. Clearly, many similarities with a wide range of first century traditions and thoughts exist. To prove or disprove influence or dependency does not seem to advance either our understanding of or ability to read Hebrews in the twentieth century. Thus, while noting and appropriating the similarities between Hebrews and other, contemporary, traditions, it seems more profitable to ask how and especially why Hebrews reinterpreted these shared concepts. Whereas the ‘how’-question has to some extent featured in the above, the reasons for Hebrews’ use of certain thought-patterns and traditions are probably manifold, but—it can be argued—ultimately point in the direction of contemporising the then existing elements of belief in Jesus Christ as Son of God.

Hebrews gives clear evidence of its interpretation of the meaning of Christ for its particular day and age, and environment. In the attempt to

85 Although admitting to Hebrews being ‘in some ways alien to the modern reader’, Lindars (1991:128,134–135) thinks the long and sustained argument, as well as its rigorism regarding apostacy, contributes to the difficulty experienced by today’s readers of Hebrews.

86 Naturally many differences also exist, as Attridge (1986:1) contends ‘(t)he Epistle to Hebrews represents a particularly complex case of both the appropriation and rejection of that heritage’ (my emphasis).

87 One needs to take into account that the letter appears to be directed at a destination within second generation Christianity: certain traditions have already been in place for some time (cf 2:3–4; 5:12; 6:1–3; 10:25; 10:32–34; 13:7; also, e.g., Johnson 1986:417–8, Attridge 1989:12; Stedman 1992:12, even Calvin 1963:2). An interesting
articulate this, Hebrews gives testimony of utilising a number of traditions, wittingly and unwittingly. It shares the terminology, concepts, thoughts and ideas of a variety of diverse and different traditions, movements and groups. Without having to enter into polemics with any particular set of views, Hebrews sets out and accomplishes an effective and thought-provoking interpretation of Christ ‘for the day’, an interpretation that is unique in many respects in the New Testament. As Johnson (1986:417) puts it: ‘Hebrews does not advance an interpretation that disputes shared traditions but advances one that builds on the traditions for those able to move to greater insight’.

The danger whenever one considers the contextual nature of theology, is that one is tempted to become overly protective of the traditional categories, or those one has become used to. This tendency can also be seen in some approaches to the background of Hebrews. One scholar (Guthrie 1982:42, question is whether the letter is dated post 70 CE, the date of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. Although beyond the scope of this contribution, the dating of Hebrews poses exciting possibilities for explaining its contextual theology. The 70 CE event could explain the need for a new paradigm to understand ‘Christianity’s Jewish roots’, however, dating Hebrews before 66–70 CE would make its contextualisation even more radical, and not less context-bound! Cf Collins (1988:53), Lindars (1989:403); for different dating positions, Bruce (1969:260–261), Barr (1995:431). Porter (1994) argues against taking the verbal ‘present tense descriptions’ of the Jerusalem cult as an indication of a pre-70 CE dating. For a pre-70 CE date the arguments of Murray (1982:202, 205) about Hebrews containing sentiments indicative of ‘dissenting Hebrews’ (i.e. as opposed to the ‘Jewish establishment’) would be even more attractive. A less convincing explanation based on a number of unverified assumptions, is by Stedman (1992:13) who explains the concern of Hebrews with steadfastness by referring to the unbearable delay in Jesus’ return which has the intended readers (situated in Jerusalem) longing back to their former religious practices which were seen performed daily in the temple.


Wilson (1987:27) stresses not only Hebrews’ contextualising of certain concepts and terminology, but that these could indeed be ‘taken up and utilized by different writers for very different purposes’.

Lindars (1989:405) finds the ‘new teaching’ of Hebrews in its ‘defence of the apostolic kerygma of the sacrificial death of Christ’.

Also Lindars (1989:406): Hebrews’ ‘defence (sc of the apostolic kerygma) opened up new vistas for the subsequent development of Christian doctrine’, in its attempt ‘to reassert the apostolic faith’.

