

LAW AND GOSPEL IN HEBREWS: SOME PARADIGMS FOR CHRISTIANITY IN AFRICA

PETER NYENDE
rev_ptn@hotmail.com

Abstract

The 'law' in the book of Hebrews is seen to relate to Christ in a variety of intriguing ways: almost simultaneously the 'law' anticipates, illuminates, is fulfilled and made redundant in Christ—the centre of the gospel. This paper will argue that it is possible to conceive of some aspects of Africa's religious heritage (still a force to reckon with in Africa) as being in the same kind of relationship to Christ, and in consequence, will also consider the missiological and pastoral implications that emanate from such a conception for the Church in Africa.

LAW AND GOSPEL ACCORDING TO HEBREWS: A SENSE OF PERSPECTIVE

How are we to understand the law in Hebrews, whose relationship with the gospel therein we seek to discuss? For purposes of this paper, will take 'the law' in a wide sense to cover in principle the Jewish religious tradition being engaged with in Hebrews. Specifically, the designation will signify the levitical priesthood. This is because, for want of space, we will limit our discussion of the law and the gospel in Hebrews to this particular aspect of it.

As concerns the Gospel, we will take it here simply as representative of Christ, his person and his work. This being the case, our task is to explore the relationship that exists in Hebrews between the levitical priesthood (the law) on the one hand and Christ (the gospel) on the other. Since our theme is 'OT Law and the Gospel: Its Relevance Today'—is intended to relate biblical interpretation to contemporary African issues, I will attempt to bring into dialogue the outcome of my study with contemporary Christianity in Africa. We turn, therefore, first to Hebrews' message generally.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE RHETORIC OF HEBREWS

Hebrews' rhetoric is characterized by the comparison of Jesus with the Jewish religious figures and thus can be looked at in this way:

Angels (1:1–2:18):	Comparison of Son and Angels (1:1–14) Exhortation (2:1–18)
Moses (3:1–4:16):	Comparison of Moses and Christ the Son (3:1–6) Exhortation (3:7–4:16)
Aaron (5:1–6:20):	Comparison of Aaron and Christ (5:1–10) Exhortation (5:11–6:20)
Melchizedek (7:1–8:3):	Comparison of Melchizedek/Christ and Levitical Priesthood (7:1–25)
Covenant (8:4–10:18):	Comparison of First Covenant and New Covenant (8:4–10:18)
Exhortation (10:19–12:29)	
Epistolary Appendix (13:1–25)	

We will use this structure first to pursue briefly the subject matter of this comparison and, later, use it to consider the subject matter of the exhortation when we attempt to determine the intended end of Hebrews on its audience.

Comparison of Son and Angels

The author of Hebrews introduces Jesus as the Son of God through whom he has spoken in 'these last days' (1:1–2).⁹ As God's Son, the world was created through him, and he was appointed heir (κληρονομον) of all things. The purpose of this introduction becomes clear in verse 4 when the comparison with angels is made—that Jesus is superior to angels because he is God's Son and they are not. The several scriptural quotations (1:5–2:14) that follow help to underscore this superiority on the basis of identity.

Comparison of Moses and Christ the Son

Comparison with Moses comes next in chapter 3 where the author of Hebrews shows that though they are both faithful (πιστον, 3:2) to the one who appointed them, Jesus is superior for, unlike Moses who is faithful as a servant (θεραπων 3:5) in the

house of God, he is faithful as a Son (υιος 3:6) over his house.

Comparison of Aaron and Christ

Next is the comparison with Aaron the high priest. Even though both are called by God (5:4), Jesus is superior because he is a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek (κατα την ταξιν Μελχισεδεκ 5:6), as exposed in 7:1-28. This priesthood is permanent and precedes the Aaronic one. In addition, Jesus' priesthood is superior by virtue of the efficacy of his sacrifice; hence its once for all (εφ'απαξ 7:27) status that does away with the need for further sacrifices.

The comparison with the Aaronic priesthood leads the author of Hebrews to compare the new covenant which Jesus mediates, and the old covenant (8:1 – 10:18).

Comparison of the First Covenant and New Covenant

The comparison which draws out the superiority of the new covenant is focused on the place of worship (the tabernacle) and the main activity therein (sacrifices). The old covenant had an earthly tabernacle which was a copy and shadow of the heavenly one (8:5). Sacrifices of the goats and bulls and others offered there were not able to take away sin (9:13) hence the need to offer sacrifices again and again (9:9). In contrast, the new covenant has Jesus who, as its high priest, entered the heavenly tabernacle with his own blood that effectively takes away sins (chapter 10). Consequently not only is the new covenant superior to the old one, it replaces it as well (10:15-18).

