

THE BOOK OF HEBREWS
AND ESCHATOLOGICAL SYSTEMS

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Introduction

In his book *Understanding Dispensationalists*, Vern Poythress suggests that much disagreement over eschatological systems amongst evangelicals could be solved by a thorough study of the book of Hebrews:

I propose, then, both to myself and to my dispensationalist friends, the following discipline. Let us all devote ourselves to reading, studying, and meditating on the Book of Hebrews. Let us ask the Lord to teach us how to interpret the OT properly, and understand the relation of the OT to the NT properly. Let none of us come with the attitude, "I will see whether there is some way or other of understanding Hebrews such that it confirms my own views." Let us not struggle to have it simply *confirm* our previously existing views. Rather, let us cast those views aside so far as we genuinely can. Let us subject them to criticism wherever things in the Book of Hebrews point us in that direction. Let us be humble listeners wherever Hebrews leads us.¹

Poythress is not the only theologian who sees Hebrews as the key to unlock eschatological answers. Robert Strimple uses Hebrews, alongside the entire New Testament, to prescribe a particular view of the Old Testament that leads to amillennialism.² Bruce Waltke suggests that it is not only entirely appropriate but hermeneutically required to "read the New Testament into the Old."³

¹ Vern Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 1994), 70. Poythress later adds, "No doubt one of the reasons God has provided us with the Book of Hebrews is so that we would have a safe and sure starting point and guide into the complexities of interpreting the OT. It has proved to be that in my life: the above discipline was one of the ways whereby I came to make up my mind. I am confident that it will be so in many others' lives" (Ibid.).

² "But is it correct to interpret such Old Testament prophecies as descriptions of a future millennial kingdom... To answer that, the crucial question the Christian must ask, of course, is this: How does the *New Testament* teach us to interpret such passages? In the New Testament Christ's church has been given, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, that post-resurrection, post-Pentecost revelation that is absolutely authoritative, her infallible guide in all matters of faith and life, including this vitally important matter of how to interpret Old Testament prophecy." (Robert A. Strimple, "Amillennialism," in *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, ed. Darrell L. Bock [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999], 84-5; emphasis his). Strimple enlists Hebrews to bolster his case for amillennialism on pp. 89-92.

³ Bruce Waltke, "Is It Right to Read the New Testament into the Old?" *Christianity Today* 27, no. 13 (September 2, 1983): 77.

The theologians above seem to suggest that any Christian who devotes serious attention to the book of Hebrews, alongside the rest of the New Testament, will find an eschatological system similar to theirs, one of strong continuity. But is Hebrews truly the inspired answer to Christian eschatology and Old Testament interpretation? Upon closer examination, what does the book of Hebrews really offer in terms of eschatological lessons?

Any answer to the question above will by necessity involve several related eschatological issues. First, Hebrews has been used to establish that the New Testament has priority over the Old Testament; that is to say, Old Testament prophecies and promises must be viewed through the lens of the New. Second, Hebrews contains pervasive and contested uses of Old Testament passages, leading many to conclude that Hebrews offers a central lesson in God's perspective on Old Testament hermeneutics. Third, Hebrews is often reported to show fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy and typology that argues for covenant amillennialism. Finally, the significant futurism of Hebrews is rarely discussed by those who wish to emphasize the above issues.

This paper aims to survey these issues and provide preliminary responses from a discontinuity perspective. Hopefully this brief analysis will lead to a more balanced and fruitful discussion of an important New Testament book.

The Book of Hebrews: Background, Themes, and Content

The background of the book of Hebrews is widely recognized as the most difficult in the canon.⁴ Scholars have attributed authorship variously to Paul, Clement of Rome, Barnabas,

⁴ "We are unlikely ever to be able to give certain and specific answers to such questions as: Who wrote Hebrews? Where? And to whom? Hebrews itself does not give this information, and there is no textual evidence that it ever did. External evidence of authorship is unreliable and divided, and external evidence of the circumstances in which the letter was written is largely lacking" (Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1993], 3).

Peter, Jude, Stephen, Priscilla and/or Acquilla, Epaphras, Apollos, and more. Similarly, the recipients of the book have been thought to be Jewish Christians, Gentile Christians. Even the date and destination of the book have been widely disputed.⁵

The purpose of the book is much less controversial. The recipients of the letter, whoever they might have been, were Christians in need of encouragement to persevere in light of temptation to apostasy.⁶ The majority of the letter provides this encouragement by detailing the myriad of ways that Jesus is better than varied Old Testament figures and means of relating to God. On the heels of these lessons on Jesus' supremacy, the author gives stark warnings on the consequences of neglecting so great a salvation. Using the generation that wandered in the wilderness as a paradigm, the author makes clear: if that generation received so severe a punishment, how much more will those be punished who despise the better new covenant, inaugurated by the better revelation, mediator, and High Priest, Jesus? The past, far from offering a better means of religious observance, points instead to the kind of faith that pleases God, which rests finally in the promised Christ who has come.⁷

To make his case, the author ably demonstrates that Christ is better than angels (1:5–2:18), that Christ is a better high priest (3:1–10:39), and that Christ is a better ground for an enduring faith that pleases God (11:1–13:25). Inside these larger themes is a host of Old Testament figures and topics (Moses, Aaron, Melchizedek, the promised “rest” of God, the

⁵ For a survey of Hebrews' authorship, recipients, date, and destination, see: Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 3–59; William Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, WBC (Dallas: Word Books, 1991), x.vii–lxiii; Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmann's Publishing, 2010), 1–19.