Naturally, the particular disposition on the context’s possible influence in the resultant theology or religious practices, betrays something of the interpreter’s view of what is traditionally known in Christianity as ‘revelation’, the nature of the Bible especially as ‘inspired’ book, etc. There is no room here to attend to these very important matters.
a fairly representative example of the tendency, refuses to acknowledge that Hebrews arrived at its interpretation ‘through the application of Hellenistic ideas’, leading him to contend that Hebrews’ approach is ‘more biblical’ than Philo’s, and that Hebrews merely expresses its Christian conviction of Christ being the key to the Old Testament in Hellenistic forms!

The serious difficulties with the kind of view expressed above boils down to at least the following three matters. The argument pressupposes a Christian tradition that came into existence without the forces and pressures of society bearing in on it and thus moulding—and in the process changing—that tradition. Secondly, to suggest that contextualised expressions of Christian belief are ‘unbiblical’ only because it would not adhere to the worldview or conceptual framework of traditional Christianity, is tantamount to the idolisation of the common and accepted practices and beliefs. Finally, the very idea that one can use a particular language and also worldview to express certain ideas, without the language and worldview rubbing off on the ideas, seems not only naive but dangerous to be oblivious of.93

Hebrews not only clearly shows its use of available traditions, predominantly the contemporary Christian tradition, but its use of these traditions is clearly innovative and creative.94 Williamson (1969-1970:375) emphasises that, in the New Testament, Hebrews’ uniqueness in language and thought is matched by it being ‘a highly original piece of doctrinal thinking’, crafted by its author’s ‘creative genius’: ‘...Hebrews...contains some of the greatest texts of the N.T., on the loftiest themes, in the sublimest language’.95 Similarly, (Hickling 1983:115) states: ‘...(sc Hebrews’) most striking

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93 In terms of one specific tradition, the summary of Perkins (1988:278) is applicable here: ‘Adaptation of Platonic philosophy to understanding the biblical message of salvation and the soul’s progress toward God became an essential part of Christian spirituality.’

94 The description of Middle Platonic representatives by Ferguson (1993:365) could well be made applicable to Hebrews as it also ‘...reflects the eclectic tendencies of the time and the capacity...to absorb many other elements and be the integrating framework for new syntheses...’ Whereas Ferguson explains the dominance of Middle Platonic thought in Patristic theology on the basis on this description, one can certainly argue along the same rationale for this notion of assimilation and integration as one of the reasons for the tenacity and pervasive influence of ‘Christian’ theology as opposed to others like ‘Judaism’ since the first century CE. Pregeant (1995:470) balances the Hebrews author’s creativity with his use of the ‘wide range of ideas’ available to him.

characteristic is the depth and imaginative quality of its reflection...’ Naturally, this should not be taken in isolation from the context or (rhetorical) exigency detected in Hebrews, which was one of ‘desperate urgency’.96 As Williamson (1969–1970:371–376) argues, the twentieth-century readers of Hebrews will have to repeat the efforts detected in Hebrews in order to render the writing accessible for the contemporary situation and mind: the necessity ‘to employ the doctrinal constructions’ found in Hebrews ‘is extremely doubtful’.97 Rather, one ‘...must attempt to interpret in modern language categories and concepts employed in the Epistle which, because of the nature of life in a modern, western, industrial society, bear no direct relation to those employed in Hebrews’.

‘In many parts of Africa’, Williamson (1969–1970:375) finds a ‘relevance and importance’ for Hebrews which had been lost for Western society, referring specifically to sacrificial practices. However, even this apparently parallel worldview might, under scrutiny, appear to be in need of a reinter­pretation of Hebrews, contextualised for Africa specifically. This would necessitate an honest evaluation and comparison of the thought-patterns both in Hebrews and different African societies, probably discontinuing simplistic and generalised ‘equivalents’.

Ironically, Stedman who puts so much emphasis on the nature of the Hebrews document itself being contextual (1992:9), seems to insist (1992:15) on appropriating certain first-century contextually derived conclusions of Hebrews ‘as is’ for today and cautions lest ‘our cultural context...lures us into practices or deeds that are inconsistent with the new life we have been given in Christ’.98 This, in short, leads Stedman to insist on the ‘parousia’; the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ as ‘complete ground of salvation’ as contrasted with and opposed to ‘works-righteousness’ as a prominent theme; and, the portrayal of Jesus Christ as ‘high priest’—even after admitting that modern readers ‘may lack the Jewish background’—as such themes need not be recontextualised.99