Exhortations and Intentions

We may now consider the subject matter of the exhortation from which, against the background of the comparison, we will get something of the intentions of Hebrews on its audience. The first exhortatory section (2:1-18) comes after the demonstration that Jesus is superior to the angels. It is a warning to the audience not to slip away (παραρνωμεν 2:1) from the word of Jesus, for such an action would carry a greater penalty than the one given those who disobeyed the message spoken to them by angels.

We again encounter in the second section (3:7-4:16) another

warning from the author to the Hebrews just after the comparison of Jesus with Moses: 'see to it brothers, that there is not in any of you a wicked (πονηρα), unbelieving (απιστιας) heart that turns away (αποστηναι) from the living God' (3:12). This warning is dwelt on by a lesson from the generation that Moses led which failed to enter God's rest because of unbelief (3:16-4:5).

In the third exhortatory section (5:11- 6:20), the author of Hebrews bemoans his audiences' slowness of learning (5:11-6:3) which prevents him from explaining more of his theme of Jesus as a high priest in the order of Melchizedek. He then, again, warns them of the dangers of falling away (6:4-7) and of laxity, before exhorting them to be imitators of those who, through faith and perseverance (μακροθυμιας), inherit what has been promised' (6:12).

Most of the last exhortation section (10:19-12:29) is a reiteration of what the author of Hebrews has previously said: in his exhortation, for example, to hold fast (κατεχωμεν) to their hope (10:23); to watch out against sin (10:26-31); to persevere in their previous confidence (10:35-39) and not to turn away from God (12:25-27). However, he now shows a concern for worship (he tells his audience to draw near to God in assurance of sins forgiven [10:19-22] and with reverence and awe (12:29), and for his audience's ecclesial life when he gives them general pastoral advice (12:12-17). Pastoral advice also predominates in the 'epistolary appendix'.

From the above mentioned exhortations, we could conclude that the situation that leads to the writing of Hebrews is that of a Christian community in imminent danger of drifting away from God through a combination of disobedience, sin and a crisis of confidence in their faith. Thus the author of Hebrews seeks to pre-empt this by numerous warnings of the consequences of such action, by motivation through examples and by reminding them of their past ways. The desired ends of Hebrews on its audience is to motivate them to obedience, faith and perseverance, the kind they had before (10:32-25). The comparison in Hebrews functions to help the audience see the superiority of Jesus over angels, also over Moses, the Aaronic priesthood and its *cultus*. The author then in his exhortation uses this established superiority to

motivate this community to right action (in this case to obedience, faith and worship, and perseverance). In a nutshell, as Attridge¹ and others² observe, exhortation to faithfulness is the practical purpose of Hebrews, and this is done primarily through the comparison.

HIGH-PRIESTLY CHRISTOLOGY OF HEBREWS

It will be noticed that the content of the comparison mentioned above is with mediatorial figures where the comparison of Jesus is with Israel's principal mediators before him. However, the bulk of the content of Hebrews has to do with high priesthood. This is first introduced in 1:4, touched on in 2:17 and 3:1 and the content of 4:14–10:18 and, because priests must have a sanctuary to attend to, it also has to do with the tabernacle and the activities therein. We want to consider this closely with a view of comprehending what light it sheds on the relationship of the law and the gospel.

Intercession and Mediation:

Aaronic High Priesthood

Perhaps then, the best place to begin is by seeking to determine the mediatorial roles of the Aaronic high priesthood that are in focus here. Two, intercession and mediation of forgiveness, stand out and are brought out in contrast to, and side by side with, the superiority of Christ's high priesthood.

Intercession is mentioned directly with regard to Christ, who lives forever to intercede (ἐντυγχάνειν) for those who come to God through him (7:25), but it is mentioned as such in the context of the Aaronic priesthood whose primary role is to intercede for the people. With the Tabernacle/Temple *cultus* this (intercession) is done partly by virtue of the high priest appearing before God on behalf of the people (9:24), which principally he does on the Day of Atonement. As for mediation of forgiveness/cleansing, most of the discourse on the high priest is to do with his activities on the Day of Atonement, thus, the spotlight is on the sacrifice that he

¹ Attridge, H.W. *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1989, pp. 21-22

² Ellingworth, P. *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, Carlisle, Paternoster, 1993, pp. 78-80

offered on that day and, accordingly, the author of Hebrews offers it a sustained discussion (9:1–10:18). What is important to note here is that on the Day of Atonement, the high priest offered a sacrifice for his sins and those of his people (9:7) through which they were forgiven and cleansed.