⁶ “Unless the writer was quite mistaken (a view which *ex hypothesi* we have excluded), something had happened in the community which was threatening to sever at its root the faith of at least some of its members; or, to use the language close to that of the epistle itself, threatening to interrupt their pilgrimage of faith before it had reached its goal. Once some of the readers had succumbed to this threat, there was a danger that he evil would spread to the rest (12:15)” (Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 80).

⁷ Several outlines of Hebrews have been offered. For options, see Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 50–59; Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, lxxxiv–xcvii; O'Brien, *Hebrews*, 22–34.

sacrificial system, and more) that are viewed from the perspective of a new and better covenant. Of obvious importance in the epistle is Christology, which is developed most around the status of Christ as “son” and the role of Christ as high priest.⁸ From this central emphasis on Christology, Hebrews also treats Theology Proper, soteriology, ecclesiology, pneumatology, and eschatology. This all-too-brief summary of the epistle provides sufficient background to discuss the significance of the book for systems of eschatology.

Hebrews and the Testaments: Does Hebrews Teach New Testament Priority?

Poythress, Strimple, Waltke, and others suggest that Hebrews, and the New Testament as a whole, ought to serve as a tutor for Christian interpreters when it comes to the Old Testament. Is it right to view Hebrews as a hermeneutical textbook?

The Issue of Testament Priority in Systems of Eschatology

Recent literature has assigned various eschatological systems a particular place on a spectrum of continuity and discontinuity.⁹ Covenant theology is for the most part a system of continuity, as described by Willem VanGemen: “Old and New [testaments] differ in terms of clarity and certainty; but God has one plan of salvation, one mediator, and one eschatological purpose in which all his people share.”¹⁰ Dispensationalism is for the most part a system of

⁸ Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 67–8.

⁹ John S. Feinberg, ed., *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1988). In the preface, Feinberg writes: “Theological positions can be placed on a continuum running from views which hold to absolute continuity between the Testaments to views holding absolute discontinuity between the Testaments. The more one moves in the continuity direction, the more covenantal he becomes; and the more he moves in the discontinuity direction, the more dispensational he becomes” (Ibid., xii).

¹⁰ Willem VanGemen, “Systems of Continuity,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity*, ed. John Feinberg (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1988), 40.

discontinuity, seeing God as having different eschatological plans for the nation of Israel and for the church.

Historically, Rodney Peterson finds four distinct approaches to the relationship between the testaments:

Finally, four ways to evaluate the interrelationship between the Testaments can be isolated in terms of their theological significance: the OT may be read as mere history; it is often read through the NT; it can be understood as complete in some way in its own theological integrity; it may simply be viewed as an allegorical symbol in relation to the NT.¹¹

The interrelationship between the Testaments is determinative for one's eschatological system; those who subscribe the first or third approach above will find themselves holding a system of relative discontinuity, while those who use the second or fourth approach will find themselves holding a system of relative continuity. In other words, those who give priority to the NT over the OT will necessarily conclude with a system of continuity. By suggesting that the book of Hebrews ought to be seen as a tutor for interpreting the Old Testament, Poythress and others are implying this kind of New Testament priority, which, if accepted, will lead towards a system of continuity.¹² But is this approach warranted, methodologically or exegetically?

Methodological Problems with New Testament Priority

The hermeneutical issues involved in relating the two testaments are dense and complex, and so a full treatment is well outside the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, the fact that New

¹¹ Rodney Peterson, "Continuity and Discontinuity: The Debate Throughout Church History," in *Continuity and Discontinuity*, ed. John Feinberg (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1988), 33. See also the categories in Darrell L. Bock, "Evangelicals and the Use of the Old Testament in the New: Part One," in *Rightly Divided*, ed. by Roy B. Zuck (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1996), 206–17.

¹² To be fair, Poythress later stated that one should consult "the whole Bible," though this does not quite resolve the issue. See Gerry Breshears, "Dispensational Study Group Discussion," *Grace Theological Journal* 10, no. 2 (1989): 163–4.

Testament priority is so well entrenched in the thought of many significant theologians requires at least some preliminary interaction on the methodological level.

An example of such entrenchment is seen with Bruce Waltke:

Second, the classical rule *sacra scriptura sui ipsius interpres* (the Bible interprets itself)—more specifically, the New interprets the Old—should be accepted by all Christian theologians. Is it not self-evident that the author of Scripture is the final exponent of his own thoughts? Should not the rule so often used by dispensationalists, who traditionally saw no connection between the OT promises and the church, that the NT cannot contradict the OT, be reversed to say that the OT cannot contradict the NT? Should not theologians who put the enigmatic visions of prophets on a par with the most direct revelation in Christ fear? Recall how God judged the prophet and prophetess, Aaron and Miriam, for putting themselves on a par with Moses, to whom he gave more direct revelation (cf. Numbers 12). Does not the posture that begins first with the theologian's interpretation of the OT instead of with the NT beg the issue by presuming a hermeneutic for interpreting the promises before looking to the Scriptures themselves?¹³

Waltke's passion for the principle of NT priority is evident, but there are several methodological problems that face such an approach. First, the issue of clarity—in the words of Paul Feinberg, “the claim that one's hermeneutic for OT predictions must grow out of the NT's use of the OT is sufficiently ambiguous that almost anyone can affirm it and mean by it whatever they so choose.”¹⁴ It is appealing to suggest that the “author of Scripture is the final exponent of his own thoughts,” but rarely is clarity given as to *how* the Author of Scripture functions as that exponent. This issue is compounded when one recognizes that there is no little debate as to how the NT authors use OT texts.¹⁵ Exegetical confidence is impossible in a NT priority system

¹³ Bruce Waltke, “Kingdom Promises as Spiritual,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity*, ed. John Feinberg (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1988), 264.

