I used to take Hebrews’ supersessionism for granted. In other words, I perceived Hebrews’ rejection of Jewish life, ritual practice, and the biblical tradition on which Judaism is grounded, as being inherent in the text of Hebrews. I no longer feel that way. I am now a much more sympathetic reader of Hebrews. Why? I don’t think supersessionism inheres in Hebrews; it’s been superimposed by a long tradition of interpretation. So many later stereotypes about Judaism (and early Christianity) still inform the reading of Hebrews (far more than in studies of the gospels and Paul in my view).

I wish to illustrate—very briefly—four ways in which traditional interpretive paradigms make Hebrews appear more supersessionist than it is. It is my intention not only to be critical but to offer constructive alternatives wherever I can imagine them.

First, the dating of Hebrews matters to this question in a way not adequately observed. It matters if the author writes in the wake of the destruction of the Jerusalem temple and is attempting to fill a desperate theological and social void. If we were to agree to a later dating (i.e. late first century)—just for a hypothetical moment—then I ask, how is the claim that Jesus provides consolation and atonement and access to God different from the rabbinic claim (R. Jochanan b. Zakai?) that torah, prayer, and acts of charity function similarly? If the author of Hebrews is, like many other Jews of various kinds, in despair about the temple’s destruction, then the levitical system is not a viable alternative in competition with Jesus.\(^1\) In
other words, a post-destruction dating means the author did not write Hebrews so to relegate the temple to obsolescence, but real-world circumstances made it so. Constructing Christ as the perfect priest cum sacrifice is then a response to the temple’s non-existence, not an attempt to write it out of existence.²

Yet, Hebrews is persistently read as if it is a polemic against the alternative offered by cultic Judaism. But if there is no temple, the so called “alternative” we project in reading Hebrews isn’t an alternative at all. (It’s the product of our imagination; the mistaken result of “mirror reading.”³) I am not suggesting scholars should date Hebrews to the late first century merely because it is more appealing to modern sensibilities. I am rather suggesting that many (especially Anglo-American) scholars find it difficult to imagine ways to read Hebrews without seeing it as an argument against the on-going validity of cultic Judaism. And this creates a profound need to cling to an early (i.e., pre-destruction) date.

On final observation with regard to this issue: even if Hebrews were written prior to the destruction of the Jerusalem temple, the importance of the cult to the “average” first-century Jew tends to be overestimated by many interpreters of Hebrews.⁴

Second, I wish everyone would stop using the labels “Jews” and “Christians” or “Jew” and “Gentile” so uncritically. “Jewish-Christian” is the worst culprit of all! These terms frequently obscure more than they explain. Given recent historical work on the complexity of religious identity in antiquity, and that fact that these terms do not show up in Hebrews, it is surprising that these categories are used with such confidence when trying to sort out the thorny question of Hebrews’ audience. In my reading, it seems that most scholars, regardless of where they come down on the ethnic make-up of the audience, see the problem in Hebrews as rooted in an attraction to Judaism, and the solution of course as the
attempt to dissuade the audience from this “temptation.” The interpretive consequence is that we end up assuming the author is pitting Christianity against Judaism, and Christians against Jews. But if the categories aren’t clear on the ground, so to speak, then we are not forced to think with them.

Third, I wish everyone were more careful and self-critical when they say that the cultic language of Hebrews is “metaphorical.” The metaphorical approach looks something like this (for example): “Jesus is not really a priest in Hebrews—that’s just a metaphor used to describe the reality, that reality being Jesus’ inauguration of direct access to God. Because Jesus mediates between the divine and human realm, the author of Hebrews found it rhetorically expedient to describe Jesus in priestly terms, but he never meant it to be taken literally. Jesus may be like a priest, but he’s not literally a priest. (As we know, Hebrews begins by stressing the way in which Jesus is not like anything or anybody; Jesus is not like the angels, not like Moses, etc.) Similarly, Jesus’ death in Hebrews is not literally conceived as a blood sacrifice. Rather, Jesus’ death is described as a sacrifice because blood sacrifice constitutes a metaphor for illustrating the greater ‘reality’ that has been effected by the death, namely, a sui generis act of atonement, in which all forms and sin and pollution have been cleansed, so that the divine and human realms need no longer remain separate. In other words, Jesus’ ultimate transformative act is the thing that counts, the real thing that Hebrews is trying to describe, while blood sacrifice is mere metaphor, a verbal tool, useful for describing something much more important and complicated.”

