

IN SEARCH OF THE HEBREWS 9,2 GRAIL

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THE STATE OF THE QUESTION

For some forty years the present writer has been engaged in an arduous (some would say quixotic) search for an interpretation of the Greek text of Heb 9,2 which would be consistent with its immediate and general context¹

Making the search all the more adventuresome was and is the conviction of said writer that such an interpretation would be related to the Eucharist. A major breakthrough, it would seem, took place when a footnote in a student's seminar paper led to the writer's discovery of the Jewish ceremony of the *tôdâ*.² This breakthrough led to a plausible interpretation of Heb 13,1-21 in terms of the Eucharist.³ This use of the *tôdâ* to arrive at a plausible interpretation of Heb 13 seems to be confirmed by the usefulness of the *tôdâ* in interpreting Heb 2,12 independently of Chapter 13.⁴

The General Context of Hebrews 9,2

In order to establish a general context for Heb 9,2 one has to suggest a structure in which Heb 9,2 occurs. Attempts to come to terms with the structure of the Epistle to the Hebrews are legion.⁵ In trying to settle on a structure that is plausible, an interpreter is inevitably influenced by his or her presuppositions. The essential

1. Cf.: J. Swetnam, "Hebrews 9,2 and the Uses of Consistency", *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 32 (1970) 205-221; J. Swetnam, "Hebrews 9,2: Some Suggestions about Text and Context", *Melita Theologica* 41 (2000) 163-185. One may visit the website "James Swetnam's Close Readings".
2. Cf. J. Swetnam, "*Zebach tôdâ* in Tradition: A Study of 'Sacrifice of Praise' in Hebrew, Greek and Latin", *Filologia Neotestamentaria* 15 (2002) 65-86.
3. Cf. J. Swetnam, "A Liturgical Approach to Hebrews 13", *Letter and Spirit* 2 (2006) 159-173 and J. Swetnam, "A Liturgical Approach to Hebrews 13", *The Incarnate Word* 1 (2006) 3-17 [a shorter but clearer presentation than that in *Letter and Spirit* where, for some unknown reason, the suggested structure of the chapter is presented in a confusing way].
4. Cf.: J. Swetnam, "*Ex henos* in Hebrews 2,11", *Biblica* 88 (2007) 517-525; J. Swetnam, "*Ho apostolos* in Hebrews 3,1", *Biblica* 89 (2008) 252-262; J. Swetnam, "*Tôn lalêthêsomenôn* in Hebrews 3, 5", *Biblica* 90 (2009) 000-000.
5. For more on the structure of Hebrews as understood by the present writer cf. J. Swetnam: "*Ex henos* in Hebrews 2,11", 518; "*Ho apostolos* in Hebrews 3,1", 252; "A Possible Structure of Hebrews 3,7 – 10,39", *Melita Theologica* 45 (1994) 127-147 (especially p. 141); "Hebrews 11,1

presupposition on which the present writer depends was long ago fixed on the Eucharist, well before he became familiar with the *tôdâ*. Given the plausibility of the *tôdâ* in helping establish a structure for Heb 13 and Heb 2,12, this fixation on the Eucharist has become even more central to his thinking.

Heb 9,2 belongs to what seems to be a clearly-defined structure beginning at 8,1 and extending to 10,39. The principal reason for the apparent clarity in this major section is the prophecy of the New Covenant of Jeremiah at Heb 8,8-12 and 10,16-17. These two citations seem to constitute a frame forming an inclusion. The inclusion is a common structural device.⁶ In Hebrews this giant inclusion can plausibly be seen as introducing and explaining three “entrances” of Christ (indicated by the occurrence of the verb *eiserchomai* in 9,12; 9,24; 10,5). This major section may be outlined as follows:⁷

Hebrews 8,1 – 10,39: The New Covenant

Introduction to the Prophecy of Jeremiah: Heb 8,1-6

The Opening Frame: Jeremiah 31,31-34 (Heb 8,7-13)