¹⁴ Paul D. Feinberg, “Hermeneutics of Discontinuity,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity*, ed. John Feinberg (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1988), 116.

¹⁵ John Feinberg makes a similar point: “Moreover, studies like S. Lewis Johnson's *The Old Testament in the New* show that there is no such thing as *the NT pattern of OT usage*. There are varieties of NT uses of the OT.... Moreover, if the NT reinterpretation becomes the OT passage's meaning, how can one determine that the OT passage means since the NT may reinterpret it several different ways? And what remains constant for the meaning of OT passages which are reapplied in the NT?” (John Feinberg, “Systems of Discontinuity,” *Continuity and Discontinuity*, ed. John Feinberg (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1988), 77).

when there is no consensus in this critical area, let alone when the system itself allows for so much variation.

A second issue that quickly arises when implementing NT priority is that of the integrity of the OT. Can the OT truly be inspired revelation to man if those before the New Testament could never truly understand it?¹⁶ Waltke's argument can easily be turned the other way—should not those who undermine the integrity of God's revelation before the NT stand in fear of the God who spoke both testaments? It's hard to believe that the book of Hebrews, and, for that matter, the rest of the NT, should be approached as the key to understanding that which, by scriptural definition, is inspired by God to be *useful*—and not only to those with a New Testament in hand. NT priority that does violence to the revelatory nature of the OT must be rejected.¹⁷

Here we find our third and most important methodological issue. Many theologians who hold to a more chastened view of NT priority have eluded the above critiques by claiming that the concept of progressive revelation *demand*s such an approach. Waltke's quote above hints at just such an approach when comparing the “enigmatic visions of prophets” with the later revelation of Christ; others are more direct in their claims that the New Testament, by merit of having come later in the process of progressive revelation, must be viewed as not only

¹⁶ So Feinberg: “If Ladd is correct that the NT reinterprets the OT, his hermeneutic does raise some serious questions. How can the integrity of the OT text be maintained? In what sense can the OT really be called a *revelation* in its original meaning? Similar objections can be made to any approach which advocates a subsequent or consequent meaning ascribed by the NT” (Feinberg, “Hermeneutics of Discontinuity,” 116).

¹⁷ It's important to note that not all those who subscribe to a position of NT priority attempt a complete revision of the OT text. Reformed theologian Willem VanGemen laments that “the ‘new’ Reformed hermeneutic is no longer ‘the Old is in the New revealed and the New is in the Old concealed,’ but rather ‘the Old is by the New restricted and the New is on the Old inflicted’” (Willem VanGemen, “Israel as the Hermeneutical Crux in the Interpretation of Prophecy (II),” *WTJ* 46 (1984), 268). Nevertheless, the assertion that one Testament has “priority” over the other almost by definition suggests that one is of a better *quality*, not a better *clarity*.

elucidating but determining the interpretation of Old Testament texts.¹⁸ The existence of progressive revelation through history is difficult to deny, but does such progress necessarily entail that later revelation must exert a controlling influence on what has come before?

This issue deserves a wider treatment, but a few brief points will have to do. It's important to first note that an appeal to progressive revelation does little to resolve the critiques above—what does it mean for some revelation to “control” the interpretation of other revelation, and how can that be true while still respecting the inspired nature of *all* revelation, with all the ramifications (such as usefulness and perspicuity) that come with it? Similarly, why does such a position not reach beyond the boundaries of the two testaments and into the individual books? The Gospel of John was inspired later than the Gospel of Mark, ought John to exert a “controlling influence” over Mark? What's more, should not the book of Revelation, as final in the canon, be the interpretive grid through which the rest of both testaments are viewed? The system has no guard against such conclusions. The position also seems to conflate Christ, as the “most direct revelation,” with the New Testament scriptures. It seems dicey to suggest that the New Testament should have priority over the old simply because Christ himself is more “direct” than the visions that the prophets had about His coming. Similarly, such a view presents a false choice between spiritualizing the Old Testament on the one hand and denigrating the New Testament revelation on the other. It's simply not true that in order to recognize the existence of further revelation in the NT one must gut the Old Testament of its original meaning. Why would the existence of later, fuller revelation require that earlier revelation be both of a lesser clarity and a lesser *quality*? It makes much more sense to conclude that the clarity of later NT revelation elucidates the legitimate revelation that was already contained in the OT. In other

¹⁸ See, for example, Kim Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism: Understanding the End Times* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003), 36–7.

words, progressive revelation sheds light but does not transform.¹⁹ As the language of “New Testament priority” cannot help but connote something more than clarification, even the most chastened view under such a name will most likely fall under the above critiques.

