Gelardini, Gabriella

“Verhärtet eure Herzen nicht”: Der Hebräer, eine Synagogenh Homilie zu Tischab-Aw

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Most specialists today classify Hebrews as a sermon or homily. In this book Gabriella Gelardini attempts to move beyond this rather general designation. She argues that Hebrews displays the characteristics of a synagogue homily of the petichta/proem form. Furthermore, she finds in Hebrews evidence that allows her to identify the occasion for which the homily was composed: the Tisha b’Av (Ninth of Av), the fast day commemorating the destruction of the First and Second Temples. This insight, she contends, is the key to understanding the structure and argument of Hebrews.

The eight chapters of this book are divided into three main parts. Part 1 focuses on the structure of Hebrews. It begins with a literature review reporting the various ways in which scholars have understood Hebrews’ structure. The second chapter surveys various informal and formal methods scholars employ to reach these conclusions. The chapter concludes with a summary and evaluation of the findings in the first two chapters. Gelardini commends an eclectic approach that structures the text around its main points of theological emphasis.

In chapter 3 Gelardini presents her own structural proposal, in which she identifies twelve thematic sections of five to eight verses in length that serve as structural markers. Each thematic section is labeled as synonymously or antithetically parallel to another section.

A. Exaltation and Humiliation of the Son (1:1–2:18)
   B. Faithlessness of Fathers and Sons (3:1–6:20)
      C. Institution of the New Covenant and Cult (7:1–10:18)
   B’. Faithfulness of the Sons and Fathers (10:19–12:3)
   A’. Humiliation and Exaltation of the Sons (12:4–13:25)

Gelardini considers these structural insights to be an important hermeneutical key for unlocking the meaning of the text. First, they point to the need to interpret parallel passages in light of one another. Second, they alert us to the need to interpret larger sections in light of their chiastic relationships with the other larger sections. Lastly, the concentric structure helps us to identify the section in which we should find the biblical text upon which the homily is based. This piece of information allows her to identify the occasion for which the homily was composed.

In part 2 (chs. 4–6) Gelardini makes her case for identifying Hebrews as a synagogue homily for Tisha b’Av. Her main argument is relatively simple. She begins with a discussion of the origin and function of ancient synagogues, along the way hinting that Hebrews may have been composed for a synagogue in Rome. She then moves on to discuss synagogue practices related to the reading of the Law and Prophets. She maintains that first-century Palestinian synagogues read through the Torah and corresponding selections from the Prophets according to a three-year lectionary cycle. Moreover, preserved petichta/proem homilies from antiquity based on the triennial cycle exhibit a distinctive form. Early in the homily allusion is made to the Torah reading (sidra), but the main text guiding the preacher’s thought is the prophetic selection (haftarah). The haftarah is explicitly quoted later in the homily, usually in its central section.

Gelardini believes that the structure of Hebrews corresponds to this homily form. Thus, we should expect to find a quotation of the haftarah upon which the homily is based in Hebrews’ central section (7:1–10:18). Jeremiah 31:31–34 is the most prominently quoted passage within this section and is therefore identified as the homily’s haftarah. It is claimed that the same chapter of Jeremiah also supplied the haftarah reading for the Tisha b’Av in the second year of the triennial cycle. Gelardini purports to find echoes of a corresponding Torah reading from Exod 31 earlier in Hebrews, confirming that the seder/haftarah pair lying behind the homily is that assigned for the Tisha b’Av. On this
basis we can conclude that Hebrews is a synagogue homily composed for the observance of the fast.

Part 3 (chs. 7–8) presents a new interpretation of Hebrews in light of the conclusion that it is a synagogue homily for the Tisha b'Av. The first chapter briefly describes a methodology, while the second is a lengthy application of the method to each of the textual units identified in chapter 3. The interpretation of each section is subdivided into seven headings under which Gelardini offers a reading of the passage with an eye toward (1) structure and text; (2) contents and context; (3) intertextual connections; (4) form and argumentation; (5) theology; (6) history and sociology; and (7) critical hermeneutics.