Introduction to the Three Entrances of Christ (Heb 9,1-10)

1) Entrance of Christ into the Holy of Holies (Heb 9,11-23)

2) Entrance of Christ into Heaven Itself (Heb 9,24 – 10,4)

3) Entrance of Christ into the World (Heb 10,5-14)

The Closing Frame: Jeremiah 31,33 (Heb 10,15-18)⁸

Negative Paraenesis (Heb 10,19-30a)

Positive Paraenesis (Heb 30b-39)

– 13,24: A Suggested Structure”, *Melita Theologica* 47 (1996) 27-40. Some refinements may be needed here and there on the general structure which results, especially as regards terminology and exegesis, but in general the contents of these articles still seem defensible, as opposed to the structure which the present writer held in the 1970s. Hebrews has the tantalizing capacity to keep disclosing unsuspected depths of meaning for those who keep trying to gain insights into it.

6. For an author who refers frequently to inclusions cf. P. Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews. A Commentary on the Greek Text* (The New International Greek Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids, Michigan / Carlisle, England 1992) 740.
7. Cf. J. Swetnam, “Hebrews 9,2: Some Suggestions about Text and Context”, 178.
8. [vv. 15-18] La nuova alleanza è perfetta, non ha bisogno di nuovi sacrifici (v. 14). La prova di questa assertio (tesi) è condotta con l’ausilio di Ger 38,33 (LXX), testimonianza profetica che torna a giocare un ruolo decisivo; ampiamente esposto in 8,7-3, Ger 38,33 viene ripreso in 10,16 a mo’ di magna inclusio per puntare una volta ancora in 10,17 sul perdono, momento capitale nel patto (*diathêkê*), C. Marcheselli-Casale, *Lettera agli ebrei. Nuova versione, introduzione e commento* (I Libri Biblici, Nuovo Testamento, 16; Milano 2005, 428.

These three “entrances” seem to be of considerable importance to the author since he devotes the centre of his entire epistle to them to explain his understanding of the new covenant. The introduction at 8,1-6 sets the tone for what follows; the word *leitourgos* in 8,2 is particularly significant, for it indicates that what follows is to be understood as dealing with worship.⁹

The interpretations of the verses in which the word *eiserchomai* is found are varied. But it can be said that an interpretation of *eiserchomai* which involves the imagery of spatial movement is not out of line with the use of the verb elsewhere in the New Testament.¹⁰ Further, an interpretation of *eiserchomai* in Hebrews involving cult is not out of line with some interpretations already advanced.¹¹ Still further, the use of *eiserchomai* in Hebrews is closely connected with the faith of believers.¹²

In view of all the above, the interpretation which recommends itself to the present writer takes into consideration the placement within the inclusion formed by the citations from Jeremiah about the new covenant and the mutual relevance of the three uses of *eiserchomai* that would seem to be implied by their parallelism. That is to say, all three uses involve the appearance of spatial imagery, all three uses involve Christian cult, and all three uses involve the faith of the addressees.

In the light of these considerations and of other passages in Hebrews the following interpretation recommends itself: The passage about Christ’s entrance into the Holy of Holies refers to Christ as sacrificial victim¹³; the passage about*

9. “In Hebrews [*leitourgos*] is always used in cultic contexts, whether of angels (1:7, cf. v. 14), of worship in the wilderness tabernacle (cf. 9:21; 10:11), or (as here and in 8:6) of the ministry of Christ” Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 401.
10. “The use of *eiserchomai* in the NT with expressions of place has led to widespread agreement that it is to be understood quasi-literally in such contexts as a verb of movement ...” (Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 235).
11. “*Eiserchomai* ... is used in Hebrews in cultic contexts, of entry into God’s presence”, Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 349.
12. “*Eisēlthen* of believers, and negatively of unbelievers, was a key word in 3.4-11 in the exposition of Ps. 95,11. In 6:19-20., Christ’s entry into the heavenly sanctuary was closely linked with the entry of believers (cf. also 9. 12, 25)” (Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 480). In the view of faith as faith-trust, a view espoused by the present writer as regards many texts of Hebrews, Christ is also a “believer” (cf. Swetnam, “*Ex henos* in Hebrews 2,11” 521-524). To say that *eiserchomai* is used [positively] of believers and negatively of unbelievers in Hebrews means that it has an intrinsic connection with faith as understood in Hebrews.
13. On Christ as victim cf. J. Swetnam, “The Crux at Hebrews 2,9 in Its Context”, in a forthcoming number of *Biblica*. In this article the suggestion is advanced that the baffling crux at Heb 2,9 in which Christ is said to die to experience death (one need only consult any commentary to see how