Exegetical Problems with New Testament Priority

The methodological problems above seem dire for those who hold a New Testament priority position, but Poythress and others have appealed to the New Testament—specifically, the book of Hebrews—to bolster their claims. If scripture itself commands a view of NT priority, it must be accepted. Does Hebrews in fact demand such a perspective?

Even a cursory read through Hebrews will reveal a few salient facts. First, the book nowhere claims to function as any kind of hermeneutical textbook. Based on the case for New Testament priority made by many covenant theologians, one would assume that the New Testament authors would at the very least implicitly identify themselves as tutors for Old Testament reinterpretation. No such self-identification is apparent in Hebrews or the rest of the New Testament.²⁰ What’s more, the argument of Hebrews is built in many ways on the authority of the OT scriptures.²¹ It’s hard to imagine, given the authority with which the author vests in the OT, that he would in the same book then wrest the text from its context and do it

¹⁹ Feinberg, in addressing this issue, notes that “the crucial point is *how we know* whether something in the OT (especially prophecy about Israel’s future) is still binding in the NT. My response is twofold. If an OT prophecy or promise is made unconditionally to a given people and is still unfulfilled to them even in the NT era, then the prophecy must still be fulfilled to them.... Progress of revelation cannot cancel unconditional promises” (Feinberg, “Systems of Discontinuity,” 76). This fits well with the idea that later revelation clarifies, but does not transform.

²⁰ “No NT writer claims his new understanding of the OT passage cancels the meaning of the OT passage in its own context or that the new application is the only meaning of the OT passage. The NT writer merely offers a different application of an OT passage than the OT might have foreseen; he is not claiming the OT understanding is now irrelevant” (Feinberg, “Systems of Discontinuity,” 77).

²¹ Roger Nicole provides a helpful summary of the NT author’s use of and perspective on the OT scripture. Roger Nicole, “New Testament Use of the Old Testament,” in *Rightly Divided: Readings in Biblical Hermeneutics*, ed. by Roy B. Zuck (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1996), 183–98.

hermeneutical violence because he viewed himself as the bearer of some kind of “higher revelation”—no matter how inspired. (This same principle holds for all of the NT authors). Even if one ascribes to the idea of *sensus plenior*, given the NT authors’ high view of the OT, there is no warrant to demand NT priority of the revisionist type.

Perhaps the most significant contribution made by the book of Hebrews to this discussion is its concern with “types and shadows” of the things to come (Heb. 8:5, 10:1). Allusions to these verses abound in literature promoting NT priority. Strimple says:

The fact is that our authoritative New Testament teaches us that this is precisely how we *should* understand such elements in the Old Testament prophecies. And with regard to any type—whether it be sacrifice, feast, temple, or land—when the reality is introduced, the shadow passes away.²²

The issue here has little to do with an exposition of the text itself; it has been ably demonstrated that Hebrews 8:5, in the context of chapters 8–10:18 (a section which will be addressed again below), deals with the supremacy of Christ’s high priesthood and sacrifice over the old covenant sacrificial system, making the latter obsolete.²³ The word at issue, *skia*, is used in explaining that the old covenant cultus had no ultimate spiritual significance, and instead functioned as a copy of heavenly realities.²⁴ Such a verse hardly demands a wholesale reinterpretation of the Old Testament; the author of Hebrews, in fact, enlists the Old Testament

²² Strimple, “Amillennialism,” 86.

²³ See Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 406–8; Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, 206–8; O’Brien, *Hebrews*, 290–91.

²⁴ “Unlike Philo, the author of Heb. Understands this contrast christologically: in comparison with the high-priestly work of Jesus Christ, who is ‘in the heavens’, all earthly worship, as conducted in the tabernacle, takes on secondary importance. Thus the Mosaic law may not be regarded as absolute in its validity, for it belongs to the ‘shadow of heavenly things’ (Heb 10:1; cf. 9:5)” (H.-C. Hahn, “Shadow,” in *NIDNTT*, 5:555–6).

scriptures to prove that *they demand such a future High Priest themselves*, without the aid of any revising.²⁵

The use of shadows by those in favor of continuity is far from driven by exegesis alone—instead, the issue at hand deals with making Hebrews 8:5 a principle which then blankets the whole of biblical eschatology. Darrell Bock explains:

Postmillennial and amillennial interpreters appeal to the model of worship in passages like Hebrews 8–10 and argue that the typology or patterns of Old Testament worship are ‘shadows’ of realities that now have come; they are never to be resumed.... In other words, the principle applied to sacrifices and other elements of the temple worship in Hebrews is turned into a general interpretive principle for all of eschatological hope.²⁶

In this way, rather than seeing Hebrews as speaking of the sacrificial system alone, covenant theologians read this as an example of how the entire Old Testament is to be treated. While typology will be addressed again below, here it must be said that extrapolating a principle from Hebrews 8–10 to be used across the eschatological spectrum is simply not what the text demands. Nowhere does the author suggest that he is providing a kind of hermeneutical grid to be enlisted by future interpreters. Far from it, the author in this text is drawing out the legitimate result of the progress of revelation: the old covenant sacrificial system has been surpassed by Christ’s high priestly work. Bock again explains the premillennialist approach:

Premillennialists, by contrast, raise the question whether the principle argued for from Hebrews 8–10 should be elevated to a principle that applies across the board to eschatological categories. The typology that it represents involves only a specific pattern of realization, but the question as to the principle’s extent must be determined by the specific declaration of passages and the treatment of other texts that it is argued, give no hint of this shift of imagery into a new sphere. To premillennialists, it is better to take texts on a case-by-case basis, assessing how typology works in one text or instance at a

²⁵ Ellingworth comments on 8:5: “The point of the quotation is to show from scripture itself that the Mosaic tabernacle, and by implication the whole OT cultus, was only a copy of the heavenly reality” (Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 408).

