

JODY A. BARNARD

# The Mysticism of Hebrews

*Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen  
zum Neuen Testament 2. Reihe*

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**Mohr Siebeck**

Review by Nicholas J. Moore, Keble College, University of Oxford

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Scholarship on the Epistle to the Hebrews has tended to divide over the most pertinent background against which to read the letter. On the one hand, scholars such as Spicq, Moffatt, and more recently Kenneth Schenck and Gregory Sterling, have sought to locate Hebrews within a Middle Platonic philosophical framework, with Philo as the most important comparative author. On the other hand, Ronald Williamson, C. K. Barrett, L. D. Hurst and Scott Mackie among others have emphasised the Jewish apocalyptic background of the letter. While acknowledging the overly simplistic nature of this dichotomy, Jody Barnard's revised doctoral thesis (completed under Catrin Williams at Bangor University, North Wales, in 2011) joins this debate largely on the side of Jewish apocalypticism. The book argues for the importance of mysticism for our understanding of Hebrews, an aspect of apocalypticism that has been largely underappreciated in the secondary literature, which has tended to give more attention to eschatology.

Part I introduces Jewish apocalyptic mysticism. In Chapter 2 Barnard identifies as his sources those apocalypses which contain accounts of an otherworldly journey, rather than historical apocalypses. The texts he uses are the *Enochic Book of Watchers*, *Astronomical Apocalypse*, and *Similitudes*, *2 Enoch*, the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, the *Testament of Abraham*, the *Apocalypse of Zephaniah*, the *Testament of Levi*, *3 Baruch*, and, from Qumran, the *Sabbath Songs*. Barnard acknowledges the difficulties with using such texts (which we have often only in late and Christian form) to speak of Second Temple Jewish apocalypticism, but defends the presence of early traditions. He divides the literature into three groups based on probable date of origin, according progressively less weight to the

later groups: late Second Temple Period; end of or just after this period; early Christian apocalypses.

Chapter 3 proceeds to summarise major themes from this literature which characterise Jewish apocalyptic mysticism. Four main areas emerge: the heavenly realm, conceived of as a celestial temple; the righteous ascender; angels as cosmic supervisors, guardians, priests, and guides; and God as sovereign and enthroned, described in anthropomorphic terms yet also impenetrably glorious. Barnard ends with a plea that mystical language be taken seriously as a claim to mystical experience, noting that neither exegesis nor the use of conventional language precludes the possibility of mystical experience; this anticipates his study of such language in Hebrews in Chapter 7.

In Part II Barnard turns to Hebrews, seeking to interpret certain key motifs within the context of the mystical themes identified in Part I. Chapter 4 deals with the heavenly temple, pointing to the importance of the heavenly sanctuary as the true one and therefore superior. Barnard challenges the terminological parallels and exegetical traditions that are cited in support of a Platonic background, arguing that the traditions underlying Hebrews' treatment of the heavenly tabernacle are too widespread to be called 'Platonizing'. The engagement with Sterling here demonstrates the value of adducing mystical traditions to overcome the association of vertical cosmology exclusively with Platonic ideas. Nevertheless, while Barnard asserts that in Hebrews 'a narrative of ascent is clearly presupposed' (116), it is not the process of ascent that is important to the letter but the fact that Jesus has arrived, in contrast to much apocalyptic literature where the narrative and its successive stages have greater importance. This, coupled with the importance of the ascent motif for Philo (with which Barnard does not engage), suggests that mysticism does not form the exclusive conceptual framework for Christ's ascent in Hebrews.

Chapter 5 addresses the heavenly high priesthood of the Son, arguing that the motif of Christ as high priest is original to Hebrews but was influenced by Jewish apocalyptic mysticism. Barnard sees few similarities with Philo's Logos or with priestly angels, and identifies the eschatological conception of Yom Kippur, priestly messianism, and Melchizedek speculation (which he assumes to be widespread in the first century) as the most likely inspiration for Hebrews' conception of Christ as high priest. The suggestion that Christ's high priesthood is the author's own innovation, rather than part of the Christian tradition he inhabited, is unconvincing: Hebrews is not concerned with establishing *that* Christ is a high priest, but rather *how* he can be high priest – *what sort* of high priest he is. Barnard further suggests that Christ's investiture as high priest occurs fully only in heaven (citing Heb 6.20 and 8.4), a notion which accords with David Moffitt's reading of the atonement in Hebrews (Moffitt's St. Andrews paper is referenced, though not his monograph).

In Chapter 6 Barnard turns to Christ's heavenly enthronement. The Son, who is the anthropomorphic representation of God's glory, shares a single celestial throne with God. Barnard points out that although most commentators take the name Jesus receives in Heb 1.4 to be 'son', this is in fact a title not a name; he argues that this should be understood as 'the Name', YHWH, thereby bringing to the fore apocalyptic traditions of the name-bearing angel.