Christ's entrance into heaven itself refers to Christ as heavenly high priest seated at God's right, from which position of authority he presides at every Christian *tôdâ*¹⁴; the passage about Christ's entrance into the world refers to Christ as earthly high priest who thus prepares himself for the unique sacrifice which is at the centre of every Christian *tôdâ*.¹⁵ Thus the three entrances are about the victimhood of Christ, the heavenly priesthood of Christ, and the earthly priesthood of Christ, with the heavenly, definitive priesthood appropriately in the centre.¹⁶

This view of the entrances which sees them as involving the Eucharist directly (Entrances #1 and #2) or indirectly (Entrance #3) seems supported by the inclusion in which the three entrances are being considered: Jeremiah's text about the "New Covenant" is the text alluded to by the words of Christ in the institution of the Eucharist as reported in Matt 26,28; Luke 22, 20; 1 Cor 11,25; and 2 Cor 3,6. There is nothing out of the ordinary in an exegesis that takes the inclusion involving Jeremiah 31, 34 in Hebrews as involving the Eucharist.

The key insight involved in attributing direct relevance to the Eucharist in Entrances #1 and #2 and indirect relevance to the Eucharist in Entrance #3 is the implication of the word *eiserchomai* ("to enter"). For with the spatial imagery of

baffling it is) involves the Christian gazing at the victim Christ in the Eucharist in faith in order to re-live Christ's experience of death. Thus he or she is strengthened in the faith-trust in Christ by which he/she is both a spiritual child of Abraham (i.e., one who, like Abraham, believes that God can raise from the dead) and has Christ as a brother (i.e., participates in the Christian *tôdâ* in which the risen Christ is the high priest—cf. Heb 2,12 and Swetnam, "*Ex henos* in Hebrews 2,11", *passim*).

14. "The entrance into *Ta Hagia* (9,11-23) involves heavenly realities because Christ entered into heaven itself (v. 24). He did this by the unique offering of himself (vv. 25-26). Thus Christ is being presented here as high priest who offers, whereas in 9,11-23 he is presented as the victim being offered, a victimhood only alluded to in vv. 25-26. The entrance into the Holy of Holies / Holy Things is connected with the entrance into heaven as offering is connected with offerer" Swetnam, "Hebrews 9,2: Some Suggestions about Text and Context", 180.
15. "'Coming into the world' is a Jewish expression for birth ..." Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 500. Ellingworth further remarks: "... the reference [sc., in Heb 10,5a] is almost certainly to Christ's incarnation viewed as a single event, his sacrifice being seen from before his birth as its culmination", Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 499. He also states: "*Eiserchomenos* ... *legei*: the subject 'Christ' is implied from 9, 28, the full name 'Jesus Christ' being held in reserve until it can be used with great emphasis in v. 10. It is nevertheless remarkable that the author can assume without stating that the words of scripture can be attributed to the pre-existent Christ in this way", Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 499.
16. On Christ's two interrelated priesthoods cf. Swetnam, "*Ex henos* in Hebrews 2,11", 523-524. On Christ as victim cf. J. Swetnam, "The Crux at Hebrews 2,9 in Its Context", in a forthcoming number of *Biblica*.