²⁶ Darrell Bock, “Summary Essay,” in *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, ed. by Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1999), 293–4.

time.²⁷

This latter approach seems much more exegetically grounded than the former.

Nevertheless, those with a system of strong continuity would take issue with this premillennialist view, arguing that the use of the Old Testament by the New gives warrant for just such an extreme typological approach. In other words, the lack of an explicit declaration by the NT authors that they are demonstrating a kind of “new covenant hermeneutic” should not control the strong *implication*, seen in their use of the OT, that such is the case. Does Hebrews use of the OT provide a framework that can be *enlisted* (even if unintended by the author) as a lesson in hermeneutics?

Hebrews and Biblical Interpretation: Does Hebrews Teach OT Hermeneutics?

There are several schools of thought amongst evangelicals as to the New Testament use of the Old.²⁸ Any attempt at a full exposition on the topic is well outside the scope of this paper, so we will limit ourselves to the following question: does Hebrews “use” the Old Testament in such a way that would demand a system of strong continuity?

The use of the OT in Hebrews has been of some interest in recent scholarship, with varied conclusions.²⁹ At issue is the nature and number of Old Testament passages, the function of those passages in the structure of the book, and the appropriation of those texts for the purposes of the author. Despite some controversy on the number of OT quotations (and the

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 294.

²⁸ Bock identifies four such schools: the Full Human Intent school, the Divine–Intent Human–Words school, the Historical Progress of Revelation and Jewish Hermeneutic school, and the Canonical Approach and New Testament Priority school. (Bock, “Evangelicals and the Use of the Old Testament in the New: Part One,” 206–17).

²⁹ See Markus Barth, “The Old Testament in Hebrews: An Essay in Biblical Hermeneutics,” in *Current Issues in New Testament Interpretation*, ed. by W. Klassen and G.F. Snyder (New York: Harper & Row, 1962): 53–78; G.W. Grogan, “The New Testament Interpretation of the Old Testament: A Comparative Study,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 18 (1967): 59–68; G. B. Caird, “The Exegetical Method of the Epistle to the Hebrews,” *Canadian Journal of Theology* 5 (1959): 44–51.

definitions of OT allusions and “echoes”), all are agreed that the book of Hebrews is “impregnated with the OT.”³⁰

Three important observations should guide our understanding of Hebrews’ use of the Old Testament. First, “the Old Testament is viewed in this Epistle as Divine utterance.”³¹ The author of Hebrews treats the Old Testament with reverence and authority due to God’s own words—“One almost gains the impression that the writer has overheard God speaking and communicated what he has heard to men.”³² Often, the writer employs verbs of speech in the present tense to introduce quotations, implying that the Old Testament scriptures were at that moment still God’s authoritative speech.³³ Such reverence for the text, as intimated above, does not square well with the idea that the author would provide a revised interpretation of God’s prior revelation.

Second, some theologians have suggested that the author of Hebrews uses the Old Testament in a proof text fashion, with little to no regard for the quotes’ original context.³⁴ This is simply not the case. While the author does not necessarily mirror the mindset of a modern interpreter,³⁵ his grasp of the original context of the Old Testament scriptures is ably communicated in his quotations.³⁶

³⁰ Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, cxv.

³¹ Grogan, “New Testament Interpretation of the Old Testament,” 59. He continues, “It is not a dead letter but the living voice of the living God, the incisive, authoritative utterance of ‘him with whom we have to do’ (4:11–13)” (Ibid.).

³² Ibid.

³³ Lane writes, “The writer is persuaded that god continues to speak today in the biblical passages that are cited. What was said in the past continues to be said now as well” (Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, cxviii).

³⁴ For example, Hugh Montefiore, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (reprint, 1964; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 43ff.

³⁵ Ellingworth writes “Certain aspects of [the author’s] exposition may be misunderstood as atomizing because they are based in theological presuppositions which a modern commentator would try to exclude from his

This is tied closely with our third observation: the author of Hebrews founds his argument for Christ's supremacy on the authority of the OT revelation. Far from re-inventing the meaning of the Old Testament, or implying that some new hermeneutic is needed to properly apply the Old Testament to new covenant realities, the author stands on the original meaning of the Old Testament to prove the supremacy of the new covenant. In Hebrews, "the argument is based on the witness of Scripture to the avowedly provisional character of the old covenant."³⁷ The use of the Old Testament in Hebrews does not imply that the Old Testament must be "reinterpreted" in light of Christ, but instead implies that the original meaning of the Old Testament is fundamental to arguing for the supremacy of Christ.

