



The Epistle to the Hebrews

Hebrews 3:1-4:13: Moses, Wandering Israel and the Promised Rest

We noticed that the Epistle to the Hebrews works like a great symphony. There are several themes, motifs that recur in different combinations and with variations of harmony and rhythm. In this section alone we find the motif of priesthood, picked up from the previous portion of the homily and expanded here and even further in the chapters that come.

We have the interpretation of Psalm 95, an interpretation that uses two key words to set themes here introduced but further elaborated as we follow the preacher through his homily: The first word is “Today,” which means the “today” of the Psalm but also the “today” in which the hearer of Hebrews is called to listen to the voice of God. The second word is “rest”—which calls us back to the Sabbath rest of Genesis, then to the rest that awaited the wandering children of Israel on their journey toward the promised land and finally the “rest” that awaits those who receive this letter, hear this sermon, as the end of their own life of faithfulness.

Hebrews relies heavily on two strategies of biblical interpretation. First our homily assumes that the words of Scripture can and should be applied directly to the present time of his listeners. Second the preacher relies heavily on typology—the assumption that characters and situations in the Old Testament prefigure figures and situations in the story of Jesus and in the time of the people who hear this letter. (Our author is by no means unique in this. For Matthew’s gospel, Moses typologically prefigures Jesus; for Paul Abraham typologically prefigures the Christian believer.)

Typology can be used to show a similarity, as Joseph in Genesis is similar to Joseph the righteous dreamer who married Jesus’ mother in Matthew 1 and 2. Typology can be used to argue from a less important example of life to a more important one—Moses to Jesus in Matthew 5 and Moses to Jesus in Hebrews 3:3-6. Or the first Joshua (named Jesus in Greek) to the second Joshua/Jesus who is pioneer and high priest. Typology can also be used to show a stark contrast—Adam to Jesus in Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15. The writer draws another contrast that he hopes will be persuasive—between the disobedient children of Israel in the wilderness and the obedient believers who hear this sermon (3:13-14).

As we suggested in our introduction, Hebrews is not only a homily, it is a collection of homilies. Many of its subsections have their own integrity and coherence; at the same time

one subsection relates to another so that the distinct parts are woven into a whole tapestry. One such smaller homily is contained in our passage, Hebrews 3:1-4:13.

The writer signals that he is beginning a new section with the transitional term “Therefore,” which always means that we are turning to something new, but that the new was implied and prepared by what we read before. What we have read before is the story of the faithfulness, suffering and exaltation of Jesus. Now the “Therefore” tells the listeners how they are to live in the light of that story. A second “therefore” in 3:7 provides the text that our preacher will explicate—Psalm 95:7b-11.

Jesus and Moses: Hebrews 3:1-6

There is no evidence that the distinction our author draws between Moses and Jesus responds to any particular dispute in the community he addresses, or indeed any particular dispute with the synagogue. As he contrasts Jesus with the angels in the previous chapters, here he contrasts Jesus with Moses. The language is metaphorical and perhaps a bit confusing but the general implications are clear.

The builder of the house is greater than the house itself (v 3). Jesus is connected with God the builder of the universe; Moses represents the house. The house also represents the community of faith, and Moses was a servant to that community while Jesus as son is faithful guardian of the household. (See Numbers 12:7, which understands Moses’ status as servant quite differently).

It may also be that our homilist and his audience are aware that Moses was the great mediator between God and the people—and that as a mere servant. How much greater a mediator is the son and priest.

Interpreting a Biblical Challenge: Hebrews 3:7-19

Now our homily has its central text, Psalm 95:7b-11. The comparison between Moses’ time and the author’s time continues, only now the people of the Exodus serve as an example and warning to the people of the church.

Psalm 95 is quoted again in this section in Hebrews 3:15 and the Psalm recurs in Hebrews 4:1-5 and again in 4:6-11. The portion of the letter from Hebrews 3:7-4:11 is a kind of exposition of the Psalm, comparing and contrasting the audience to the children of Israel in the wilderness. Behind both the Psalm and these portions of Hebrews lies the narrative of Numbers 14, which finds echoes particularly in vv 18 and 19.

The children of Israel fell into disobedience. Those who hear this homily are exhorted to obedience. These Christians are not only God’s house; they are partners with Christ or participants in Christ (4:14). In the description of disobedience we hear echoes of 1 Corinthians 10:1–13; in the picture of participation, echoes of 1 Corinthians 12, though there is no reason to believe that our author knew that epistle.

While we have no idea what specific circumstances may have inspired our letter, there seems considerable evidence here that the possibility of disobedience was not posed only rhetorically. Here and elsewhere in Hebrews we sense the real danger that believers would fall away from their faith.

Strikingly, there are at least two remedies for the temptation of obedience: the first remedy, much stressed in our epistle, is to look firmly at Jesus. The second remedy, not so much stressed but unmistakable, is to look toward one another: “But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today’” (Hebrews 3:13).

Redefining “Rest”: Hebrews 4:1-11

The text for this homily within the homily recurs in 4:5. It becomes clear that Sabbath is not only a gift from the past; it is a promise for the future. Sabbath is what God celebrated at the beginning, and Sabbath is what God promises in the end.

We also see that the creation story moves quickly to the wilderness wanderings. Now the promised rest is not only temporal—it is geographical, the promised land. The children of Israel in Numbers 14 and Psalm 95 did not enter into God’s promised rest because they did not enter into God’s promised land. Hebrews shows the way to enduring Rest and to a Promised Land far richer than Canaan, a heavenly destination. He makes that point by associating two Biblical verses Psalm 95:11 and Genesis 2:2, cited in 4:5. They are connected by the use of similar words, at least in the Greek version of the Bible, “he rested” (*katepausen*) and my “rest” or “resting place” (*katapausin*). Interpreting scripture by associating verses connected in this way is a technique found in Rabbinic Biblical interpretation.

Whether the promise of rest (and the danger of failing to enter into that rest) refers to the promised land that awaits each believer at his or her death or refers to a final consummation of human history at the hand of God is not clear, at least not in these verses.

Joshua fails to lead his people into the promised land (v 8), a fact which for the author confirms his reading of the Psalm. David, writing of a “today” after the events of Exodus and conquest, was looking to a future rest. Jesus, the new Joshua, will certainly lead his people there. The test, however, remains the same. God speaks and the faithful are to listen to God’s voice, today, every today.

The Word as a Sword: Hebrews 4:12-13

Here we have what seems a kind of rhetorical set piece, but it grows out of the homilist’s insistence that God’s voice speaks and that the faithful are called to listen. Each believer learns in her own life what the community of believers learned in the wilderness—God’s word is both an invitation and a judgment. (There are similar depictions of the Word of God in the book of Wisdom 18:14-16, in the book of Revelation, and in the works of the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria.) God’s word reveals and discerns the division between obedience and

disobedience that runs through each human. All are exposed before that God unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known and from whom no secrets are hid, in this context, a rather frightening claim. The good news in the midst of this warning and exhortation is that the invitation to the Sabbath remains, and the gate to the promised land has not yet slammed shut.

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