97 Pressing his point home, Williamson (1969–1970:375) considers the relegating of Hebrews to an ‘appendix’ to the New Testament preface to leaving it uninterpreted as a ‘hindrance and a barrier’. While an ‘abbreviation’ of the canon—regarding Hebrews—seems in order, in the same vein ‘extensions’ of the canon are welcomed by Williamson, as the canon ‘cannot be considered properly closed until the Holy Spirit has no further truth into which He wishes to lead the Church’.
98 Cf the translation model of contextualisation (Bevans 1992:30–46).
99 Whether the expectation of the imminent return of Christ is still widespread among Christians today is questionable; Stendahl (in his Paul and the introspective conscience of the West) and others after him, have convincing argued that the contrast between faith-righteousness and works-righteousness as commonly understood today, was not first-century Jewish but Medieval Catholic; and, insisting on the portrayal of
Again ironically, Williamson who denies in his comparative studies the possible influence of Plato (1963) and Philo (1970) respectively on Hebrews, insists that Hebrews needs to be interpreted in ‘modern language’ or else one should accept its ‘contemporary irrelevance’ (1969–1970:875).100

It would seem then as if those who are willing to affirm the contextual nature of the biblical documents disavow the same process of contextualisation today, and vice versa. It should, however, be considered more appropriate that, since one admits to the contextual and contingent nature of the Hebrews writing, the process of reinterpretation should be continued in and for the twentieth-century for the sake of today’s Christians, and those of tomorrow!

There is need to engage in a search for fresh idioms in which to express Christian beliefs and to capture the loyalty of modern men (sic) to the Truth as Christ had made us see it and to arrest the drift away from Christianity of those who, seeing it only in traditional dress, do not comprehend it (Williamson 1969–1970:376).

8.3 ‘Christian’ tradition(s)

In attempting to account for the distinctiveness of the ‘religious imagination’ of Hebrews, one should be careful not to limit sources of influences to ‘pre- or non-Christian sources’. Hickling (1983:114, 115) in his suggestive comparison of a certain section of Hebrews (2:10–18) with the Fourth Gospel argues that the ‘immediate matrix’ of the ‘theology’ of Hebrews was formed by the Christian tradition, to which the author of Hebrews was ‘indebted’. This tradition did not only comprise of ‘credenda and proof-texts’, but suggested ‘a way of attending to Christ and to his relationship with us that was reflective’.101

This position is supported by Lindars (1991:25), when he takes a very apologetic position in accounting for the influence of different traditions on Hebrews: ‘the chief influence...is the mainstream of Christian life and teaching’. However, in the process Lindars uses certain concepts in a way which

100 Williamson does seem to acknowledge the influence of Merkabah mysticism on Hebrews, cf section 7.2 above.

101 Witherington (1991:146–152) argues compellingly for Galatians having had some influence on Hebrews as detected in a shared terminology (e.g. the use of δυνατοτητης), and a similar use of Old Testament texts (both in choice and technique). He concludes with the contention that the author of Hebrews ‘very likely’ was ‘part of the larger Pauline circle’, suggesting the name of Apollos as a likely contender. Guthrie (1970:723), however, concludes that Hebrews is ‘as much in line with Paulinism as with the primitive tradition’. Cf Rissi (1987:25).
are heavily questioned today, for example ‘mainstream...of Christian...teaching’ and ‘primitive kerygma’, as though there was an agreed upon set of doctrine(s), and then as something monolithic. Certainly a ‘large, shared body of common traditions’ (Attridge 1989:31) existed, but at least the diverse positions among the different New Testament authors contradict a fixed body of doctrines. In any case, it has become common practice to speak of first century ‘Christianity’ as a ‘Jewish sect’ which contests references like the Hebrews author was ‘first and foremost a Christian’ (Ellingworth 1993:47), as this is probably a term that would not have been very descriptive during the first century CE.

Perhaps one should rather acknowledge the claim made by Attridge (1989:30) that the ‘commitment to Jesus’ found in Hebrews is ‘as important as any of the Jewish [and other, JP] traditions out of which Hebrews has been formed’.