Chapter 7 takes a different course, offering a thorough overview of all the passages in Hebrews which may suggest direct mystical experience (Heb 2.1-4; 3.1; 4.3, 14-16; 6.4-6, 19-20; 10.19-25; and of course 12.22-24). This chapter helpfully highlights the experiential aspect of certain passages in Hebrews, which is often overlooked or not assessed in terms of religious experience. Of particular interest is the argument that Heb 10.22 ('our bodies washed with pure water') is a reference to (regular) ritual immersions rather than (one-off initiatory) baptism, which could potentially be understood as

preparation for mystical experience (196-208). This suggestion is strengthened by the parallels of the practices of the Essenes and at Qumran, cited by Barnard; one might add such groups as the Hemerobaptists and the Ebionites, mentioned by Epiphanius, as evidence that regular immersion was practised by both Jewish and Jewish-Christian sects. However, Barnard's dismissal of 1 Pet 3.21 as evidence for 'washing the body' meaning baptism is unwarranted: this text is most naturally read not as denying that baptism is a washing of the body, but as emphasising its effect on the conscience (making it a very apt parallel for Heb 10.22, which also mentions the conscience). In addition, Barnard does not mention the ubiquitous patristic interpretation of Heb 6.4-6 as referring to baptism, and consequent use of Hebrews to exclude the possibility of repeating baptism. This need not necessarily invalidate Barnard's reading, though it does make it harder to sustain; if he is right there are interesting implications for the text's origins and afterlife which would bear further exploration.

A broader issue which the kind of reading of Hebrews pursued in Chapter 7 may need to face is the distinction between 'mystical' experience and religious experience *tout court*. For example, while Heb 2.3-4 clearly presupposes charismatic experience on the author's and audience's part, it is less obvious that this should be designated mystical. Similarly, while passages such as 2.9 ('we see Jesus') and the parallel exhortations in 4.14-16 and 10.19-25 admit of a mystical interpretation, a non-mystical reading is equally possible, and arguably more probable in the light of the very practical injunctions that are concomitant with the supposedly mystical ones.

Part III is a worked example, a reading of Heb 1.5-13 in the light of Jewish apocalyptic mysticism; notably, and commendably, Barnard selects a passage that is arguably one of the least obviously mystical in the letter. In Chapter 8 he critiques text-orientated and contextually-sensitive approaches for failing to agree either on criteria for what in the context of an OT citation is relevant, or in

their conclusions. He also scrutinises the special pleading that such approaches employ to make certain OT contexts fit a particular hypothesis for selection of OT citations. He proceeds to highlight the distinctive use of scripture in the catena in Heb 1.5-13 compared with the rest of the letter, arguing that the citations should be seen as detextualised speech acts of God to the Son and the angels whose new context (Christ's reception into the heavenly realm) is of greatest significance for their meaning. The use of scripture in Heb 1 is certainly different from that found elsewhere in Hebrews, though perhaps not as much as Barnard claims: collocation of scriptures from various sources without extended comment is also found in 2.12-13, and the fact that the texts in Heb 1 'are not even presented as quoted *texts* [...] but are presented as heavenly declarations from the mouth of God' (235) is entirely unremarkable in Hebrews, which presents almost every citation of the OT as a divine speech act and eschews the vocabulary of *graphē* and cognates.

Chapter 9 offers a verse-by-verse reading of Heb 1 on the above basis, arguing that a mystical background helps us understand the function and arrangement of the citations. This involves a great degree of close exegetical engagement; Barnard argues persuasively for the meaning 'inhabited *heavenly realm*' for *oikoumenē* in 1.6 (cf. 2.5), and for the notion that speech is addressed *to* (not 'about') the angels and the Son in 1.7-8.

*The Mysticism of Hebrews* is lucid, cogently argued, and has a clear logical flow. The detailed exegesis in Chapters 8 and 9 (and also in 5.2.2-3 and 6.3.1-2) represents a bold challenge to the current emphasis on textually-sensitive interpretations of the use of the OT in the NT, and will be of particular importance for commentators and others engaging with Heb 1. The fundamental significance of the book, however, lies in highlighting the *mystical* aspect of the apocalyptic background of Hebrews. This is welcome because it helps refute the Platonic-cosmological-vertical versus apocalyptic-eschatological-horizontal dichotomy that continues to affect

Hebrews scholarship. Mysticism may illuminate aspects of Hebrews' thought, but this reviewer's impression is that while Hebrews *admits of* a mystical reading, it is less obvious that the letter itself *mandates* such a reading; put another way, apocalyptic eschatology and even Middle Platonism retain their importance. Barnard is cautious and nuanced regarding absolute statements on the background of Hebrews, but his contribution will nevertheless bolster the case for seeking this primarily in Jewish apocalypticism.

Nicholas J. Moore

Keble College, University of Oxford

nicholas.moore [ at ] magd.oxon.org