

## RE-OPENING *KATAPETASMA* (“VEIL”) IN HEBREWS 6:19

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Heb 6:19-20 reads: “[19]This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, a hope both sure and steadfast and one which enters within the veil (εἰς τὸ ἑσώτερον τοῦ καταπέτασματος), [20]where Jesus has entered as a forerunner for us, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek” (NASB).

In his 1987 *AUSS* article entitled “Hebrews 6:19: Analysis of Some Assumptions Concerning *Katapetasma*,” George Rice successfully demonstrated that in the Septuagint the word *καταπέτασμα* can refer to any of three curtains/veils of the ancient Israelite sanctuary: the screen of the court (e.g. Exod 37:16 [= MT & Eng. 38:18]; Num 3:26), the screen at the entrance to the sacred tent (e.g., Exod 26:37; 37:5 [= MT & Eng. 36:37]), and the inner veil that separated the holy of holies from the outer sanctum (e.g. Exod 26:31, 33, 34, 35).<sup>1</sup> Having shown that *καταπέτασμα*, can have a variety of meanings, Rice maintained that in Heb 6:19 the word should be freed from the generally accepted idea that it is the inner/second veil,<sup>2</sup> and interpreted *καταπέτασμα* in this context as referring

<sup>1</sup>*AUSS* 25 (1987): 65-71. In his list of references to the courtyard veil, Rice includes Exod 37:26, which appears to be a typographical error for Exod 37:16 (67 n. 9). Rice’s article has been reprinted as Appendix B in *Issues in the Book of Hebrews*, ed. F. Holbrook, Daniel and Revelation Committee 4 (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 1989), 229-234. That the LXX uses *καταπέτασμα* for both the inner and outer curtains of the sacred Tent is well known: see Arndt and Gingrich, 416; H. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 184; F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 199, n. 14; 250-251, n. 87; M. Dods, “The Epistle to the Hebrews,” in *The Expositor’s Greek Testament*, ed. W. R. Nicoll (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 4:305; O. Michel, *Der Brief an die Hebräer*, Kritisch-Exegetischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966), 254; C. Schneider, “*καταπέτασμα*,” *TDNT*, 3:629.

<sup>2</sup>For the conclusion or assumption that the inner veil is meant, see Arndt and Gingrich, 416; Attridge, 184; H. Braun, *An die Hebräer*, Handbuch zum Neuen Testament 14 (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1984), 191; Bruce, 155, 250-251, n. 87; G. W. Buchanan, *To the Hebrews: Translation, Comment and Conclusions*, AB 36 (New York: Doubleday, 1972), 116; P. Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 347; R. P. Gordon, “Better Promises: Two Passages in Hebrews against the Background of the Old Testament Cultus,” in *Templum Amicitiae: Essays on the Second Temple Presented to Ernst*

metaphorically to the heavenly sanctuary as a whole, which Christ entered at his ascension (cf. v. 20).<sup>3</sup>

While Rice did not directly identify καταπέτασμα in Heb 6:19 as the heavenly equivalent of any of the three OT veils, his reading of the word here has its closest analogies in LXX references to the outer/first veil, through which a priest would necessarily enter the sanctuary as a whole. Needless to say, Rice's view has important implications for the location of Christ's ministry in the book of Hebrews.

There is no question that in the LXX καταπέτασμα by itself can denote any of the three sanctuary veils. However, in Heb 6:19 the word belongs to the phrase ἐσώτερον τοῦ καταπετάσματος, "within the veil." In the LXX this phrase appears four times: Exod 26:33; Lev 16:2, 12, 15. Each time the meaning is the same: within the inner veil.<sup>4</sup> This raises suspicion that the phrase may be a technical expression in which καταπέτασμα necessarily refers to the inner veil of the sanctuary. This suspicion is confirmed by the fact that in each of its LXX occurrences, ἐσώτερον τοῦ καταπετάσματος renders מְבִיחַ לְפָרֶכֶה, "within the inner veil." While Greek καταπέτασμα by itself can refer to various veils, the Hebrew word פְּרָכֶה unambiguously denotes the inner veil.<sup>5</sup> Another Hebrew word,

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*Bammel*, ed. W. Horbury JSOTSS 48 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1991), 441; E. Grässer, *An die Hebräer* (Zürich: Benziger, 1990), 383-385; D. A. Hagner, *Hebrews*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 98-99; W. Hendriksen and S. Kistemaker, *Exposition of Thesalonians, the Pastorals, and Hebrews*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 176; T. G. Long, *Hebrews*, Interpretation (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1997), 78-80; W. L. Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, WBC 47 (Dallas: Word, 1991), 154; *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 12:81-82; Michel, 254; Schneider, 630.