Hebrews’ position within the tradition of the followers of Jesus Christ can perhaps best be detected in the way it appropriated the Scriptures of Israel: ‘...his (sc the author of Hebrews) use of the Old Testament is in continuity with what has preceded him in Christian hermeneutics, but unique in his treatment of relationships and implications’ (Longenecker 1975:185). The same reasoning is detected in Ellingworth (1993:39) when he writes, ‘(t)he author inherits an interpreted Bible and makes his own, often original, contribution to the interpretive tradition in which he stands’ and ‘...freedom to highlight, and occasionally to de-emphasize, features which do not carry the weight of the main argument.’

Similarly, when Hughes (1979:124-130) refers to Hebrews’ faith and its traditions, he does so from the perspective of the author of Hebrews as ‘interpreter of Scriptures’. 103

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102 Lindars (1989:405) also argues that the Hebrews author ‘was in close touch with the primitive kerygma’. However, he disputes the contention of an ‘Early Catholicism’ in Hebrews (as suggested by Grässer, Fuller, Koester; also Conzelmann and Dunn) because, although Hebrews shares certain terminology and ideas with other New Testament writings, the content and use thereof tend to differ, e.g. the role of the Spirit, worship, leaders, faith.

103 Although one can probably argue that the ‘Old Testament’ forms an important ‘backdrop’ to Hebrews (at least in the sense of the most referred to tradition), the use of the Scriptures of Israel in Hebrews merits a separate and more detailed discussion than what could be allowed for here. In short, however, the ‘contextualization’ of Scripture in Hebrews illustrates how Christians could use and manipulate the thought and views of their time in order to reinterpret Christ for a new and changed situation. Buchanan (1972:xix) for instance refers to Hebrews as a ‘homiletical midrash’; his is probably the most sustained interpretation of Hebrews as a midrash in toto on Ps 110. For Hebrews’ use of the Old Testament, abundant sources exist, e.g. Combrink (1971:22-36) with a short bibliography; Longenecker (1975:158-185); Ellingworth (1993:37-42). 104 Cf Court and Court (1990:319) on 11:17-19, the only New Testament...
However, to the argument that Hebrews pays no attention to the context of its quotations, Ellingworth (1993:41) replies strongly that the point of the quote may be concentrated in a single word or phrase, and that Hebrews does not offer ‘continuous exposition of the text’ in the modern sense of the word. Ellingworth (1993:40) contends that ‘...the interpretive texts do not replace the historical accounts, to which the author more than once appeals in course of his exposition of an interpretive text, or in support of his interpretation of Israel’s history’ because, ‘(a)t the end of the day, what matters for the author is not the diverse imagery, but the one reality to which it points’, *viz* Jesus Christ (Ellingworth 1986:350).

Moving from the interpretive thrust detected in Hebrews, Hughes stresses the ‘freedom’ of the twentieth-century interpreter:

The freedom of the modern interpreter then lies in his (sic) liberty to choose which of these several hermeneutical attempts applies most fittingly to his (sic) present situation, always in critical assessment of their own legitimacy as interpretations, and endeavouring to understand as well as he (sic) can the factors which have given them their present shape (Hughes 1979:130).

Naturally, this interpretation will happen within the Christian tradition and with the aim of exploring more adequate ways of ‘doing theology’ through which Jesus Christ will become even more of a present reality to people.

8.4 Areas in need of contextual interpretation

Many aspects of thought in Christianity, accompanied by a specific worldview, are challenged by the world of the twentieth century. One cannot help but surmise what elements of Hebrews, were it written today, would be reinterpreted. As one finds in any case that certain issues lie readily at hand, which will only be mentioned here, the following is by no means an exhaustive list!

The ‘traditional Christian’ dualism and even dichotomy between spiritual and material, heaven and earth with its implicit notion of value (or lack thereof) will have to be acknowledged and dealt with.

The need for materiality in our theology, in order to recover the spiritual in this age of secularism, is to be emphasised (Füssel 1984; Sölle 1984).104

The atonement ritual accompanied by the blood of the sacrificial victims, ‘which is most distasteful to modern readers’ and without relevance for their reference to the Akedah (Abraham’s intended sacrifice of Isaac).