The Aaronic priesthood's role of intercession and mediation as mentioned are brought out in contrast to, and interwoven with, the superiority of Christ's priesthood.

The first contrast is with the sanctuary (σκηνης) in which they minister (8:1-6). The Aaronic high priesthood serves on earth in a sanctuary made by hands and 'as a copy (υποδειγματι) and shadow (σκια) of what is in heaven' (8:5), whilst Christ serves in heaven, in the 'true tabernacle set by the Lord' (8:2). By virtue of this, Christ has a superior ministry (λειτουργια) and is a superior mediator.

More importantly (because it is more specific than the first) the second contrast is with the ineffectiveness of the Aaronic priesthood's mediation of forgiveness compared to the efficacy of that of Christ. Hebrews points out that the sacrifices offered by the Aaronic priesthood in the Tabernacle/Temple did not (and could not), save for outward purity (9:13), bring cleansing and forgiveness to the people, and thus free or effective access to God (9:8), resulting in the giving of the sacrifice annually (9:9-11 and 10:1-4,11). He considers the Aaronic priesthood's mediation as part of the old order, which is in the process of being dispensed with (9:9-10). But Christ's priesthood, heralding the new order and the dissolution of the old (9:11), is effective: not only does he enter a sanctuary not of this creation (9:11, 24) but does so with his own blood which cleanses indeed (9:14). He is therefore a superior mediator.

This contrast between the Aaronic high priesthood and Christ's high priesthood is done only after the validation of the high priesthood of Christ (Heb. 4:14 – 5:10): because a high priest must be able to sympathize with those he represents (5:1-3), Jesus sympathizes with those he represents (4:14-15 and 5:7-10). Because a high priest must be divinely appointed (5:4), Jesus is

appointed a priest in the order (ταξιν) of Melchizedek. In explicating the latter (7:1-28), Hebrews again brings to relief the superiority of Christ's high priestly intercession and mediation over the Aaronic one.

The Priesthood of Melchizedek and the Priesthood of Christ

Turning to Melchizedek, scholars of Hebrews are not agreed on exactly what kind of relationship there exists between Melchizedek and Christ. For our purposes, it suffices to note that we have a correspondence between Melchizedek and Jesus, which Hebrews uses to validate and illuminate the priesthood of Christ, with the result that the priesthood of Christ in Hebrews rests upon the priesthood of Melchizedek.

There are two basic correspondences that are used accordingly to show an aspect of the superiority of Christ's priesthood over the Aaronic one.

The first is with the eternity of Melchizedek and his priesthood (7:3,7): because Christ's priesthood is in the order (ταξιν) of Melchizedek, it is forever. Therefore Christ's priesthood is superior to the Aaronic one since, unlike Aaronic high priests, he has a permanent priesthood, and thus always lives to make intercession (εντυγχανειν) for 'those who come to God through him' (7:23-25).

The second correspondence is with the 'other' in the Melchizedek priesthood, i.e. Melchizedek shows the existence of another order of priesthood not founded on Aaronic pedigree (σακρινη) but on indestructible life (ζωης ακαταλυτου) and on an oath that is unchangeable (7:11, 15-20). So Jesus' priesthood being in the order of Melchizedek is introduced to replace the Aaronic one that has failed to perfect the people (7:11,18). So we see again Jesus being like an Aaronic high priest because he meets the requirements of being a priest, and also performs their roles. However he is superior to them because, being a priest in the order of Melchizedek, he surpasses them (thus making them defunct) by his effectiveness in those very roles.

THE RELATIONSHIP OF LAW AND GOSPELS IN HEBREWS

So what may we conclude is the relationship of the law and the gospel as brought out in this instance? We have already pointed this out indirectly in our delineation of Jesus as high priest in pointing out that he surpasses the Aaronic priesthood by his superior effectiveness in the functions they play. We have seen this brought out in three instances: intercession, mediation of forgiveness, and the order, or ontology, of Christ's priesthood (it rests on the priesthood of Melchizedek).

In other words, it seems that the law—in its imperfect functions and being—was a pointer to the gospel, to Christ who performs to perfection the very functions the law tried to perform, and whose priesthood is of a higher order (ταξιν). Hebrews 10:1 is key to providing the metaphysical framework, so to speak, for such an understanding. Here it is clear that the law (here represented in the levitical priesthood) is an imperfect foreshadow (σκια) of the good things to come (των μελλοντων αγαθων) of the reality of those things (την εικονα των πραγματων) which have come now in Christ. In this sense, the law can be understood to have been a witness to the gospel. More specifically we could say that the levitical priesthood was a prophetic institution pointing forward to the gospel—it was never an end in itself. So, with the coming of the gospel, it was not only surpassed, but, in addition, was made redundant.