<sup>3</sup>Rice, 70-71. Compare the metaphorical interpretation of the area behind the inner veil, i.e. the holy of holies, as a figure for heaven in Heb 6:19: BAGD, 416; Hendriksen and Kistemaker, 176; Long, 78-79; M. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament* (New York: Scribner's, 1918), 4:453.

<sup>4</sup>Cf. A. F. Ballenger, *Cast Out for the Cross of Christ* (Tropico, CA: A. F. Ballenger, 1911), 28; W. G. Johnsson, "Day of Atonement Allusions," in *Issues in the Book of Hebrews*, 112.

<sup>5</sup>John D. Livingston identified Lev 21:23 and Num 18:7 as ostensible exceptions, arguing that in these verses פְּרָכֶה could denote the outer veil at the entrance to the tent ("A Critical Study of the Greek Words Translated 'Veils' and an Application to the Book of Hebrews" [unpubl. M. A. thesis, Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, 1949], 34-36, 39-45). But both of these instances can easily be explained as referring to the inner veil. Lev 21:23 prohibits blemished priests from coming to the inner veil (בוא + אל + obj. of prep. פְּרָכֶה) by entering the outer sanctum. Even if we were to read here with NJPS (= Tanakh), "but he shall not enter behind the curtain" (as if the curtain were an area that could be entered, as in the use of בוא + אל in Exod 30:20 and Lev 16:2 for entering the Tent of Meeting and [most] holy [place], respectively), פְּרָכֶה could still denote the inner veil and the verse would bar defective Aaronides, including potential high priests, from the totality of the sanctuary, expressed as a merism referring to its extremes: (1) the area inside the inner veil,

מָסָךְ, is used for the screens/veils at the entrances to the tent (e.g., Exod 26:36-37) and to the court (e.g., Exod 38:18 [= LXX 37:16]).<sup>6</sup>

MT can speak of the inner veil as פָּרֹכֶת הַמָּסָךְ (Exod 35:12; 39:34; 40:21; Num 4:5) or even just הַמָּסָךְ (Num 3:31)<sup>7</sup> because the פָּרֹכֶת served as a special kind of מָסָךְ, “screen.” מָסָךְ represents the larger semantic category of fabrics having screening or covering functions. The word can even refer to a horizontal screen (2 Sam 17:19, over a well). Within the מָסָךְ category, פָּרֹכֶת designates the curtain of the sanctuary that delineated the inner apartment of the deity. This accords with its apparent etymology as a loan-word from Sumerian *bará*, “dais,” via Akkadian *parakku*, “cultic base/pedestal, high seat; shrine/apartment (of deity).”<sup>8</sup>

Because it divided the sacred tent into two apartments, the פָּרֹכֶת constituted the primary reference point for the internal geography of that structure. For example, while the ark of the covenant was placed מִבְּיַת לַפָּרֹכֶת, “within the veil” (= LXX ἐσώτερον τοῦ καταπετάσματος; Exod 26:33), the table and lampstand were מִחוּץ לַפָּרֹכֶת, “outside the veil” (= LXX ἔξωθεν τοῦ καταπετάσματος; Exod 26:35; 27:21) and the altar of incense was לִפְנֵי הַפָּרֹכֶת, “before the veil” (= LXX ἀπέναντι τοῦ