Nevertheless, the author of Hebrews does understand the relationship between the testaments to some degree in terms of types, and some have concluded that Hebrews' use of typology implies a larger principle of interpretation. Waltke is typical of such an approach:

In that new light [of the new covenant] the images of the old dispensation were resignified to represent the heavenly reality of which they always spoke. As W. D. Davies expressed it, "The Land" was "Christified." The writer of Hebrews warns his generation not to go back to these images that have been abolished forever; he implicitly cautions us against projecting them imaginatively into the future. The concern of the New Testament is a relationship with Jesus Christ, not a restoration of the types of the Old Testament.³⁸

exegesis of an OT text. In particular, the author believes that Christ was active in OT history from the beginning.... This, however, reflects the author's general theological position: it is the opposite of atomistic exposition" (Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 41).

³⁶ A full defense of this position would be too lengthy for this paper. See George H. Guthrie, "Hebrews," in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. by G.K. Beale and D.A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), 919–95.

³⁷ Lane, *Hebrews*, vol. 1, cxiii.

³⁸ Bruce K. Waltke, "A Response," in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition*, ed. by Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1992), 358–9. See also Bruce K. Waltke, "Kingdom Promises as Spiritual," 276–9.

The sentiment illustrated above demonstrates how the legitimate existence of types in scripture can be used to justify making most everything in the Old Testament a type, including the rather specific Old Testament references and promises concerning land.³⁹ But this approach does not seem exegetically warranted based on the use of the Old Testament in the book of Hebrews.

The text of Hebrews itself obviously describes a relationship between some figures, events, and systems in the Old Testament and Christ. Christ, in each instance, functions as the antitype that surpasses the previously established pattern. For example, one of the central themes of the book is that Christ is the better and final high priest than those under the old covenant. To return to an old covenant system in light of Christ's priestly work is clearly undesirable and ineffective. But the cautious interpreter must ask, by viewing Christ as the supreme high priest, does the author of Hebrews mean for us to completely overwrite the original meaning of all the Old Testament mentions of the priestly system? Or, as suggested earlier, do the Old Testament treatments of the priestly system, standing as originally intended, function as a foundation upon which Christ's supremacy can be seen? What's more, simply because *some* aspects of the Old Testament are viewed as provisional by the author of Hebrews, is it warranted to conclude that, therefore, *all* of the Old Testament should be fit into that system?

Great clarification is needed in the realm of typology for fruitful discussion between differing eschatological systems. Suffice it to say at this point that the burden of proof lies on those who would suggest that the existence of an antitype in the New Testament necessitates a complete revision of the type in the Old Testament. It seems appropriate to side with Feinberg:

³⁹ Hoekema promotes this idea of prophecies being fulfilled "antitypically," and addresses the issue of land-specific prophecy from an amillennial perspective. Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1979), 211–12.

We have already seen that though some of the OT was indeed provisional and a shadow, not all of it was. Proper understanding of typology informs us that even if the NT interprets the OT typologically and even if we are to do so, that does not allow us to ignore or cancel the meaning of the type or substitute the meaning of the antitype for it.⁴⁰

While preliminary, that above should illustrate that Hebrews' use of the Old Testament does not imply a hermeneutical grid that necessarily results in an eschatological system of strong continuity. If anything, Hebrews' use of the Old Testament bolsters its original authority and meaning, and in the cases where an aspect is interpreted as provisional, it is done so on the very basis of the Old Testament's original intention.⁴¹ This should add significant caution to those who desire to "typify" that which Hebrews (nor the rest of the NT) does not.

Hebrews and Fulfillment: Does Hebrews Teach the Fulfillment of OT Prophecy?

The new covenant is of particular interest to eschatological systems, and its mention in the book of Hebrews has generated no little discussion. Strimple, as an amillennialist, suggests that Hebrews 8 and 10:

present great difficulty for premillennialist interpreters...because the writer here quotes the new covenant prophecy of Jeremiah 31:31–34 and seems clearly to say that the new covenant prophesied through Jeremiah is that better covenant founded on better promises of which our Lord Jesus Christ is the mediator (8:6), and which is in force *now*, bringing blessing to both Jews and Gentiles.⁴²

⁴⁰ Feinberg, "Systems of Discontinuity," 78. He continues, "Moreover, if the NT antitype cancels the meaning of the OT type, the NT must tell us so. NT reinterpretations of OT passages are neither explicit nor implicit cancellations of the meaning of the OT. Likewise, NT antitypes neither explicitly nor implicitly cancel the meaning of OT types. Thinking they do misunderstands typology" (Ibid., 79). We would add that if the existence of some NT antitypes and OT types entail a view of the entire OT as a type, the NT must tell us so.

⁴¹ Blaising concludes in a similar fashion: "Certainly, the New Testament uses the Old Testament in many interesting ways. These have been analyzed in many works on the subject. But, the New Testament does not 'transcendentalize' Old Testament eschatology. It reaffirms the reality and basic structure of Old Testament eschatology even as it gives new revelation about the Messiah, about an inaugural fulfillment of certain features of that eschatology, and about additional features of the eschatological pattern" (Craig Blaising, "A Premillennial Response," in *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond* (Grand Rapids; Zondervan Publishing, 1999), 144).

⁴² Strimple, "Amillennialism," 89.

Strimple sees the fulfillment of the new covenant “with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah” (Heb. 8:8) as applying to the church, which, by merit of being in Christ, the true Israel, has become that house.⁴³ Waltke, similarly, asserts that that “the writer of Hebrews interprets the New Covenant, originally addressed to the house of Israel and Judah, as fulfilled in the church age (Heb 8:7–13).”⁴⁴ Is it warranted to see in Hebrews the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy that leads to a system of strong continuity?

