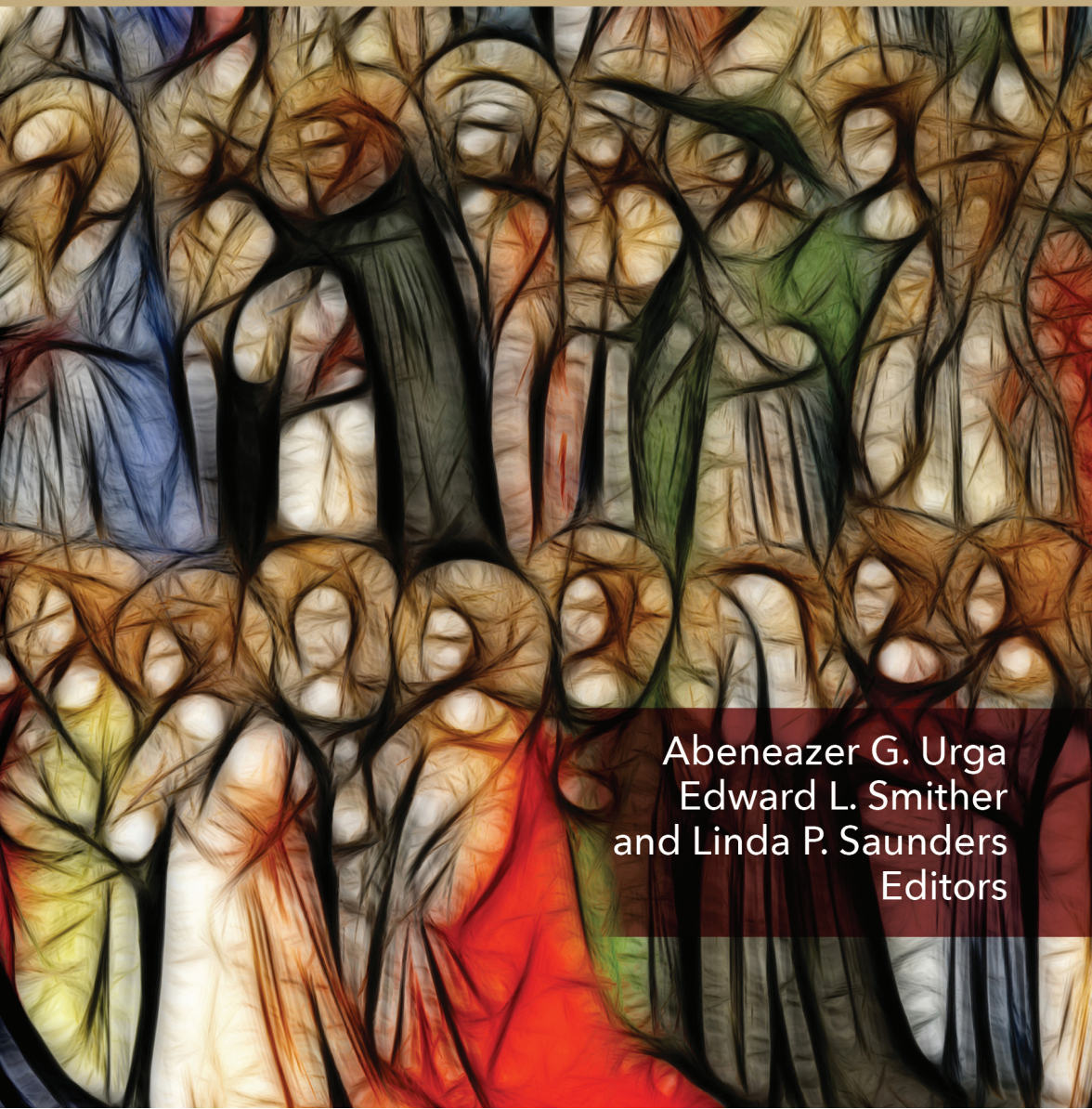
Reading Hebrews Missiologically

The Missionary Motive, Message, and Methods of Hebrews

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Published by William Carey Publishing
10 W. Dry Creek Cir
Littleton, CO 80120 | www.missionbooks.org

William Carey Publishing is a ministry of Frontier Ventures
Pasadena, CA | www.frontierventures.org

Cover and Interior Designer: Mike Riester

ISBN: 978-0-87808-455-6 (paperback)
978-0-87808-457-0 (epub)

Printed Worldwide

27 26 25 24 23 1 2 3 4 5 IN

Library of Congress Control Number: 2023930269

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Chapter 1

Hebrews and Missions

Renarrating the World in Christ

Matthew Aaron Bennett

The burden of this book is to explore the contribution of the book of Hebrews to Christian missions. The purpose of this chapter, then, will be to investigate how Hebrews contributes to the communication of the gospel among people and in places where the gospel is unfamiliar. In using the word *gospel*, we encounter a term that is broadly used in Christian writings but which is also variously defined. As one who is convinced of the authority and sufficiency of Scripture, it is my preference to defer to biblical texts whenever possible in setting the parameters for the biblical use of terms.