But this is not all: I would contend that in the very fact of being a foreshadow to the gospel, the law in Hebrews belies one other important function; that of acting as a preparation for comprehending the significance of the gospel. The way in which Jesus' identity and work is cast in Hebrews is deeply dependent on the levitical priesthood, without which there would be no such understanding of the gospel. For this reason, the law has, in this instance, acted as a means of preparing the audience of Hebrews for this particular understanding of the gospel—a *praeparatio evangelica* (a preparation for the gospel). Their very religious heritage (or at least, a religious heritage they are most intimate with) has aided towards an explication of the gospel that they can grasp and relate to fully.

HEBREWS AND AFRICA'S RELIGIOUS HERITAGE

What bearing then does such a relationship of the law to the gospel have on contemporary Christianity in Africa? I suggest that there are at least three possible bearings, each of which is centred on the interaction of Africa's religio-cultural heritage and the gospel.

Reconceiving of Christ

The first bearing has to do with the use that Africa's religious heritage could be put to in the re-conceiving of Christ in Africa. Hebrews, by its example, can be used to offer African theology an appropriate analogy or metaphor for the re-conceiving of Christ.

Hebrews' casting of Jesus as mediator (i.e. high priest), itself a conception of Christ within Jewish religious cosmology, means that we have a biblically sanctioned category that is easily grasped by Africans and through which they can conceptualize and interpret Jesus. This is crucial since it would mean having a Christology that is conceptualized within an African cosmology, and consequently, *ipso facto*, for a given time, place and a human situation that is African. In delineating an ancestor-Christology in Africa based on Hebrews, the African theologian, Bediako (1990), has used Hebrews precisely for this. He writes, 'the value for us in the presentation of Jesus in Hebrews stems from its relevance to a society like ours with its deep tradition of sacrifice, priestly mediation and ancestor function'.³

African Religious Heritage and the Gospel

The second bearing of the law and the gospel in Hebrews on Christianity in Africa has to do with how African Christians can relate their religious heritage to the gospel. Hebrews, provides a way of 'theologizing' that can greatly help the quest of African theology to do just this. The provision for such a theologizing is in the way Hebrews relates Jesus to aspects of Judaism (as portrayed in this instance in the temple *cultus*) which presents a

³ Bediako, Kwame Jesus in African Culture: A Ghanaian perspective in *Jesus in Africa: The Christian Gospel in African History and Experience*, Younde, Editions Clé and Akropong-Akuapem, Ghana, Regnum Africa, 2000 p. 28

paradigm for the way that Africa should relate the gospel to her religious heritage. This is because (if it is granted that there are similarities between aspects of Africa's religious heritage and aspects of the Jewish religious heritage) aspects of the religious-cultural heritage of African can be viewed as pointing to, and preparing Africans for, the reception of the gospel in which God speaks with finality and fulfils some aspects, perfectly, of the religious heritage of the African in the same way that the law in Hebrews is viewed to act as a preparation for, and pointer to, Christ. Put differently, Hebrews' way of theologizing could allow African Christians the possibility to understand aspects of Africa's religious heritage as pointing to the gospel, and thus surpassed now by this very gospel.

Engaging African Christianity with its Religious Heritage

Finally, the third bearing that the law and the gospel in Hebrews could have on Christianity in Africa is in shedding light on how African Christianity can critically and apologetically engage with their religious heritage. This is because Hebrews, again by its example, provides African theology with an essential prophetically critical voice to help foster authentic embodiments of the Christian faith.

It is possible to understand some New Testament writings, and not least Hebrews, as prophetic words to Christian communities in danger of compromise (if they have not compromised already). Consequently, if the rhetoric of Hebrews is in fact dealing with a real issue of a relapse to Judaism, then we could understand it as a prophetic word to that Christian community, critical and apologetic of its religious heritage to which they want to fall back. If so, Hebrews would be at the service of chiefly a first-order level of African Theology as a continuing prophetic witness to African Christian communities.

Here, it is instructive to bear in mind that the threat of compromising Christian faith to African Christians on account of their religious heritage seems perpetually present especially in times of crisis. Therefore Hebrews' message to African Christians would be to a large extent identical to that of its initial audience. But now, instead of resisting the courting of Judaism, the African

Christians would be urged to resist the courting of their religious heritage through a critical and apologetic engagement with it, and to give their absolute loyalty to Christ who is understood now in a critical and apologetic engagement as the definitive mediator.

