

Review of Lukas Stolz, *Der Höhepunkt des Hebräerbriefts: Hebräer 12,18–29 und seine Bedeutung für die Struktur und die Theologie des Hebräerbriefts*

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This volume, a revised version of the author's doctoral dissertation, argues that Heb 12:18–29 forms the sermon's structural, rhetorical and theological high point. These verses, Stolz suggests, should be recognized as the intensified summary of the sermon's main points, thereby serving as the homily's *peroratio*. The contents of this passage can be seen to correspond to the main themes of the *exordium* of 1:1–4, as well as with numerous terms and motifs that run throughout the text. This larger thesis is not entirely novel, though many interpreters do not agree with this position. Stolz, however, offers a fresh and compelling defense of this view. Readers are likely to take issue with a number of the particular positions Stolz takes along the way, particularly his argument that 12:22–24 offers a vision of things to come at the future Parousia, but the main thesis is ably presented and supported.

The book's argument unfolds in four parts consisting of a total of thirteen chapters of unequal length (the final two chapters are less than one page each). In Part A, after a brief introduction to the thesis and outline of the volume, Stolz offers a short discussion of those elements of standard introduction that prove most salient for his case—location, audience, genre, date and structure. Stolz concludes that Hebrews is a sermon that addresses a house church in Rome consisting of mainly Jewish-Christians. The author fears the recipients are being drawn back to Judaism, perhaps because the Jewish cult offered a clearer notion of ongoing sacrifice as a means to address the reality of continued sin than did their new faith in Christ. Thus, too, Stolz joins a growing number of scholars who date Hebrews prior to 70 CE. As for structure, Stolz focuses primarily on significant shifts in the sermon that would be recognized by most interpreters. The determinations that 1:1–4 forms the *exordium* and that the break between 12:39 and 13:1 marks a structural shift are among the most important structural concerns for his argument.

Part B makes up the bulk of the volume (41–362). This section consists of highly detailed, phrase-by-phrase exegesis of the verses in question. Stolz offers a plausible case on thematic grounds for taking 12:18–29 as a unit divided into three subsections (vv. 18–21, 22–24, 25–29). The first subsection (vv. 18–21) emphasizes the fearfulness and hiddenness of God at Sinai. The middle section (vv. 22–24), and in Stolz's view the real high point of Hebrews, aims to show that God, the judge, is approachable because of Jesus' mediatorial work. These verses, he argues, offer a vision of the day when Jesus will return and believers will fully enjoy the realities described in this theophany. The final section (vv. 25–29) consists of exhortation, one final push intended to urge the audience to remain faithful.

While a detailed accounting of the rich and thorough exegesis of Part B of the book lies well beyond the scope of this brief review, one of Stolz's central claims relates to the time envisioned in vv. 22–24. Stolz argues that the author has eschatological realities in mind in these verses. The audience can get a proleptic taste of these realities through the author's rhetoric and the Holy Spirit's presence (255–58), but they will only fully enjoy these blessings in the future when Jesus

returns, the final judgment occurs, and creation is transformed such that heavenly realities exist on earth (see esp. 251–65). For Stolz, therefore, 12:22–24, together with the depiction of Jesus’ exaltation in Heb 1, offer a vision of the way things will be at Jesus’ Parousia, not primarily of the way things presently are on account of Jesus’ passing through the heavens (see esp. 111–41). The ramifications of this interpretive decision play out in a variety of ways as Stolz seeks to explain each of the entities identified in the list in vv. 22–24 in future, earthly terms rather than in present, heavenly ones. For example, the phrase “the spirits of the righteous made perfect” in v. 23 refers not to those who have died, entered God’s heavenly presence and joined the heavenly cloud of witnesses, but to the future, resurrected state that all the righteous will enjoy (174–94). In v. 24, the “sprinkled blood which is speaking” refers to the effects of Jesus’ crucifixion that speak on behalf of God’s people in the future judgment by crying out for mercy. This latter point allows Stolz to limit the once-for-all salvific offering of Jesus to the cross, while partly locating the effect of this sacrifice in the future at the last judgment.

In Part C Stolz collates terms and concepts from 12:18–29 and correlates them with elements throughout Hebrews. Here he lays out the case that numerous terms and themes from earlier in Hebrews are reprised and combined in vv. 18–29 in such a way as to indicate that this section is the *peroratio* of the discourse. Whether, or to what degree, one agrees with the exegesis he offers in Part B, the argumentation in Part C is generally strong. Stolz can show that numerous terms found throughout Hebrews recur in 12:18–29, as do several key ideas and motifs mentioned in the exordium and the opening chapters of the homily (e.g., the speech of God, the angels, the notion of the firstborn, the motif of family). That these verses contain the last instance of extended synkrisis (Sinai and Zion) and the last of the hallmark sections of paraenesis in the homily are also significant indicators that this is the climax of the sermon. Even the material of Heb 13, with its apparent afterthoughts, is shown to fit well with what one might expect after the *peroratio* of ancient speech.

Part D, only two pages, offers a brief summary of the main arguments and some reflection on future research.

As noted above, Stolz offers a fresh, detailed and compelling case that Heb 12:18–29 functions as the high point of the sermon. One need not accept Stolz’s thoroughly eschatological interpretation of vv. 22–24 in Part B to recognize the merits of his larger claims for the structural and rhetorical function of vv. 18–29 relative to the rest of Hebrews.