While there are multiple instances of apostolic *kerygma* to which one might appeal, the words of Paul commend themselves as a succinct and helpful biblical definition of the Christian gospel, as he writes to the Corinthians:

> Now I want to make clear for you, brothers and sisters, the gospel I preached to you, which you received, on which you have taken your stand and by which you are being saved, if you hold to the message I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. For I passed on to you as most important what I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve. (1 Cor 15:1–5 CSB)

What Paul provides here for his readers serves as one of the most concise biblical definitions of the essential elements of the gospel message.

Among other things that could be highlighted, Paul here includes a recognition that the Christ—the anticipated Messiah of the Hebrew Bible—was crucified for human sins, was raised again, and appeared to multiple witnesses. He notes that this is a message to be received and also to be passed on. And he twice reminds his readers that these events happened in accordance with the Scriptures. For those familiar with the contours of the biblical story, this gospel summary provides clarity regarding the essentials of the gospel.

But in a context where one cannot count on familiarity with the preceding Scriptures that Paul references, the clarity of the message is quickly

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obscured by the brevity of the destoried summary. Without a knowledge of the story and worldview that the Scriptures—the Torah, the Writings, and the Prophets—provide, an account of a man who is crucified and who comes back to life is interesting and unexpected, yet it has no apparent connection to the forgiveness of sins. Likewise, while those tutored by the elder testament recognize the importance of the title *Christ*, those oblivious to it might simply mistake it for Jesus's family name.

If one of the essential tasks in missions is to communicate the biblical gospel of Jesus Christ, then we must both consider the barriers to such communication as well as the Scriptures that are of most help in explaining the meaning of the gospel in a new place and for a new people. I want to argue in this chapter that Hebrews is ideally suited to renarrating the world according to a biblical story, worldview, and cultus so as to make sense of the gospel for those unfamiliar with the Scriptures.

In order to substantiate this claim, we will need to consider how Hebrews provides a biblical framework for understanding the biblical God who intends to dwell among his creation. In light of this divine intention to dwell with humanity, we will need to explain the problem of sin and its biblically prescribed remedy to show how a sin-stained people could abide a holy and righteous God dwelling in their midst. Using Hebrews, we will be able to demonstrate for non-Christians why Jesus's crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension is good news, as the author extends and retells the biblical story of the world in and through Christ.

Story & Worldview: The Purpose and the Problem

The first aspect of this task is to demonstrate how Hebrews provides a sketch of the biblical metanarrative—and subsequently provides a worldview framework—for the reader. The importance of story for doctrine and worldview is reinforced by missiologist Theodore Curry, who argues,

> If one is to properly comprehend the Bible's teaching on the triune nature of God, the incarnation, the atonement, the church, eschatology, or ethics, these must be understood in the context of their organic relationship to the story narrated in the Bible and its redemptive theme.[1]

1 Many have argued for the centrality of story in biblical communication, not the least of which is Curry, "Mission to Muslims," 222. Leading into the quote cited above, Curry writes, "The Bible's redemptive narrative provides the clue to understanding its overarching message. It communicates its depiction of reality in the one form that is commonly understood across all cultures regardless of time or place—story. Story is so fundamental to the Bible that most of its major teachings, both doctrinally and ethically, are developed within the context of stories."

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The biblical story is often simplified by considering the basic plot moves: Creator and Creation, Sin and the Fall of Humanity, Redemption through Covenant, and New Creation.[2] If Hebrews is able to present the basic outline of the biblical story, perhaps it can be useful in both demonstrating Christ to be the climax of the story and also challenging the counter-stories of non-Christian faiths.

As noted above, Paul connects Jesus's death and resurrection with the removal of human sin. Yet such a claim only makes sense within the parameters of the biblical story wherein one finds the logical precursors of substitutionary atonement embedded in ancient Israel's divinely commanded sacrificial system. Likewise, such a sacrificial system only makes sense within the worldview framework in which sin separates image-bearing humans from the one whose image they bear.[3] In other words, the story told about the world, its history, and human roles therein produces a set of basic assumptions about how the world works and how to ascertain value and purpose.

One of the most important elements of the biblical worldview as it relates to producing a system of value and purpose is through the tension created by the desire of a holy and righteous God to dwell among his sin-stained creatures. As we seek to communicate the gospel story and its relationship to atonement to non-Christians, we must engage the context of the biblical story from which these doctrines and values arise and in which they make sense.[4] We turn, then, to an analysis of the metanarrative provided by Hebrews to provide a glimpse of some of the influences that form a biblical worldview and which are necessary for non-Christians to apprehend.

Author and Authority: "God has spoken through the prophets and by his Son."

