

Background studies have sought to discover the intellectual basis of the author's use of the OT by comparing Hebrews with various religious and philosophical thoughts of the first century such as Philo, Platonism, Qumran, Gnosticism and *Merkabah* mysticism.<sup>31</sup>

Burtness noted that the Philonic influence upon Hebrews was first suggested by Grotius in 1644,<sup>32</sup> and has received considerable support since then.<sup>33</sup> However, the most vehement support comes from C. Spicq who after considering the evidence of literary dependence of Hebrews upon Philo concluded that:

While the author of Hebrews is no plagiarist, nevertheless his affinities with the philosopher of Alexandria which have their origin neither in an identity of readers nor in a similarity of the subjects which are discussed, compels one to conclude that at a minimum he studied Philo's work and probably even that he knew him personally and was taught by him.<sup>34</sup>

Spicq's views were challenged by Williamson who examined the similarities between the epistle and the works of Philo under three heads: 'Linguistic evidence', 'themes and ideas' and 'the use of Scripture'.<sup>35</sup> After an extensive discussion Williamson concluded that there is no evidence that either a single doctrine or any of the vocabulary of Hebrews is borrowed from or influenced by Philo.<sup>36</sup> On the contrary he emphasized the conflict and differences between Hebrews and Philo.<sup>37</sup> Thurston, after considering the opinions of both Spicq and Williamson, suggests that the similarities can be explained by the fact that 'Hebrews 1–5 takes its subjects

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<sup>31</sup> J. C. McCullough, 'Some Recent developments in Research on the Epistle to the Hebrews', *IBS* 2 (1980), 141–165, esp. 142–151; L. D. Hurst, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: Its Background of Thought*, SNTS Mon. Ser. 65 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 5–85; James W. Thompson, *The Beginnings of Christian Philosophy: The Epistle to the Hebrews*, CBQ Mon. Ser. (Washington: The Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1982).

<sup>32</sup> J. H. Burtness, 'Plato, Philo and the Author of Hebrews', *LQ* X (1958), 54–64, esp. 54.

<sup>33</sup> Philonic influence upon Hebrews is supported by many scholars such as Gilbert, 'Greek', 521–32; Moffatt, *Hebrews*, xxix; C. Ryder Smith, *The Bible Doctrine of Salvation* (London: Epworth, 1946), 221; E. C. Blackman, *Biblical Interpretation: The Old Difficulties and the New Opportunity* (London: Independent Press, 1957), 88; C. K. Barrett, 'The Eschatology of the Epistle to the Hebrews', in W. D. Davies and D. Daube (eds.), *The Background of the New Testament and its Eschatology* (Cambridge: University Press, 1964), 363–93, esp. 393; A. Cody, *Heavenly Sanctuary and Liturgy in the Epistle to the Hebrews: The Achievement of Salvation in the Epistle's Perspectives* (St. Meinrad, IN: Grail, 1960), 3; A full-length study on the Platonic and Philonic influence upon Hebrews can be seen in Thompson, *Beginnings*; L. K. K. Dey, *The Intermediary World and Patterns of Perfection in Philo and Hebrews* (Missoula: Scholars, 1975).

<sup>34</sup> C. Spicq, *L'Épître aux Hébreux* (Paris, Gabalda, 1952), 88f, translation by McCullough, 'Developments', 143.

<sup>35</sup> Ronald Williamson, *Philo and the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Leiden: Brill, 1970).

<sup>36</sup> Williamson, *Philo*, 576.

<sup>37</sup> Williamson, *Philo*, 492–95,

from Philo' (i.e. Philo's Logos doctrine) to argue against the angel-christology (Heb. 1–2) and Moses christology (Heb. 3:1–6).<sup>38</sup>

Considering the conceptual background of the high priesthood of Jesus in Hebrews 7, Thompson also argues for Philonic influence upon Hebrews.<sup>39</sup> His argument is based on the terminology shared by both the author of Hebrews and Philo.<sup>40</sup> He states that 'the dualistic reading of the Old Testament, the use of Hellenistic terminology in 7:3, and the focus on the abiding of the exalted one have their closest analogies in the work of Philo'.<sup>41</sup> Thurston, on the other hand, notes the difference between Hebrews' concept of high priesthood and that of Philo, and says that although Philo refers to the Logos as 'the Great High Priest' he never directly links Melchizedek's name to the term 'Great High Priest'.<sup>42</sup> Thurston continues that the Philonists identified the Great High Priest with the high priest Joshua the son of Josedech which suggests that the Philonist would equate Jesus with the son of Josedech. He says, 'this would have been a natural conclusion for the Philonists, because Hebrews 1:5 seems to suggest that they equated Jesus with the "son" of 2 Samuel 7:14.... and this passage could have been applied to both Christ and the son of Josedech'.<sup>43</sup> However, Thurston believes that Hebrews argues against this Philonic christology by presenting Jesus as a high priest in the order of Melchizedek. 'If the Philonists' Logos christology had been correct Christ would have needed to suffer many times since the foundation of the world'.<sup>44</sup>

Käsemann, noting the difference in theological orientation between Hebrews and Philo, suggests 'the Gnostic myth of the redeemed Redeemer and the soul's journey to heaven' as the background thought of Hebrews' doctrine of redemption.<sup>45</sup> His interpretation of the various themes of Hebrews such as Sabbath rest, pilgrimage and the high priesthood has received both support and criticism.<sup>46</sup> Käsemann was challenged by Hofius who argues that the concept of rest

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<sup>38</sup> Robert W. Thurston, 'Philo and the Epistle to the Hebrews', *EQ* 58 (1986), 133–143.

