

HEBREWS 6:19:
ANALYSIS OF SOME ASSUMPTIONS
CONCERNING *KATAPETASMA*

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Commentators on the book of Hebrews are practically unanimous regarding four assumptions upon which they base their interpretation of the term *katapetasma*, "veil," at 6:19 (and also elsewhere in the book). These are: (1) that *tou katapetasmatos* in the phrase *eis to esōteron tou katapetasmatos* at 6:19 is the second veil of the tabernacle structure, namely the veil that separates the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place; (2) that *to esōteron*, "the [place] within," in the same phrase refers to the inner shrine or Most Holy Place; (3) that God the Father's presence within the OT sanctuary was to be found only in the Most Holy Place; and (4) that *ta hagia* (lit., "the holies") in chap. 9 refers to the Most Holy Place.

In other words, it is assumed that the sanctuary language and imagery of the book of Hebrews reflects the second-apartment and Day-of-Atonement ritual. Space will not permit an examination here of all four of these assumptions, but only the first two—those regarding the meaning of the terms *katapetasma* and *esōteron* in Heb 6:19. If there is doubt as to the validity of these first two assumptions, then the third and fourth ones are also open to question and will demand new investigation.

1. *Katapetasma*

Otto Michel reflects the thinking of commentators in general on *katapetasma* in the book of Hebrews when he states that "when Hebrews speaks of 'veil,' . . . then the veil before the Most Holy Place is meant, in harmony with a broader usage of the language."¹

¹Otto Michel, "Der Brief an die Hebräer," in *Kritisch-Exegetischer Kommentar über das Neuen Testament* (Göttingen, 1975), p. 254.

The commentators support this sort of position by appealing to Philo and/or to the LXX wording in Lev 16:2.²

Philo (*De Vit. Mes.* 3.5), Marcus Dods tells us, makes a distinction between the two veils of the sanctuary by identifying the first veil with the term *kalumma* and reserving *katapetasma* for the inner veil. Dods then suggests that this is the way *katapetasma* is to be understood in the NT.³

However, B. F. Westcott points out that Philo uses these terms "for a spiritual interpretation."⁴ Philo may be free to make this clear distinction by the exclusive use of *kalumma* and *katapetasma* in his allegory, but does his allegory reflect what existed in reality? One wonders on the basis of Heb 9:3, where the inner veil of the earthly sanctuary is called the *deuteron katapetasma*, "second veil." If the numerical adjective *deuteron* is required to identify this veil, is it possible that the word *katapetasma* was *not* reserved for the inner veil as Philo and Dods suggest?

With regard to the LXX of Lev 16:2, its wording, *eis to hagion esōteron tou katapetasmatos*, and that of Heb 6:19, *eis to esōteron tou katapetasmatos*, are indeed close. This fact has led James Moffatt to conclude that Hebrews "uses language from the ritual of Lv 16^{2f}," thus indicating that the veil of Heb 6:19 is the inner veil.⁵

However, the contexts of the two passages are entirely different. Lev 16 presents the Day of Atonement—a day of reckoning and judgment. Heb 6:13-20 deals with the Abrahamic covenant and the dispensing of its promises to Abraham's heirs. Are we to impose the context of the Day of Atonement of Lev 16 upon Heb 6 in an attempt to identify the veil of Heb 6:19? Is the fact that the earthly high priest passed within the inner veil during the ritual of the Day of Atonement sufficient reason to understand *katapetasma* at Heb 6:19 as being the inner veil? Or should we allow *eis to esōteron tou katapetasmatos* to stand within its own context, free from the baggage of Lev 16?

²Cf. George Wesley Buchanan, *To the Hebrews*, AB 36 (Garden City, NY, 1985), p. 116; Michel, pp. 253-254; James Moffatt, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, ICC (Edinburgh, 1979), p. 89; Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1970), p. 163.

³Marcus Dods, "The Epistle to the Hebrews," in *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, ed. W. Robertson Nicoll (Grand Rapids, MI, 1970), p. 305.

⁴Westcott, p. 163.

⁵Moffatt, p. 89.

Appealing to Philo for the distinction between the inner veil (*katapetasma*) and the outer veil (*kalumma*) of the sanctuary, Westcott admits that this "distinction of the two is not strictly preserved in the LXX."⁶ The problem with Westcott's observation is that he fails to inform his readers as to the degree to which that distinction is not preserved in the LXX.

Other commentators recognize a disparity between the use of *katapetasma* in the LXX and the generally accepted thesis that when this word is read we must understand the inner veil. Herbert Braun, for example, uses the term "meist" in this sense when commenting on *tou katapetasmatos* at Heb 6:19: In the LXX, he informs us, this term is used "mostly [meist] for the veil between the Holy and Most Holy."⁷ If by "meist" Braun means that *katapetasma* is the word that is *almost always* chosen for the inner veil in opposition to any other word, there is no quarrel with his statement. But if he means that *katapetasma* is used for the inner veil and *almost never* used for the courtyard veil nor for the first veil of the sanctuary, then his statement comes into serious question. Unfortunately, Braun does not clarify his use of "meist."