From the very first verses of Hebrews, the author addresses the fact that there is a God, and he has spoken. Not only has this God spoken through prophets during previous ages, but in recent times he has communicated in and through his Son. For the author of Hebrews, God is the one who is singularly responsible for the creation of the world. This God accomplishes

2 Various scholars conceive of this metanarrative by this basic paradigm with slight adjustments and adaptations. For instance, N. T. Wright has conceived of the biblical metanarrative as a five-act play, involving Creation, Fall, Israel, Jesus, and New Creation in *New Testament and the People of God*, 140–41.

3 N. T. Wright makes this connection between the symbolic elements of praxis and their inextricable relationship to both a metanarrative and a subsequent worldview. He writes, "It is a truth insufficiently acknowledged that a sensible worldview equipped with appropriate symbolic praxis must be in want of a story. … Symbols and actions mean what they mean within a worldview." Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 456.

4 See the argument in Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews*, 265–305.

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creation by the agency of his Son, through whom he has also communicated himself to the world (Heb 1:1–4).

Perhaps an account of the divine creation of the world does not automatically stand in opposition to the stories told by other religions. However, even in this brief reference, the first chapter of Hebrews distinguishes biblical creation from other origin myths by introducing the divine Son as the agent of creation, as the sustainer of creation, and as the purifier of sinful creatures: "He upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high" (Heb 1:3 ESV).

The power of this divine Son, then, is not limited to creation or communication, but includes the capacity to accomplish purification.[5] In this initial introduction of the Son through whom God has created and spoken, we begin to glimpse the christological focus and imagery that will be sustained throughout the rest of the book: Jesus is the Son, the Lord, and the High Priest.[6]

Thus, the author of Hebrews presents a unique creator, referred to as God, who at the same time is distinguished from the creator referred to as the Son. This Son is further presented as having both a divine identity and a human identity.[7] Hebrews presents a God who is over and above creation as its creator, but also one who, through the Son, has entered sympathetically into the human condition. The rationale for this is given as one considers the second aspect of the biblical metanarrative that the author of Hebrews attends to: the separation between humanity and God due to sin.

Sin: Death, Guilt, Impurity, Separation

Prior to considering how Jesus achieves salvation on behalf of humanity, however, it is necessary to consider how the author presents the problem that sin creates and from which salvation is necessary. Throughout Hebrews, the author is keen to highlight at least four results of sin which carry forward the biblical storyline from Genesis through to Christ: Sin is that which produces death, guilt, impurity, and separation. For Jesus to resolve sin, he must be able to turn back these four effects.

5 Wright, "Seal of Approval," 145. Showing the narrative continuity of Christ as creator but also as the fulfillment of ancient Israel's sacrificial cult, Wright writes, "Hebrews demonstrates that although we are to acknowledge the Son's role in the act of creation, his priestly work of purification and intercession is that which properly sustains creation in the cultic framework Hebrews adopts."

6 Bauckham, "Divinity of Jesus Christ," 18–19.

7 Bauckham, 18. Bauckham contends that this threefold presentation of Jesus as Son, Lord, and High Priest reinforces both his divine identity and his human identity.

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We see the author intentionally identifying these four effects throughout his letter. For instance, in Hebrews 2:9 Jesus is viewed as the forerunner of rescue from death:

> We see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. (ESV)

Jesus's vicarious death is likewise cited later in Hebrews 9:24–28 as the once-for-all sacrifice, whereby he has "put away sin by the sacrifice of himself" (v. 26 ESV). The reader is reminded of the biblical story in which death stands as an obstacle between humans and God as a consequence of sin.

Furthermore, in Hebrews 2:1–3 the author reminds the reader of what has been written in the past, warning that if "every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?" (ESV). Transgressions of the law bring about guilt that requires forgiveness. The guilty state of sinners is reinforced by Hebrews 10:18, which states, "Where there is forgiveness of [sins and lawless deeds], there is no longer any offering for sin" (ESV). Thus sin is conceived of as transgression of law, and sinners obtain the status of guilt.

But death and guilt are not the only conditions caused by sin. The author of Hebrews reinforces what Leviticus teaches regarding sin, the consequences of a sin-stained world, and ritual impurity. Leviticus repeatedly demonstrates that sinners are in a state of guilt *and* impurity—both of which endanger a worshiper in the presence of a holy and righteous God.[8] Therefore sin—which causes both guilt and impurity—separates God from humanity.

The author highlights this separation, pointing out that even the tabernacle as the meeting place of God and the high priestly representative of his people is marked by a curtain that reinforces divine-human separation (Heb 9:1–10). Here the author reflects on the curtain as a symbol of division that disrupts the biblical story of a God who intends to dwell among his people yet whose holy and righteous presence poses a danger to his sin-stained people. Fortunately, Hebrews relates the history of God's merciful provision of a remedy for sin and separation through the biblical concept of atonement.

Atonement: Life, Righteousness, Purification, Restoration

While one might look at various places in Scripture to consider the biblical teaching on atonement, the Day of Atonement, recorded in Leviticus 16, provides the clearest basis for analysis. There, through a series of prescribed sacrifices, washings, and the presentation of blood in the innermost places of

8 Sklar, *Sin, Impurity, Sacrifice, Atonement*, 182.

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