The interpretive consequence of this kind of metaphorical reading of Hebrews is that the “real stuff” of Christ and God and heaven and all other “ultimate realities” correlates with Christianity, and all the metaphorical stuff, like temple, sacrifice, blood, etc. correlates
with Judaism. The implication is that Judaism mistakes metaphor for reality. Its supposed preoccupation with bodily ablutions and regulations for actual sacrifices (etc.) and other cultic sorts of things is empty of meaning, because it neglects to see the greater spiritual reality to which these things point and focuses instead on the things themselves.

In general terms I perceive a sloppy application of the concept of metaphorization among Hebrews scholars, which I think is partly due to the residual effect of an old Jewish stereotype—namely that Jews preoccupy themselves with meaningless rituals while Christian religiosity gets right to the spiritual heart of things. From my perspective, “metaphorical” interpreters of Hebrews have unselfconsciously inverted what is “real” and what is “metaphorical.” If anything is metaphorical in Hebrews, it is the meaning ascribed to Jesus’ sacrificial death, namely atonement. I cannot take adequate time to explain this here, but I recommend to you the essay by the Stegemann brothers in the new volume, *Hebrews: Contemporary Methods – New Insights*.

Fourth, to the extent that Hebrews is supersessionist, it is not a living form of Judaism it seeks to supersede, but the ancient Israelite cult. Christ supersedes the prescriptions of Leviticus, but Hebrews itself does not say that Christ supersedes the prescriptions of the Mishnah or the Talmud. Put another way, from our modern perspectives, two religious systems successfully “superseded” the religion of ancient Israel: Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity. (There are lines of continuity and discontinuity between Israelite religion and both Judaism and Christianity. The problem is that Jews and Christians tend to ascribe continuity to Judaism, and discontinuity to Christianity, thereby missing the continuities present in Christianity and the discontinuities present in rabbinic Judaism.) But Hebrews commentators do not adequately distinguished between Israelite religion and the emergence

Eisenbaum, Hebrews, Supersessionism and Jewish-Christian Relations, 2005
of what became Judaism. Perhaps they could mention that Hebrews never polemicizes against the kind of Judaism emergent in this period, the formative Judaism that really marks the origins of virtually all forms of modern Judaism. (Contrast Matthew: whose beef is mostly with Pharisees and their “oral traditions,” not the temple cult.)

It would therefore be helpful (to understanding Hebrews as well as modern Jewish Christian relations) if commentators on Hebrews did not speak as if the temple cult were the primary expression of the ordinary first (or second) century Jew’s Jewishness. The daily offerings were something priests did. I don’t expect that the average Jew, especially in the diaspora thought much about it. Respect and support for the temple—yes, certainly. A mental preoccupation with it—no. (The Mishnah notwithstanding. The rabbis were learned elites. Besides, I would argue that the intense reflection on the temple cult found in the Mishnah and Hebrews are of a similar order; they are both the likely result of the temple’s destruction, a kind of compensation for its absence. But, again, a full-out argument for this would require more time than I have here.)

In any case, both Jews and Christians must recognize the way they and their religious institutions superseded—as a matter of historical reality—the religion of Israel and its focus on cult. Both Jewish and Christian readers should not confuse or conflate the religion of Israel—particularly the cultic expression of Israelite religion—with Judaism then (late first/early second century), with Judaism now, or with Judaism in general.

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1 As, e.g., K. Schenck: “the Levitical system in some way stands as the audience’s main alternative to Christ,” Understanding the Book of Hebrews: The Story Behind the Sermon (Louisville: WJK, 2003), 107. See also pp. 98-103, where Schenck gives a fuller account of his reasons for this claim. Schenck cannot be simply labeled a traditional interpreter because he sees the audience as mostly gentle but reliance on the levitical cult as being the central problem Hebrews addresses—a rather unusual combination.


A good example of this is B. Lindars in *The Theology of the Letter to the Hebrews* (Cambridge, 1991). Although I disagree with his reconstruction of the situation that occasioned Hebrews, Lindars’ monograph stands as one of the most cogent arguments for the traditional reading of Hebrews.


As scholars and other literate readers of the Bible know, obedience to God and a genuine spirit of repentance were critical to achieving atonement. Meaningless ritualism is critiqued in the Bible (i.e., Hebrew scripture) itself; and the importance of actual repentance stressed as the ultimate means of atonement by virtually all ancient Jewish writers. Hebrews is not innovative in that regard. To be fair, many modern Hebrews scholars make this very point and thereby demonstrate their sensitivity to old stereotypes of Judaism. The problem is that this awareness does not seem to have affected the metaphorical orientation to Hebrews, which implicitly reinforces the old stereotype.

*The Stegemann brothers’ essay is entitled, “Does the Cultic Language in Hebrews Represent Sacrificial Metaphors? Reflections on some Basic Problems.” See also the essay in the same volume by C. Eberhart, “Characteristics of Sacrificial Metaphors in Hebrews.”*