At 185 pages long, chapter 8 is really a short commentary on the entirety of Hebrews. Here Gelardini extends her earlier discussion of the homily’s structure, use of hook words, and parallelism. She also adds further details to her reconstruction of the homily’s occasion and purpose. Most significantly, she contends that Hebrews was composed to console and encourage Jewish Christians (probably slaves from Palestine) living in Rome after the destruction of the Second Temple as they commemorated this event. The final chapter is designed to demonstrate the exegetical payoff of this reconstruction of the background. Unfortunately, most of the commentary is a pastiche of themes and observations uncritically culled from the commentaries. The distinctive spin to the discussion is an attempt to explain how each passage might relate to themes associated with the Tisha b’Av. In most cases the plausibility of distinctive exegetical proposals depends entirely on the cogency of the earlier argument identifying the occasion for which the homily was composed.

If Gelardini’s argument is sound, then she has significantly advanced our understanding of Hebrews’ genre, purpose, and function. Indeed, if the argument is deemed merely plausible, then she may have opened important new avenues of inquiry. Unfortunately, this work is permeated by serious problems. Only a few of the most serious can be summarized here.

Several interrelated shortcomings undermine Gelardini’s form-critical analysis. First, Gelardini does not argue for identifying Hebrews as a sermon. She occasionally alludes to the coincidence of the phrase “word of exhortation” in Heb 13:22 and Acts 13:15. She also asserts that its rhetorical character is more like an ancient homily than a letter (1). But in lieu of a supporting argument, Gelardini merely relies upon the consensus of recent commentators who identify Hebrews as a sermon. This consensus is apparently taken to be so secure that she does not cite any of the scholarship that has attempted to substantiate that questionable categorization.
Second, Gelardini claims that synagogue homilies of the late first century would have employed the *petichta* form. However, this form is attested only in rabbinic midrashim preserved in medieval manuscripts. The oldest material appears to go back only as far as late Amoraic times (fifth century C.E.). Most of it was produced in the sixth and seventh centuries, with editorial activity continuing throughout the end of the Geonic period (eleventh century C.E.). Gelardini naively assumes that these midrashim provide reliable evidence of first-century homiletic forms (137–41). In stark contrast, the most optimistic specialists today insist that the midrashim give us no information about synagogue practices prior to the late second or early third century. Gelardini does not seem to be aware of this and provides no argument in favor of her problematic assumption.

Third, the function of the rabbinic *petichta* is not certain. Scholars have defended three possibilities: (1) it is an introduction to the sermon; (2) it is a short sermon that precedes the scriptural readings and main homily; (3) it is the main sermon. The latter is simply taken as settled fact. Finally, even if we grant that the *petichta* was a main sermon, it may not tell us anything about typical synagogue instruction. Scholars such as Richard Sarason, Gary Porten, and Günter Stemberger have argued—convincingly, to my mind—that we cannot recover sermons for the public from the extant midrashim. Among other reasons they cite, there is little evidence from late antiquity supporting the assumption that rabbis routinely preached in synagogues (in distinction from preaching to disciples in the *bet-midrash*).

Gelardini’s thesis is further undermined by problems related to the triennial lectionary cycle. First, Gelardini again supposes that practices attested only in late rabbinic sources can be assumed for the first century. In this case she presumes that texts from the Cairo Genizah testifying to a three-year cycle of readings reflect first-century Palestinian synagogue practices. Second, Gelardini’s discussion (2–3, 125–36) gives the impression that the only serious question about the triennial cycle is whether it began in Tishri, as Adolph Büchler maintained, or in Nisan, as Jacob Mann later argued. Gelardini sides with Mann and uncritically accepts his reconstruction of the triennial cycle in its entirety.

Numerous scholars have determined that Büchler and Mann were far too optimistic about the prospect of reconstructing “the” triennial cycle from the midrashim, *piyyutim*, and Genizah materials. At many points the detailed lists compiled by Büchler and Mann are based on speculation rather than hard evidence. Moreover, conflicting number of *sedarim* are attested in the Genizah lists and elsewhere. This has been widely taken as evidence for several triennial lectionary systems operating simultaneously from late antiquity into the medieval period, not a single standardized cycle as Gelardini presupposes. It has also been argued that the varying numbers of *sedarim* may point instead to a septennial cycle of two parts. None of these issues are discussed in this book. Furthermore, nearly every
scholar since Mann who has studied ancient lectionary practices in detail concludes that there is no firm evidence for the existence of any fixed lectionary cycle in the first century. This fact is mentioned by scholars in works that Gelardini cites, but she never cites them on this point. In a few cases selective quotation gives the impression that particular scholars agree with Gelardini’s position when they in fact do not. Finally, important scholarship on the triennial lectionary cycle that reaches conclusions uncongenial to the thesis of this book is never mentioned. Most striking for their absence are several articles on the topic by Larrimore Crockett, Joseph Heinemann, Shelomo Naeh, and Ezra Fleischer. Neither does Gelardini cite works that one would expect to see that could help her argument (most notably, Dirk Monshouwer, “The Reading of the Bible in the Synagogue in the First Century,” Bijdr 51 [1990]: 68–84).