104 Cf Johnsson (1978a:105) on Hebrews’ ‘materialistic’ view of sin. However, he uses the term in contrast to ‘moralistic’.
conception of the work of Christ, might find a fertile contextual interpretation in Africa. Even though some Jews and Greeks in the time of Hebrews criticised these practices, Hebrews nevertheless did not spiritualise the sacrificial concept but stressed its dated temporality and inappropriateness for the era commencing with Christ. The 'purpose of sacrifice' seems to be an important aspect in Hebrews: 'a means of reconciliation with God' in a very practical way. It is exactly this need for practical expression ('to objectify their inner conflict of emotions'), felt by many Christians today, that is exemplified by the sacrificial activities of African Christians with regard to their ancestors (Lindars 1991:132–134).


Son of man: Buchanan (1975:321) advocates the renewed investigation of this concept. He warns, however, against restricting the range of this phrase to that of 'corporate personality' or heavenly figure, and stresses the importance of realising that it had definite political implications: 'a king who ruled over a nation and had such power that other kings would be subject to him'.

Hardly enough studies have been done to investigate the contextual interpretation of concepts in Hebrews in contemporary and as yet unexplored contexts in biblical studies, and by means of other world-views which might initially seem incompatible with the 'traditional Christian' one. For example, Arowele (1990) contextualises the pilgrim or sojourn motif,105 emphasised by Käsemann, in the Church in Africa which experiences pilgrimage and exile caused amongst others by poverty, famine, political instability, tribal and racial discrimination; Yeo (1991) attempts to show how the Chinese ‘Yin-Yang’ philosophy provides a paradigm to appropriate the concept of rest in Hebrews as expressed in κατάταξις and σοββατισμός.

9 CONCLUSION: HEBREWS TODAY

Two quotes illustrate two major conclusions of this study:

Such a convergence of attempts (sc related to Merkabah mysticism) to solve the riddle of the Epistle to the Hebrews should not, however, blind the student of that mysterious document into thinking that any one element in the kaleidoscopic Judaism of the first-century Hellenistic world provides the answer to all the questions that need to be asked of its background (Williamson 1975–1976:236).

105 To Johnsson (1978b) this motif as metaphor for the cultus as described in Hebrews, enables one to read Hebrews 'holistically': it is no description of the cult, but it 'harmonizes and blends with it'.

Its (sc Hebrews') author did not start with questions of Christology and soteriology in abstract. These emerge out of his attempt to reinterpret the Scriptures to meet the specific needs of his audience (Isaacs 1992:67).

The author of Hebrews was clearly a 'child of many worlds'. The world of thought found in Hebrews is a complex one, sharing in many traditions contemporary to it: aspects of its thought were probably held in common with (various) Jewish traditions, with Alexandrian-Platonist circles and even with Gnostic groups. Many concepts, thoughts, ideas and even vocabulary seem to have been 'communal property' between these traditions and Hebrews. However, none of these specific circles of influence can be indicated as the specific origin of the thoughts detected in Hebrews, simply by lack of evidence for it. As McCullough (1980:151) rightly argues it is necessary 'to abandon the attempt to see the epistle's background in terms of only one scheme of thought'.

The discussion on the relationship between Hebrews and Philo—and all the other possible sources of influence—should furthermore not be staged either on the line of direct religious-spiritual influence or in terms of literary-philosophical dependency. Equally, to deny that various elements of the contemporary world, including the reigning philosophies and thought and world-views had some bearing on Hebrews, would render Hebrews incomprehensible and irrelevant to its first readers and those following.


107 The Scriptures of Israel was another important source of influence in Hebrews. Cf note 103. From a different perspective, another hitherto very much unexplored field of study regarding Hebrews concerns Social-Scientific Criticism which may be of benefit in providing a social 'setting' for reading Hebrews, cf Desilva (1994:439-461).

108 Isaacs (1992:61) decries the 'either-or approach' in this debate among contemporary scholars. The world of Hebrews was one 'in which “both-and” could and did cohabit'. Cf Guthrie (1970:724) who argues for 'a theory of co-lateral development in Hebrews', comprising of Pauline, Johannine and Hebrews' own theology 'contemporaneously'; Hickling (1983:114) who refers to Gnosticism, Apocalypticism, and Merkabah Mysticism not being 'mutually exclusive'; and Yeo (1991:3) who holds 'Hellenistic philosophy, philo-gnostic, and merkabah mystical worldview' together.