Indeed, there are some weaknesses in the argumentation in Part B. I suspect, for instance, that many readers will not be persuaded by Stolz’s claim that vv. 22–24 form a chiasm (48–50). The point requires Stolz to keep v. 22’s phrases “Mount Zion” and “the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem” together as one unit, even though these phrases, as with the other distinct entities in vv. 22–24, are coordinated by the conjunction “and.” The terms “Mount Zion” and “the city of the living God” do not, that is, appear to refer precisely to the same entity the way the terms in “the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem,” which are in apposition, do. If, however, that is right, the chiasm falls apart.

Additionally, the claim that these verses primarily present an eschatological vision of the Parousia and final judgment is problematic. Stolz argues that the statement “you have come” in v. 22 refers to a proleptic experience through the Holy Spirit of the realities laid out in vv. 22–24. But the more natural reading of this language presents believers as now having access to these realities through the act of the gathering in worship. There may be a mystical dimension to this, as scholars such as Scott Mackie and Jody Barnard have argued (Stolz disagrees, 258–60). Regardless, the gathered congregation on earth is encouraged here to imagine itself as joining the present and ongoing heavenly worship depicted in vv. 22–24, which is being led by Jesus their ministering high priest (cf. 4:14–16; 8:1–2). Much more could be said on this point, but suffice it to say that if one does not agree with Stolz that these verses along with Heb 1 refer to Jesus’ exaltation at the Parousia, many of his exegetical conclusions will lack persuasive force.

Finally, I note Stolz’s argument that to imagine Jesus making his offering in heaven would be to envision Jesus being sacrificed twice, undergoing two acts of shedding blood (esp. 238–39).

This last point about the problem of two sacrifices exposes an element of confusion in Stolz’s thinking about sacrifice. He is hardly alone here, but he appears to work with the assumption that sacrifice is reducible to the slaughter/death of the victim. This assumption contains two significant problems: 1) it locates the offering of sacrifice in the wrong place (away from the altars and outside the sancta), and 2) it fails to notice that sacrifice is a process that culminates in drawing near to God and bringing the gifts/elements of the offering into his presence.

I begin with the first of these problems. If Stolz and so many others are right that Jesus’ sacrifice is fully and finally completed with his death on the cross, then one must accept that for the author of Hebrews, the Son of God, unlike all the priests and high priests of the Mosaic covenant who drew near to God’s presence when offering sacrifices by approaching the altars and entering the various sancta to present the blood, is to be thought of as having left God’s heavenly presence to make his high-priestly offering on earth, outside the holy of holies of the heavenly tabernacle. That is, if Hebrews thinks that Jesus offered his sacrifice to God on earth, then the direction of the movement of the Son as high priest in the incarnation is precisely backwards. The only thing more strange about such a notion of sacrifice, at least from the standpoint of Leviticus and Second Temple Jewish worship, is how often commentators on Hebrews assume that the Son’s moving away from God’s heavenly presence by coming to earth to offer his sacrifice outside the heavenly tabernacle is in fact the way in which Jesus’ offering self-evidently works in Hebrews. More plausible, and actually in keeping with Hebrews’ attention to Jesus’ ascension into the heavenly holy of holies as high priest, is the idea that the Son returned to the Father’s heavenly presence and there presented the elements of his sacrifice in the heavenly holy of holies where he now appears before God “for us” (9:24), just as the high priests on earth did.

Second, the notion that Jesus’ offering of himself to the Father in heaven would require that Jesus offer two sacrifices does not take seriously the fact that Jewish sacrifice consisted of a process that culminated in the presentation of the elements of the gift being given to God. To conclude that Jesus’ death is the sum-total of his sacrifice misses this point. Even a cursory glance at Leviticus shows that this must be false. A sacrificial death is not the sum-total of a sacrifice (if so, why all the bother with the body, blood and altars that comes next?). Rather, after

the slaughter, the priests and high priests took parts of the body and the blood to the altars and into the sancta, depending on the sacrifice. In doing all this, forgiveness and/or purification was made (see, e.g., Lev 4:27–31). To offer a sacrifice to God requires the entire process, not simply the slaughter. Thus, the claim that Jesus cannot offer his sacrifice in heaven because that would amount to a second act of bloodshed attests a mistaken account of sacrifice. If, however, one thinks of sacrifice as a process that includes the slaughter of the victim, but requires a great deal more after that event, then the logic of Jesus' entrance into the heavenly holy of holies after his resurrection to present himself as a sacrifice to the Father coheres remarkably well with the process of sacrifice depicted in scripture and practiced by Second Temple Jews. While Stolz wants to take Jesus' resurrection seriously in Hebrews (58–59, 233), he seems not to reckon with the ways that this aspect of early Christian confession problematizes some contemporary concepts of Jesus' sacrifice while also allowing for Jesus' crucified and resurrected blood and body to be the elements Jesus presents to the Father as his offering when he ascends.

Be that as it may, Stolz offers a fine study that convincingly shows how 12:18–29 function as the rhetorical and structural high point of Hebrews. Future work engaging with the thorny issue of Hebrews' structure will need to engage with this volume.