<sup>39</sup> James W. Thompson, 'The conceptual Background and Purpose of the Midrash in Hebrews 7', *NovT* 19 (1977), 209–23; Thompson, *Beginnings*, 116–27.

<sup>40</sup> He considers terms such as τάξις, (p. 211), ἀπάτωρ, ἀμήτωρ (p. 212), μένω (p. 212) and σάρε (p. 217) in Thompson, 'Background', 210–17.

<sup>41</sup> Thompson, 'Background', 223.

<sup>42</sup> Thurston, 'Philo', 140.

<sup>43</sup> Thurston, 'Philo', 140.

<sup>44</sup> Thurston, 'Philo', 142.

<sup>45</sup> Ernst Käsemann, *The Wandering People of God: An Investigation of the Letter to the Hebrews*, translation by Roy A. Harrisville and Irving L. Sanderg (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 87f.

<sup>46</sup> Käsemann is supported by E. Grässer, *Der Glaube im Hebräerbrief* (Marburg: N. G. Elwert, 1965); Theissen, *Untersuchungen*, 124–29; Thompson, *Beginnings*, 88ff. Interpreters against the Gnostic influence upon Hebrews are Barrett, 'Eschatology', 389; Hughes, *Hebrews*, 137–42; H. W. Attridge, 'Let

in Hebrews should be understood against the background of Jewish apocalyptic thought as the eschatological entry into the Holy of Holies.<sup>47</sup> Hofius also examined the concept of 'curtain' in Hebrews against the background of Rabbinic thought, Jewish Hellenism, Philo, Josephus, Gnosticism and the *Merkabah* mysticism of Jewish apocalyptic, and argued that the *Merkabah* mysticism is the most likely background thought of Hebrews' temple discussions.<sup>48</sup> This view was supported by Schenke who after considering the teaching about angels and about Melchizedek in Hebrews concluded that Hebrews is influenced by a specific form of early Jewish *Merkabah* mysticism.<sup>49</sup>

The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls has led many scholars to understand Hebrews against the background of Qumran theology.<sup>50</sup> Yadin believes the recipients of Hebrews had been members of the Qumran sect before their conversion to Christianity. So the Son's superiority to the angels in Hebrews 1 is designed to combat the Qumran theology which views the angels as 'sons of God' (cf. 'sons of heaven', 1QS 4:22; 11:8; Gen. Apo. II:5, 16), or even as 'gods' (11QMelch, line 10).<sup>51</sup> Many scholars have attempted to understand Melchizedek in Hebrews 7 in the light of 11QMelchizedek, which describes Melchizedek as a heavenly figure and eschatological deliverer.<sup>52</sup> However, the connection between Hebrews and Qumran theology has been challenged by F. F. Bruce who argues that the purpose of Hebrews' mentioning of the angels and the superiority of the Son is not

to discourage the readers from angel-worship but rather to lend emphasis to two points which the writer is concerned to make: (1) The sanctions attending the law, which was communicated

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us Strive to Enter that Rest", *The Logic of Hebrews 4:1–11'*, *HTR* 73 (1980), 279–88, esp. 279; Hurst, *Hebrews*, 70–75; Leschert, *Foundations*, 141f.

<sup>47</sup> O. Hofius, *Katapausis. Die Vorstellung vom endzeitlichen Ruheort im Hebräerbrief* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1970), 53, 60, 102, 110.

<sup>48</sup> O. Hofius, *Der Vorhang vor dem Thron Gottes* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1972).

<sup>49</sup> H.-M. Schenke, 'Erwägungen zum Rätsel des Hebräerbriefes', in H. D. Betz and L. Schottroff (eds.), *Neues Testament und Christliche Existenz* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1973), 421–37, esp. 433f.

<sup>50</sup> The first commentary of Hebrews written in connection with Qumran was the tenth edition of the *Kritisch-exegetischer Kommentar*, by O. Michel, *Der Brief an die Hebräer* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1960).

<sup>51</sup> Y. Yadin, 'The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Epistle to the Hebrews', in C. Rabin and Y. Yadin (eds.), *Scripta Hierosolymitana IV* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1958), 36–53, esp. 48; Also H. Kosmala, *Hebräer-Essener-Christen* (Leiden: Brill, 1959); Jean Danielou, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and Primitive Christianity* (Baltimore: Nentor Omega, 1962), 112.