109 Although his distinctions of 'orthodox' and 'heterodox' Judaism might not hold water, McCullough (1980:151) on the other hand rightly argues that the portrayal of Judaism in its various guises, and then situating Hebrews within that pluriform context has more lasting value.

110 E.g the statement by Guthrie (1970:720) that unlike Philo, the author of Hebrews did not approach the Old Testament with philosophical presuppositions—only with the 'key' that Christ has fulfilled the old order—creating the illusion that Hebrews is devoid of 'philosophical' assumptions. However, it is exactly these assumptions and their accompanying world-views which make for much of the difficulty in contemporary understanding of Hebrews, especially when these assumptions and presup-
Following Dey, Thompson (1982:14-15) insists that the background of Hebrews should be investigated according to its 'conceptual framework'; 'literary dependence' should not be the issue.111 In general then, it can be noted that Hebrews is representative of first-century Hellenised Judaism, of a 'dissenting, Hebrew' kind.

Although the message to the recipients of Hebrews seems fairly clear, the impossibility of indicating a historical source(s)112 for the particular thought contained in Hebrews, can be seen as either complicating the issues or being beneficial to the reading of the document. It complicates matters in the sense that there are a number of traditions which can and indeed do seem to form a wider frame of reference for our understanding of the thought of Hebrews, leaving us with no "clear cut" option. On the other hand, not having a clear origin or source for the line of thinking in Hebrews might in the end alleviate our minds from the preoccupation with correlations, similarities and parallels113 and entice us to read this document anew for our times, like its author did in reading the Old Testament.

One can argue that Hebrews exemplifies the way in which the Christian message can and needs to present the Good News of Christ by incorporating many elements derived from traditions that might have been called heathen and pagan,114 and this was accomplished in a way which people today often label syncretistic.

111 Thompson emphasises the conceptual world Hebrews shares with Philo, as well with the 'intellectual climate' in which Philo lived: Middle Platonism.
112 The attempt by Johnsson (1978a:107) to identify the 'source' is unconvincing: the problem of situating Hebrews in terms of Religionsgeschichte is tied to its cultic language which, while 'having its roots in the Old Testament Cultus, is not explained there'. However, his emphasis on the strong presence of 'religious' (as opposed to 'theological') language, although 'endeictic' (i.e., in veiled form), should perhaps receive more attention. This emphasis is repeated in Johnsson (1978b:251).
113 The remark of Isaacs (1992:51) that whoever searches for parallels between different writings 'inevitably' finds them, holds true generally and not only for the literature of 'Hellenistic-Judaism'. Thompson (1982:12) suggests 'extreme care in the handling of parallels'. Koester (1994:131) sees the kind of comparative (extra-biblical) material used; the assessment of similarities and differences; and, the relating of the ideas found in the sources used to the social settings in which these sources were read, as 'fundamental questions' for the interpreter of Hebrews.
114 In Hebrews the attempt seems to be not so much one of 'using the audience's argument or mindset to argue against them' (as, e.g., Yeo 1991:3) but rather skilfully exploiting these elements to further its (Hebrews') own cause. The difference is perhaps more than just one of emphasis; viz., not so much refutation of existing ideas, as reappropriating the ideas for a different purpose.
Ironically, Hebrews presents to us an image of Christianity which was called to a persistent, unwavering faith, with the call clothed not in ‘traditional’ garb but in a language and according to a worldview which its addressees could understand and relate to: a ‘with-it’ translation of the ‘Christ-event’ for Hellenistic-oriented, ‘dissenting-Hebrew’ Christians, intent on urging them to greater resilience in their faith. Our task as theologians, ministers, and Christians surely is no different from that of Hebrews: to spread the gospel message to the people of today, both rural and urban, rich and poor, to all the different cultures and sub-cultures, to church-people and those outside the church, to all people—in a language and according to a worldview with which these people can identify.

The dress of the message is not simply its Bultmannian exterior, the husk containing the kernel: the message incorporates its medium. In such a way God speaks to us all today, as he spoke to the fathers in the past (Heb 1:1–2): our responsibility is to amplify his voice, indeed, become his voice as disciples of Christ, following in the footsteps of the prophets, of which Hebrews as document is one.

WORKS CONSULTED


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