R. C. H. Lenski, on the other hand, leaves no alternative when he declares: "The καταπέτασμα τοῦ ναοῦ is the inner curtain or veil that hangs between the Holy and the Holy of Holies, as the readers, being Hebrews, well knew. . . . But the regular term for the outer curtain was κάλυμμα and only occasionally was the other term used."⁸

Because the wilderness tabernacle forms the basis for the sanctuary discussion in the book of Hebrews, an examination of *katapetasma* and *kalumma* in the Pentateuch of the LXX will prove interesting. Looking at the references to these two words in Hatch and Redpath, one receives quite a surprise. Out of six references to the courtyard veil, *katapetasma* is used five times,⁹ and

⁶Westcott, p. 163.

⁷Herbert Braun, "An die Hebräer," in *Handbuch zum Neuen Testament*, 14 (Tübingen, 1984): 191. The original German reads, "In LXX unübertragen, meist für den Vorhang zwischen dem Heiligen und dem Allerheiligsten."

⁸R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Epistle to the Hebrews and of the Epistle of James* (Columbus, OH, 1938), pp. 205-206. Lenski is here using the wording of the Synoptic Gospels (Matt 27:51; Mark 15:38; Luke 23:45) in commenting on Heb 6:19.

⁹Exod 37:26; 39:19; Num 3:26; 4:32; 3 Kgs 6:36 (1 Kgs 6:36).

kalumma once.¹⁰ In eleven references to the first veil of the sanctuary, *katapetasma* is used six times,¹¹ *kalumma katapetasma* once,¹² *katakalumma* twice,¹³ *kalumma* once,¹⁴ and *epispastron* once.¹⁵ Of the twenty-five references to the inner veil, *katapetasma* is used twenty-three times,¹⁶ *katakalumma tou katapetasmatos* once,¹⁷ and *katakalumma* once.¹⁸

Certainly, *katapetasma* is used almost exclusively for the inner veil (twenty-three out of twenty-five times). But the same can be said for the courtyard veil (five out of six times)! *Katapetasma* is also the majority choice for the first veil of the sanctuary as well (six out of eleven times).

In other words, out of the forty-two references in the Pentateuch to the three veils of the wilderness sanctuary, *katapetasma* is used thirty-four times. Or put another way: In only eight instances among these forty-two references to the sanctuary veils is *katapetasma* not used by itself. Furthermore, in two additional instances *katapetasma* is combined with *kalumma*, thus leaving only six instances out of forty-two where the word does not appear.

Thus, without a doubt, *katapetasma* is the hands-down favorite, not only for the inner veil, but for the first veil and the courtyard veil as well. And in view of this use of *katapetasma* in the LXX, we are forced to conclude that assumptions such as Lenski's must be reexamined. Certainly, Hebrew readers of the LXX were aware that *katapetasma* was thus used overwhelmingly for all three veils, and it is undoubtedly for this very reason that Heb 9:3 identifies which *katapetasma* is being addressed by using the numerical adjective *deuteron*.

¹⁰Exod 27:16.

¹¹Exod 26:37; 37:5 (36:37); 39:19 (40); Lev 21:23; Num 3:10; 18:7.

¹²Exod 40:5.

¹³Num 3:25; 4:31.

¹⁴Num 4:25.

¹⁵Exod 26:36.

¹⁶Exod 26:31, 33 (three times), 34, 35; 27:21; 30:6; 35:12; 37:3 (36:35); 38:18 (36:36); 39:4 (38:27); 40:3, 22, 26; Lev 4:6, 17; 16:2, 12, 15; 24:3; Num 4:5; 2 Chron 3:14.

¹⁷Exod 40:21.

¹⁸Num 3:31.

2. To *Esōteron*

As we next analyze the assumption that on analogy with Lev 16:2 *to esōteron* at Heb 6:19 must refer to the inner shrine, it is important to note that omission of *to hagion* from the phrase contained in Hebrews creates a different syntax from what is found in Lev 16:2. In *eis to hagion esōteron tou katapetasmatos* in Lev 16:2, *to hagion* is a substantive adjective and object of the preposition *eis*. The word *esōteron* appears to be an improper preposition followed by the genitive of place, as is also true in Lev 16:12, 15. In *eis to esōteron tou katapetasmatos* at Heb 6:19, however, *to esōteron* becomes a substantive¹⁹ and thus the object of the preposition *eis*; and the phrase *tou katapetasmatos* is, again, a genitive of place.

Paul Ellingworth and Eugene A. Nida say that “shrine (RSV)” or “sanctuary” must be understood with the substantive *esōteron*, thus giving “inner shrine” or “Most Holy Place.”²⁰ But this is true only if one thinks *katapetasma* identifies the second veil. However, we have seen that *katapetasma* is used overwhelmingly for all three veils. Therefore, the *esōteron* behind the veil could just as well be the first apartment of the sanctuary as the “inner shrine,” since there is nothing in the context of Heb 6 that directly identifies which veil is being addressed.