“entering” is implied the spatial imagery of “being present”. If Christ entered into the “holy things”, i.e., the loaves of proposition of Jewish worship (cf. the explanation of Heb 9,2 given below as well as the articles of 1970 and 2000), the implication is that he is present in them in their Christian form. If Christ entered into heaven itself, the implication is that he is present in heaven as a Christian priest (i.e., as appearing before God’s “face” on our behalf. Only Entrance #3, into the world at the moment of birth with a mortal body, does not result in Christ’s abiding presence, for with the resurrection (which made the other two entrances possible—cf. Heb 9,11 as will be explained below) Christ as priest enters another world entirely (cf. Entrance #1); but Entrance #3 is vital for it makes possible the first two entrances.

This, then, is the general context of Heb 9,2 as the present writer sees it.

The Particular Context of Hebrews 9,2

Heb 9,1, following hard as it does on Heb 8,13, uses the word “first” to refer to the Sinai covenant, which was declared “old” by God by implication as soon as Jeremiah mentioned the “new”. The verse is pejorative in the sense that the first covenant is seen as outmoded, with its cultic relevance limited inasmuch as its sanctuary was of this world (*to hagion kosmikon*). It had cultic regulations (*dikaiōmata latreias*), but by association with the sanctuary of this world these too were limited. 9,2 builds on this view by mentioning what seems to be the outer tent (*skênē*) of *to hagion*, which is followed in 9,3 by reference to the inner tent (*skênē*). The use of the word “tent” indicates that the author is thinking of the desert tabernacle of the Exodus, but the implication is that what he is saying refers to the Jerusalem temple as well (cf. Heb 9,9). The two places of worship constitute the one *hagion kosmikon* as is clear from the illative particle *gar* at the beginning of 9,2. They are considered to be two places of worship because they are separated by a veil, called “the second veil” (*to deuterion katapetasma*) to distinguish it from the first veil, which was the veil through which one entered into the first tent.¹⁷ The first tent is called *hagia* and the second tent is called *hagia hagiôn*.

17. The author of Hebrews seems to be following a view of the desert tabernacle attested nowhere in the Old Testament, but nonetheless recognizably based on the configuration of the desert tabernacle as explained in Exodus. Cf. W. L. Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, Word Biblical Commentary 47B; Dallas 1991, 219. But attempts to find the sources for the thinking of the author of Hebrews are misplaced. The author of Hebrews is not attempting to represent sources. Rather, he is constructing instruments based on recognizable sources but viewed from the standpoint of what

The word *hagia* in 9,2 has been the object of considerable discussion.¹⁸ The first part of Heb 9,2 is clearly about the first tent of the Exodus tabernacle. It would seem to follow that the second part involving the *hagia* refers to the first tent as well, for *hagia* is common terminology in the Septuagint with regard to the outside tent. Further, Heb 9,3 certainly alludes to the inside tent or *hagia hagiôn*, which is the common terminology of the Septuagint with regard to the inside tent. The problem with this tidy view is that the word *hagia* elsewhere in Hebrews is used for the second tent or holy of holies.¹⁹

The present writer is on record as advocating the view that the word *hagia* has two meanings which are operative in 9,2: one meaning is “holy things”, i.e., the sacred food of the loaves of proposition referred to by the immediately antecedent *hê prothesis tôn artôn*.²⁰ Here the ambiguity of the word *hagia* comes into play. For not only is it used in the Septuagint to refer to the “holy place” as contrasted with the “holy of holies”, but also to refer to “holy things”, i.e. holy food.²¹ Given the antecedent of *hêtis*—*prothesis tôn artôn*—the conclusion imposes itself that as regards the grammar of 9,2 the author has sacred food in mind when he speaks of *ta hagia*. But the word *hagia* also has spatial relevance at Heb 9,2, a relevance arising from semantic association, i.e., from the imagery involving the sanctuary, the veil

he is going to use the instruments for. In this case, he is preparing instruments to illustrate in imaginative terms with faith resonances the priesthood and victimhood of Jesus Christ as known from his Christian belief.