In Hebrews 8–10, the author cites the New Covenant promises of Jeremiah twice, both times arguing that that old covenant is made obsolete by Christ’s high priestly work. The argument is along these lines: Christ’s priesthood is better than that of the old covenant priests, which is displayed not only by His position in the heavens but by the fact that a new covenant had been promised—the very fact that a new covenant was to come makes the old covenant provisional, and requires that it be set aside upon the inauguration of the new. Chapters 9–10 focus particularly on the aspect of the new covenant dealing with the forgiveness of sins, highlighting the sufficiency of Christ’s sacrifice. Hebrews 10:16–17 quotes only Jeremiah 31:33–34, forming the end of an *inclusio* and honing in even more on the forgiveness aspect of the covenant.⁴⁵ Guthrie sums up the use of Jeremiah 31 in Hebrews:

In short, the author understands this rich passage from Jeremiah as a direct verbal prophecy, fulfilled by the inauguration of the new covenant in Christ’s sacrificial death and his triumphant exaltation to service as a superior high priest. It is that new covenant, established by a superior offering, by which people can know God, have his laws written on heart and mind, and have their sins decisively forgiven.⁴⁶

⁴³ Ibid., 90.

⁴⁴ Waltke, “Kingdom Promises as Spiritual,” 281.

⁴⁵ See Guthrie, “Hebrews,” 970–2, 978–9; Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 397–515; Lane, *Hebrews*, 1:198–2:271; O’Brien, *Hebrews*, 286–360.

⁴⁶ Guthrie, “Hebrews,” 972.

It is telling that the author to the Hebrews focuses on the central, spiritual components of the new covenant promise in the book of Jeremiah, but such focus should not blind interpreters to the many material blessings associated with the new covenant in the same book. Such material components deal with land (including the gathering of peoples, 31:8–11; 32:15, 37, 41; the building of cities, 30:18; 31:38–40; and cultivation, 31:5, 12–14) as well as population (30:20; 31:17) and ensuing blessings, rest, and peace (31:23–25, 27–28; 32:42–44; 33:6).⁴⁷ Saucy concludes that “ultimately the new covenant provides for the total renewal of all things in the new creation.”⁴⁸

Such evidence for the material aspects of the new covenant suggests that good exegesis of Hebrews will avoid “spiritualizing” the blessings of the new covenant.⁴⁹ The fulcrum of the covenant promise quoted in Hebrews 8 should not be expanded to apply the entirety of new covenant promises to the church. The content and context of Hebrews 8–10 instead suggests that Christ’s high priestly work and sacrifice have opened the door to the spiritual blessings of the new covenant, especially the lasting forgiveness of sins, which are applied to the church.⁵⁰ It is unwarranted to conclude that, because the church has experienced the spiritual blessings promised in Jeremiah 31, the rest of the new covenant promised by God has been set aside, or given in “spiritual form” to the church in lieu of Israel.

This has several important ramifications. First, we must conclude that the author of Hebrews did not see the new covenant as being fulfilled in its entirety in the church age. The

⁴⁷ Robert Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1993), 118.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 1980), 297.

⁵⁰ “The direct citations of Jeremiah’s prophecy by the writer of Hebrews are limited to the verses that speak of spiritual realities (Heb 8:8–12; 10:16–17).” Saucy, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 134.

material aspects of the covenant, when not unnecessarily spiritualized as types fulfilled in Christ, have yet to be fulfilled.⁵¹ Similarly, if the New Testament authors truly desired a revised interpretation of the Old Testament as continuity systems require, one would assume that the author of Hebrews would take the opportunity to apply the material blessings in some kind of “spiritual” form. Instead, the material blessings are completely ignored. This argument from silence, alongside the content and context of Hebrews 8–10 and the rest of the New Testament, cannot be entirely ignored. Finally, we must conclude that Hebrews 8–10 does in fact indicate that the new covenant has at the very least been inaugurated, if not fulfilled in certain spiritual aspects applied to the church. However, *this does not demand that the entire new covenant has been fulfilled in the church as the new Israel*. The false dichotomy between no fulfillment of the new covenant (or the creation of a second new covenant) and the entire fulfillment of the new covenant must be rejected as reductionistic and exegetically unwarranted.⁵²

When one is faithful to the message of Hebrews and the revelatory nature of the Old Testament, a study of fulfillment in Hebrews does not necessitate the adoption of a system of strong continuity. Instead, it demonstrates a careful handling of the spiritual aspects of a comprehensive new covenant promise, which are applied to the church without compromising the complete fulfillment yet to come.

⁵¹ “If, in fact, there is a time of future fulfillment, the manner of the present application of the new covenant to the church in no way excludes a fulfillment of the remaining blessings according to their natural Old Testament meaning” (Ibid.).

⁵² For more on this, see the interaction between Bruce Ware and Bruce Waltke in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition*, ed. by Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1992), 68–97, 347–59.

Hebrews and the Future: What is the Eschatology of Hebrews?