Neither should the comparative form of *esōteron* in Heb 6:19 be understood as identifying the “inner shrine.” The comparative forms in Greek at this point in time were not strictly adhered to. This can be seen at Lev 16:2, where the context for the phrase *eis to hagion esōteron tou katapetasmatos* identifies *to hagion* as the room where the ark of the covenant stood, with *tou katapetasmatos* therefore being the second veil standing before the ark. *Esōteron* here is understood as the simple *esō* and is translated “within.” The context prohibits any other understanding of the word *esōteron*. Likewise at Heb 6:19, *esōteron* may be understood as simply “within.” The comparative form should not be pushed in an attempt to identify which apartment stood behind the veil.

¹⁹Cf. Braun, p. 191.

²⁰Paul Ellingworth and Eugene A. Nida, *A Translator's Handbook on the Letter to the Hebrews* (New York, 1983), p. 131.

3. *The Context of Hebrews 6:19*

G. W. Buchanan makes the following statement that is somewhat difficult to understand:

The LXX has *to hagion esōteron*, “the Holy innermost place.” The author [of Hebrews] either used a different text or chose to omit this word, but the context requires that the place be understood as the holy of holies. The LXX passage refers to the conduct of Aaron on the Day of Atonement. The author’s reason for quoting this passage was in continuation of his previous discussion. The hope for which other generations had expected fulfillment since the promise was first made to Abraham might be fulfilled for the author’s generation.²¹

Buchanan does not inform us how the Day of Atonement of Lev 16 relates to the context of Heb 6 and the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant. Nor does he point out how or why the context of Heb 6 requires us to understand the Holy of Holies, the place that is clearly indicated within the context of Lev 16. It appears that Buchanan is claiming the context of Lev 16 as the basis for our understanding of Heb 6:19. But Heb 6:19 has its own context, and we must allow the term “veil” to stand on its own merits within that specific context.

In Lev 16:2, the context identifies *katapetasma* as the second veil and *to hagion* as the “inner shrine.” Also, in Heb 9:3 the general context and the use of the numerical adjective *deuteron* identify *katapetasma* as the second veil. But the contexts of Lev 16 and Heb 9 do not exist in Heb 6. The fact that the term *katapetasma* appears in Heb 6:19 does not allow us to assume that the second veil is meant, for we have seen that this word is freely used for all three sanctuary veils.

Does, then, the context of 6:19 give us any help in identifying the word *katapetasma*? Heb 6:13-20 deals with dispensing the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant to Abraham and his children: (1) God swore by himself to fulfill his promises (vss. 13-16). (2) In order to convince the heirs of the covenant that he would fulfill his word, God interposed with an oath (vs. 17). (3) So by two unchangeable things we have strong encouragement to seize the hope

²¹Buchanan, p. 116.

(fulfillment of God's promises) set before us (vs. 18). (4) The hope enters "within the veil," where Jesus has gone on our behalf as priest after the order of Melchizedek (vss. 19-20).

This context does not deal with the sanctuary *per se*—i.e., its apartments, furniture, services, etc.—, nor does it contain any reference to the Day of Atonement, as do the contexts of Lev 16:2 and Heb 9:3. At 6:19, *katapetasma* is simply dropped into a discussion of the Abrahamic covenant and the dispensing of the blessings of that covenant. There is nothing here that would identify the veil with which we are dealing, but *katapetasma* is introduced simply to locate where Jesus is ministering—the place where the hope of the covenant people is centered and from whence the covenant blessings are dispensed. Within the broader context of the discussion in the entire book of Hebrews, it would seem that *katapetasma* is here used metaphorically for the sanctuary from which the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant are dispensed.

4. Conclusion

Although commentators are virtually unanimous in saying that *katapetasma* at Heb 6:19 is the "second veil" and that *esōteron* is the "inner shrine," these assumptions are called into question by the following facts: (1) In the Pentateuch, the word *katapetasma* is used in the LXX thirty-four out of forty-two times for all three sanctuary veils; (2) *esōteron*, although a substantive at Heb 6:19, cannot be translated as the "inner shrine" because *katapetasma* cannot be identified as the second veil; (3) the context of Heb 6:19 does not allow the identification of the second veil, as do the contexts of Lev 16:2 and Heb 9:3; (4) *katapetasma*, within the context of Heb 6:19 and the broader context of the entire book of Hebrews, may be understood metaphorically as the sanctuary in heaven, into which Jesus has entered as our forerunner, into which our hope has entered, and from which Jesus dispenses the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant.

Finally, because the validity of the assumptions regarding *katapetasma* and *esōteron* can be seriously challenged, the assumptions regarding God the Father's presence within the sanctuary and the meaning of *ta hagia* must also come into question.