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i.e. the most holy place, and (2) the (outer) altar. In Num 18:7 the prepositional compound מִבְּיַת לַמָּסָךְ ensures that the text refers to entrance within/behind/inside the veil in question. But this does not rule out the normal meaning of פָּרֹכֶת. Again, since the altar and the area within the inner veil are the extreme loci of officiation by priests, including high priests, this combination can be taken as a merism embracing the entire area of priestly officiation. For other spatial merisms, cf. “near and far” (Jer 25:26) and “far and near” (Jer 48:24). Even if פָּרֹכֶת in Lev 21:23 and Num 18:7 could be identified conclusively as the outer veil, which it cannot, the fact remains that the Greek phrase in Heb 6:19, ἐσώτερον τοῦ καταπετάσματος, is used in the LXX exclusively to translate instances of מִבְּיַת לַפָּרֹכֶת that refer to location within the inner veil. The fact that Heb 6:19 has the abbreviated substantive expression τὸ ἐσώτερον τοῦ καταπετάσματος, “that which is within the veil” (separate article + unexpressed but understood noun agreeing with the article) rather than the fuller τὸ ἅγιον ἐσώτερον τοῦ καταπετάσματος, “the (most) holy (place) within the veil” (article + explicit noun ἅγιον) does not affect our conclusion because it is the phrase ἐσώτερον τοῦ καταπετάσματος that identifies the veil as the inner one. Cf. the abbreviated substantive expression τὸ εὐδοθεὶν τοῦ καταπετάσματος, “that which is within the veil” for מִבְּיַת לַפָּרֹכֶת in Num 18:7.

<sup>6</sup>This terminological differentiation in Hebrew has been recognized by Ballenger, 20-27, 28-29; and Bruce, 199, n. 14. Cf. Attridge, 184.

<sup>7</sup>This must be the inner veil here because it was assigned to the care of the Kohathites, following assignment of the other two screens to the Gershonites (vv. 25-26).

<sup>8</sup>R. Gane and J. Milgrom, “פָּרֹכֶת,” *TWAT*, 6:755; *The Sumerian Dictionary*, ed. A. Sjöberg (Philadelphia: University Museum, 1984), 2:134-143; W. von Soden, *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1972), 2:827-828.

καταπέτασματος; 30:6).<sup>9</sup> Within the context of this range of spatial terminology, מִבֵּית לְפָרֹכֶת and its Greek rendering ἐσώτερον τοῦ καταπέτασματος refer to the area within/behind the inner veil, i.e., the holy of holies, as opposed to the outer sanctum that included space “outside” or “before” that veil.

Scholars who have interpreted καταπέτασμα in Heb 6:19 as the inner veil have done so for various reasons, including similarity to the LXX phraseology of Lev 16 in connection with the significance of the inner veil in the Day of Atonement ritual,<sup>10</sup> comparison with other passages within the book of Hebrews (9:3; 10:20)<sup>11</sup> and in the Gospels (Matt 27:51; Mark 15:38),<sup>12</sup> Philo’s use of καταπέτασμα exclusively for the inner veil,<sup>13</sup> and the idea that ἐσώτερον is to be understood as a superlative: “innermost.”<sup>14</sup> While at least some of these arguments are susceptible to parrying,<sup>15</sup> the most decisive element is the simple fact elucidated in the present article: The LXX phrase ἐσώτερον τοῦ καταπέτασματος exclusively renders the unambiguous Hebrew expression מִבֵּית לְפָרֹכֶת, “within the inner veil.” Therefore the LXX, understood as the translation that it is, provides Heb 6:19 with only one option for καταπέτασμα: the inner veil.

It remains theoretically possible that Heb 6:19 uses ἐσώτερον τοῦ καταπέτασματος differently than does the LXX to point to the area behind the outer veil metaphorically with reference to the entire heavenly sanctuary. So Rice’s final conclusion could turn out to be on target. But if we take LXX evidence seriously, and it appears exegetically expensive to do otherwise, we cannot discount the probability that Heb 6:19-20 includes the idea of Christ entering the inner part of the heavenly sanctuary. The LXX tends to support rather than undermine this view.

<sup>9</sup>Gane and Milgrom, 756.

<sup>10</sup>Attridge, 184; Buchanan, 115-116; Ellingworth, 347; Hagner, 98; Hendriksen and Kistemaker, 176; Lane, 154; Schneider, 629- 630.

<sup>11</sup>Bruce, 250-251, n. 87; cf. Ellingworth, 347; Gräßer, 384.

<sup>12</sup>Gräßer, 384; Hendriksen and Kistemaker, 176; *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 12:82.

<sup>13</sup>Dods, 305; Michel, 254.

<sup>14</sup>Gräßer, 384, n. 88.

<sup>15</sup>See Rice, 66-71.