Hebrews is given much attention for its treatment of the interrelationship between the covenants; unfortunately, little attention has been devoted to the futuristic outlook that pervades the book. Much of this is due to the overriding emphases on typological fulfillment addressed above. Poythress, for example, finds in Hebrews 12 reason to view the Old Testament city of Jerusalem as a type, which finds its antitype in Christ's high priestly role and thus fulfills the OT prophecies about a restored Jerusalem.⁵³ The assumption seems to be that Hebrews' eschatological view is one that demands strong continuity—but does the content of Hebrews allow for a futurist, discontinuity system of eschatology?

Far from dealing solely with present fulfillment, the book of Hebrews is a significantly futurist book. Hope is a dominant theme, finding expression throughout the letter (3:6; 6:11, 18; 7:19; 10:23). The warning passages demonstrate a careful consideration of the future of the recipients (cf 4:13), in fact, “The pastoral purpose of the epistle, namely to encourage the readers to hold fast to their faith, is almost by definition future-oriented.”⁵⁴ Most importantly, Christ's sacrifice is seen to contain not only present but future benefits, which can be found in two motifs: that of the future rest which remains for the people of God (4:9) and of the “city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God” (11:10, ESV).

This last aspect of Hebrews, the city with foundations built by God, has been used by some to relegate the land promises to lesser, “earthly” aspects of a promise that even Abraham understood to be near entirely spiritual. So F.F. Bruce: “The truth is, their true homeland was

⁵³ “Can we draw an analogy between the situation concerning sacrifices and the situation concerning Jerusalem? The heavenly Jerusalem in Hebrews 12 exists by virtue of the presence of Christ as high priest with his sprinkled blood (Heb 12:24). Hence it would appear to be the antitype to which the OT historical Holy city, Jerusalem, pointed as a type. Therefore we may also expect that it is simultaneously the fulfillment of prophecies about a perfect, restored Jerusalem (Isa 60:14; Mic 4:1–2)” (Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists*, 119–20).

⁵⁴ Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 77.

not on earth at all. The better country on which they had set their hearts was the heavenly country. The earthly Canaan and the earthly Jerusalem were but temporary object-lessons pointing to the saint's everlasting rest, the well-founded city of God."⁵⁵

That Abraham and others in Hebrews 11 were looking beyond the earthly city of Canaan is clear from the text—they were looking to the heavenly city designed by God himself (11:10, 16). Yet the foreign earthly land to which Abraham went by faith is referred to in v. 9 as the “promised land,” and that “same promise” is inherited by Isaac and Jacob. Twice Abraham is referred to as having received promises, in the plural (11:13, 17), indicating the complex collection of God's promises to the patriarchs that include earthly land. In light of such evidence in the immediate text, it's clear that the discussion in Hebrews 11 in no way rules out the possibility of a future millennial kingdom: “A simple dichotomy between earthly Jerusalem and Canaan on the one hand and heaven on the other, with the implication that the literal land promise of the Abrahamic hope has been transcended in the New Testament does not seem justified in light of the total biblical evidence.”⁵⁶ In fact, it harmonizes rather well with such a future.

What then are we to make of Poythress's comment concerning Hebrews 12? The issue of overzealous typology having been dealt with earlier, it seems appropriate simply to note, with Saucy, that “the truth of the matter is that the heavenly Jerusalem has not yet finally come... Saying this makes it evident that, although we have come to the final reality to which the OT prophecies looked forward, this reality is actually fulfilled in stages.”⁵⁷ Hebrews makes ample

⁵⁵ F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NIC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1964), 305. See also Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 211.

⁵⁶ Saucy, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 53.

⁵⁷ Robert L. Saucy, “Saucy's Response to Vern S. Poythress,” *Grace Theological Journal* 10, no. 2 (1989): 143. To be fair, Poythress responds in the same journal: “With regard to the heavenly Jerusalem I regret that on pp.

room for a premillennial system that looks forward to the millennial kingdom as the next stage in God's fulfillment of His promises.

Conclusion

The book of Hebrews carries a tone of finality—Christ is the final high priest, offering the final sacrifice. In these last days, the myriad ways in which God spoke have been eclipsed by His Son. But, as demonstrated above, this finality should not be understood as comprehensive over the whole of Christian doctrine. Especially in eschatological matters, Hebrews demonstrates that there is more to come. Here it is important to remember that Hebrews, in and of itself, makes no claim to function as an interpretive key, a typological manual, nor a guide to prophetic fulfillment. While its interpretations, typologies, and fulfillments must be respected as inspired scripture, they are secondary to the main purpose of the book as a “word of exhortation” (13:22) to those in need of a bolstered faith. What Hebrews provides is a great deal of confidence in the finality of Christ's work—“coming to Christ means *final* access to God without any barrier.”⁵⁸ As we come to the heavenly Jerusalem, we find that kind of soteriological finality: we are assured that our future is secure, and that our faith in what we cannot see is not in vain. Yet this security does not flatten out the comprehensive promises of God from the Old Testament into spiritual realities, nor invalidate God's promises of a mediatorial kingdom this side of the eternal state. What we find in the book of Hebrews is a glorious exposition of Old Testament promises that *bolster*, not deny, the discontinuities found in an examination of the entire Biblical witness.

119–20 I did not make it clear that it is the present heavenly Jerusalem with the future new Jerusalem that is the fulfillment, not the present Jerusalem alone. Saucy is quite right that my statement was one-sided” (Poythress, “Response to Robery L. Saucy's Paper,” *Grace Theological Journal* 10, no. 2 (1989): 157).

⁵⁸ Saucy, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 56.

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