18. Cf. Ellingworth, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 423.
19. “The more problematic feature of this verse [sc., Heb 9,2] is the final relative clause, which, on the most widely accepted reading, is *hêtis legetai hagia*”, H. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Hermeneia; Philadelphia 1989, 233.
20. In the 2000 article (Swetnam, “Hebrews 9,2: Some Suggestions about Text and Context”, 105-107) the way the relative *hêtis* is used in Hebrews is examined in detail. In all nine instances (2,3; 8,5; 8,6; 9,9; 10,8; 10,11; 10,35; 12,5; 13,7) other than 9,2 the word or words to which it refers are in close proximity, with no intervening clause. If 9,2 is consistent with this usage, *hêtis* refers to the feminine singular non what is immediately antecedent, i.e., *hê prothesis*. This usage by the author of Hebrews is made more plausible by the fact that he has separated mention of the showbread (*hê prothesis tôn artôn*) from the “table” (*hê trapeza*). In the *Septuagint* text of Exodus the showbreads are usually referred to as *hê trapeza*. Further, he has inverted the normal way of mentioning the showbreads from *artoi tês protheseôs* to *hê prothesis tôn artôn*. (Cf. the discussion in Attridge, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 233). The result of these changes is to make the phrase *hê prothesis tôn artôn* the unmistakable antecedent of *hêtis*, with the word *trapeza* being definitively eliminated from contention by being mentioned separately. That is to say, the loaves themselves are in effect the *hagia*.
21. Cf. Swetnam, “Hebrews 9,2: Some Suggestions about Text and Context”, 171-172. The most relevant Septuagint texts are: Lev 24,9; Ex 29,32-33; Lev 10,12; 22,6-7.10.14.15-16; 2 Chr 35,6; 1 Sam 21,4; Esdras 2,63; 17,65; 20,34.

and the tent in Heb 9,1-3. This must be a meaning of considerable importance to the author of Hebrews, given the elaborate context involving spatial imagery which he is constructing. The problem involving spatial imagery in a nutshell is this: that when viewed from the standpoint of the immediate context the spatial imagery seems to indicate that *hagia* means the first or outside tent; but when viewed in the general context of the epistle the imagery seems to indicate that *hagia* means the second or inside tent.

To solve this problem one can presume inconsistency, which is the solution assumed by most commentators.²² Or some form of tinkering with the text or with possible sources of the text.²³ But if one interprets the mind of the author as indicated by how he seems to use the text in Heb 9,11-23 (for which 9,1-10 is the introduction), a new possibility emerges. Viewed from the standpoint of the author's purpose instead of the author's antecedents, and presuming the consistency of the use of *hagia* elsewhere in the epistle, the following assessment emerges: in 9,2 the author of Hebrews is taking the word *hagia* to suggest that what was connected in the Septuagint (i.e., the old covenant) only in an ancillary way with the symbolic presence of God in the holy of holies, in the dispensation of the new covenant becomes the centre of that divine presence. In the worship of the old covenant the showbreads were only of ancillary importance with regard to God's presence; in the new covenant, however, the showbread as changed into the Eucharist by the entrance of Christ is the centre of that divine presence. And the Christian showbread is Christ as victim, the one who has been offered once and for all in the Christian *tôdâ*. In Heb 9,1-3, in other words, the supposition underlying the discourse is of decisive importance, parallel to the importance of grammatical analysis, and that supposition is the divine presence in the holy of holies of the desert tabernacle.

Once this divine presence is postulated as guiding the thinking of the author of Hebrews, the apparently inconsistent and refractory elements of 9,2 fall into place. The texts in which *hagia* is found are the following:²⁴

8,2: Here Christ is the *leitourgiôs* of *tôn hagiôn*. That is to say, he is the high priest of the holy food which is himself as sacrificial victim, made the vessel of his divine presence by his entrance.

22. " ... it could be that our author simply took over the standard designations of the parts of the tabernacle without worrying about consistency", Attridge, *Hebrews*, 233 and 233 n. 45.