References

- Attridge, H W. *The Epistle to the Hebrews*. Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1989
- Bediako, Kwame Jesus in African Culture: A Ghanaian perspective in *Jesus in Africa: The Christian Gospel in African History and Experience*, Younde, , Editions Clé and Akropong-Akuapem, Ghana, Regnum Africa, 2000, pp.20-33 [originally published Accra, Asempa, 1990].
- Bruce, F F. *A Commentary of the Epistle to the Hebrews*. 2nd edition. London, Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1964
- Buchanan, W G. *To the Hebrews: Translation, Comment and Conclusion*. Garden City, Double Day and Co., 1971
- Dickson, K. *Theology in Africa*. Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 1984
- Davis, P G. 'Divine Agents, Mediators, and New Testament Christology' 1994. *Journal of Theological Study* 45, pp.479-503
- Davies, W D. 'Law in the New Testament' in *The Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible III*, 1962, pp. 95-102
- Ellingworth, P. *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, Carlisle, The Paternoster Press, 1993
- Evans, C F. *The Theology of Rhetoric: the Epistle to the Hebrews*. London, Dr. Williams's Trust, 1988
- Fletcher-Louis, C 'The High Priest as Divine Mediator in the Hebrew Bible: Daniel 7:13 as a Test Case', *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers*, pp.161-93, 1997
- Hanson, A T. 'Christ in the Old Testament According to Hebrews' *Studia Evangelica* 2, pp. 393-407

Hauser, A, & Watson, D, (ed.) *Rhetorical Criticism of the Bible: A comprehensive Bibliography with Notes on History and Method*, Leiden, EJ Brill, 1994

Horbury, W. 'The Aaronic Priesthood in the Epistle to the *Hebrews*', *Journal of the Study of the New Testament* 19, 1983, pp. 43-71.

Isaac, E 'Relations between the Hebrew Bible and Africa.' *Jewish Social Studies* 26(2), 1964, pp. 87-94.

Parratt, J. *Reinventing Christianity: African Theology Today*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995

Seid, T. 'Comparison in Hebrews 7: the Rhetorical Structure and Strategy.' In *The Rhetorical Interpretation of Scripture: Essays from the 1996 Malibu Conference*, Porter, S, Stamps, D (eds), JSNTS 180, Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, pp.322-347

Ukpong, J S. 'Current Theology: The Emergence of African Theologies' *Theological Studies* 45:501-536, 1984

Williams, J J. *Hebrewisms of West Africa: From Nile to Niger with the Jews*. London, Allen and Unwin, 1930

A REVIEW BY DR. DAVID EKEM

In this stimulating paper, Rev. Nyende examines the central theme of 'Law and Gospel' using the puzzling book of Hebrews as a paradigm with special reference to Christianity in Africa. He gives a broad but useful definition of 'The Law' as 'the Jewish religious tradition being engaged with in Hebrews' and proceeds to define 'The Gospel' as 'representative of Christ, his person and work.' He focuses his initial discussion on the levitical priesthood before zeroing in on the High-Priestly Christology of Hebrews which he compares and contrasts with the former. This familiar procedure enables him to relate the issues to the relationship between Law and Gospel in Hebrews however the space he offers to this vital subject in his paper is rather limited. Although he significantly views the Law in Hebrews as a *praeparatio evangelica*, he could have said a lot more about the author of Hebrews' ingenious attempt to bring out the dynamic relationship between Law and Gospel through his presentation of two distinct but theologically

interrelated traditions of 'atonement and priestly mediation'.

This remark notwithstanding, Rev. Nyende deserves commendation for taking pains to provide a good overview of the rhetoric of Hebrews which is a relevant starting point for his discussion.

The section on Hebrews and Africa's religious heritage is quite intriguing. The author contends, among other things, that 'Hebrews, provides a way of "theologizing" that can greatly help the quest of African theology to relate African religious heritage to the gospel.'

Admittedly, the relationship between the Christology championed by the author of Hebrews and 'Africa's religious heritage' is a complex one that can hardly be treated comprehensively in a short paper. Rev. Nyende should consider developing this subject along 'the dialogical approach' whereby the Judeo-Christian concepts are brought face to face with traditional African worldviews on the principle of 'reciprocal challenge'. He would also need to expand his bibliography to cover the contributions of French and German authors who have written quite extensively on Hebrews.

Comments from delegates

Africans were traditionally people who practiced sacrifice and the letting of blood. Christ once-for-all sacrifice has negated the need for any other sacrificial rites or systems. However many African Christians have not understood this and therefore still practice traditional sacrifice. There is still fear of the spirits... 'the living dead'. This challenges Christian leadership to re-assess their teaching which would appear to have failed to impact on our people.