<sup>52</sup> M. De Jonge and A. S. Van der Woude, '11Q Melchizedek and the New Testament', *NTS* 12 (1965–66), 301–26; G. H. Lang, 'Melchizedek', *EQ* 31 (1959), 21–31; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, 'Now This Melchizedek', *CBQ* 25 (1963), 305–21; idem, 'Further Light on Melchizedek from Qumran Cave 11', *JBL* 86 (1967), 25–41; David E. Aune, 'A Note on Jesus' Messianic Consciousness and 11Q Melchizedek', *EQ* 45 (1973), 161–65.

through angels, were severe enough in all conscience; how much more awful must be the consequence of belittling God's final communication which was delivered not through angels but by the Son? (2) Whereas the old order was subordinated to angels, the new world, which is to supersede it, is subjected to the Son of man.<sup>53</sup>

Thus Bruce understands the angels in Hebrews 1:7 as the counterpart of the 'myriads of angels' in Hebrews 12:22 where the angels are understood to be the attendants sent to minister to the heirs of salvation. Bruce said that when 'believers come to the myriads of angels it is not to worship them, but to worship the God whose servants they are'.<sup>54</sup> Horton and Buchanan also suggest that Hebrews could be understood without reference to Qumran.<sup>55</sup> It seems to be clear that although there are some parallels found in the Qumran and Hebrews it is by no means certain that the arguments in Hebrews are influenced by the Qumran community.

Against all the proposed non-Christian background sources Hurst attempted to understand Hebrews' intellectual background within the tradition of early Christian theology. He examined especially the Stephen tradition in Acts 7, Pauline theology and 1 Peter and concluded that it is more likely that the author of Hebrews shares the traditions of these writers rather than the Hellenistic traditions.<sup>56</sup> The advantage of Hurst's study is that he returned to the biblical tradition to provide the author's background thought rather than staying in the popular trend of Hellenistic backgrounds. Nevertheless his overemphasis on the temporal element of Jewish eschatology obscures the otherwise clear meaning of the temple imagery in the central section of the epistle.<sup>57</sup>

The difficulty with all these attempts to find the religious background of Hebrews is that while each of the proposals could explain some of the arguments of the epistle, nevertheless none of them could bring all the topics in Hebrews under discussion. Therefore, McCullough says:

The tendency in recent studies on the religious background of the epistle to the Hebrews has been to abandon the attempt to see the epistle's background in terms of only one scheme of thought.... Rather scholars have concentrated on trying to gain clearer knowledge of the religious pluralism

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<sup>53</sup> F. F. Bruce, ' "To the Hebrews" or "To the Essenes"?' , *NTS* 9 (1962–63), 217–32, esp. 218; Also Gareth Lee Cockerill, 'Melchizedek or "King of Righteousness" ', *EQ* 63:4 (1991), 305–12; Hurst, *Hebrews*, 43–66.

<sup>54</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 357f.

<sup>55</sup> F. L. Horton, *The Melchizedek Tradition: A Critical Examination of the Sources to the fifth century AD and in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 161; G. W. Buchanan, 'The Present state of Scholarship on Hebrews' in J. Neusner (ed.), *Christianity, Judaism and other Graeco-Roman Cults* (Leiden: Brill, 1975), 299–330.

<sup>56</sup> Hurst, *Hebrews*, 131–33.

<sup>57</sup> For more detailed discussion on the temple imagery, see below 7.2.2. *The Interpretation of ὑπόδειγμα, σκιά and ἀντίτυπος.*

and diversity within heterodox Judaism and then to place the epistle to the Hebrews in that context.<sup>58</sup>

It is unquestionable that the early church was born out of the diversity of religious traditions and philosophical thoughts, which influenced by and large the early church in the process of its formation. Therefore, it is important to understand the epistle in the context of the whole picture of the socio-historical context of the first century. The background study of Hebrews has revealed the fact that there are parallel concepts between Hebrews and the proposed background materials, and therefore it is possible to suppose at least the cultural and intellectual overlap between them. Nevertheless, it is unreasonable to imagine that the author of Hebrews incorporates all the suggested background sources into his discussion of the various themes of the epistle. Hebrews is a single theological treatise with a single task to achieve (i.e. the theological significance of the person and ministry of Jesus) rather than to deal with all the religious pluralism of the first century. The following consideration on the structural coherence and literary unity in spite of the various themes of the epistle will suggest that the discovery of a single predominant conceptual framework of the epistle is still required instead of supposing that the epistle was written under the influence of the various religious and intellectual thoughts of the first century.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> McCullough, 'Developments', 151.

<sup>1</sup> Kiwoong Son, [\*Zion Symbolism in Hebrews: Hebrews 12:18-24 as a Hermeneutical Key to the Epistle\*](#) (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005), 9–13.