23. As Attridge attempts (Attridge, *Hebrews*, 233-234).

24. Cf. also Swetnam, "Hebrews 9,2: Some Suggestions about Text and Context", 168-170.

9,8: The structure and ceremonies of the desert tabernacle are a means used by the Holy Spirit to indicate that as long as the outer tent²⁵ remained access to the inner tent or the divine presence in the holy food of the Eucharist was impossible.

9,12: Christ entered into the sacred food through his own blood, i.e., as a sacrificial victim.

9,24: As high priest Christ did not enter into a man-made holy of holies as the high priest of the first covenant did, but into heaven itself. The primary contrast is with the old covenant high priest and the term of his entrance. But also involved is a secondary contrast between Christ as victim and Christ as priest. As priest he is present in a primary way in heaven where he is seated at God's right hand (Heb 1,13). There is thus question of two presences of Christ, one in the Eucharist where he is victim, and one at God's right hand where he is high priest.

9,25: Again, the contrast is between Christ as high priest of the new covenant and the high priest of the old covenant. Christ offered himself only once, while the old covenant high priest offered himself many times in the blood of another not his own.

10,19: Christians have access into the divine presence as found in the worship of the new covenant through the blood, i.e., through the sacrifice, of Christ.

Summary and Conclusion

The present article seeks to bring to a plausible conclusion (no "proof" is being attempted) a quest of almost forty years by its author. This quest attempts to interpret Heb 9,2 in a way which fits in to the general and particular contexts of Hebrews as the present writer understands them. This means that the Eucharist plays a major role in the epistle, as can be seen in Heb 13,1-21 and Heb 2,12 when viewed in the light of the old covenant *tôdâ* as Christianized by Christ.

In the light of this general context the more immediate context of Heb 9,2 involves the inclusion created by the citation at Heb 8,8-12 and Heb 10,16-17 of Jeremiah's new covenant. Within this inclusion the patterned use of the verb *eiserchomai* suggests that Heb 9,11 – 10,14 concerns Christ as victim, Christ as heavenly high

25. The outer tent is best understood as the body of the risen Christ. Cf. A. Vanhoye, "Par la tente plus grand et plus parfait ..." (Hebr 9,11)", *Biblica* 46 (1965) 1-28.

priest, and Christ as earthly high priest. Heb 9,1-10 serves as an introduction to these three entrances by establishing the spatial framework involved.

In 9,2 the ambiguity of the word *hagia* provides the author of Hebrews with an opportunity to make a key point about the background for Christ as victim and Christ as high priest. *Hagia* in the Septuagint can mean “holy things” in the sense of the holy food of the showbread of the temple; *hagia* can also serve the author of Hebrews as a word indicating the first or outer tent of the desert tabernacle. But the author of Hebrews consistently uses *hagia* in the sense of the holy of holies. This suggests that for the author of Hebrews the secondary role of the showbread in relation to the place of the symbolic divine presence in the first covenant is replaced in the new by the holy bread of the Eucharist in which Christ enters by his unique death and resurrection and is thus really present as victim. Thus the *hagia* of Hebrews replaces the *hagia hagiôn* of the first covenant as the centre of the worship of the new covenant. This function of *hagia* serves negatively in 9,24 to indicate that Christ did not enter into a this-worldly holy of holies, but into heaven itself, where he is present as high priest. This presence contrasts with his presence as victim in the Eucharist in the Christian *tôdâ*.

The “real presence” of Christ in the Eucharist has been a perennial challenge to Christian theologians. In the classic presentation of the Church it has been viewed in the light of Greek philosophical terminology (e.g., “transubstantiation”). If the above argumentation has any validity it indicates that for a key new covenant author the “real presence” was also a question of major importance—he dedicates a third of the central section of his epistle to it. But he seeks to aid human understanding of this mystery not by invoking the language of Greek philosophy but the language of the Septuagint as arrayed by his genial and Christian touch.

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