One would be charitable to conclude that Gelardini’s discussion of the ancient synagogue homily and the triennial lectionary cycle is merely outdated, inaccurate, and inadequately researched. Ironically, Gelardini’s case would not be helped much even if it could be shown that petichta sermons and the triennial cycle (as reconstructed by Mann) were already established in the first-century synagogue.

Gelardini associates Jer 31:33–40 with the Ninth of Av because it appears as the haftarah for the first Sabbath of Av during the second year of the cycle according to a chart based on Mann’s reconstruction in the Encyclopedia Judaica (s.v. “Triennial Cycle,” reproduced on 133–36). For the argument to work, the calendar must be fixed so that Jer 31:33–40 was read on the Sabbath immediately preceding the Ninth of Av every third year.

However, this is impossible, because the triennial cycle assumes a lunisolar calendar, and in the early centuries of the Common Era the beginning of the month was determined by observation of the new moon (not by the formula now in use). Gelardini mentions the observation of the new moon in passing (148) but does not recognize the problems this causes for her thesis. (I will set aside the possibility that Jews in first-century Rome may have followed a solar calendar like those formulated at Qumran or the local Gentile calendar as some Diaspora communities did.)

The average length of a lunation is 29 days 12 hours 44 minutes, leading to an average year of 354 1/3 days. Lunar months will vary in length between 29 and 30 days, but months will not necessarily alternate between 29 and 30 days. This is due to small variations in the length of the lunar cycle caused by the varying proximity of the moon to the earth and sun throughout the year. The Jewish lunar month could also be as long as 32 days if at the end of a longer lunation clouds prevented observation of the new moon for two consecutive days. The month following could then be as short as 28 days. (See Ben Zion Wacholder and David B. Weisberg, “Visibility of the New Moon in Cuneiform and
Rabbinic Sources,” *HUCA* 42 (1971): 227–42; and Sacha Stern, *Calendar and Community* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 99–154). A month could have four or five Sabbaths, but it was not always possible to know how many Sabbaths a month would have until the new moon was observed.

Due to the imprecise length of lunations and the role of observation in declaring new months, the length of the normal year would normally vary between 353 and 355 days, but in rare circumstances it could be as long as 357 days. (Over the course of several years, the lunar year has an average length of 354 days.) In addition, the first day of the year migrates through the days of the week. Because of these factors, a year could have 50 or 51 Sabbaths. To further complicate matters, the year must be periodically intercalated to bring it in line with the solar year. We do not have direct evidence for how intercalation was determined in the first century, but it was probably determined by observing the proximity of Passover to the ripeness of the barley crop. If the barley was not sufficiently ripe, second Adar would be declared. This would add another 29–30 days (typically) to the length of the year and another four or five Sabbaths. The amount of time it takes for a crop to mature can vary due to precipitation levels and temperature. Political and social considerations may have also played a role in making the decision to intercalate or not. Lacking any central authority in the aftermath of the First Jewish War, communities could differ in their judgments in both of these areas, leading to temporary discrepancies between their respective calendars. These factors made it impossible to know in advance whether a year would be intercalated, though on average it had to be intercalated seven times in every nineteen year cycle.

It should now be obvious that it would have been impossible to have a fixed triennial lectionary in which the same readings always occur on the same Sabbath of the cycle. When the *Encyclopedia Judaica* chart assigns particular readings to specific Sabbaths of the year, it does so merely as illustration. The triennial cycle might occasionally coincide with the chart, but this would be quite rare. The devastating implication for Gelardini’s thesis is that only occasionally would Jer 31:33–40 serve as a haftarah for the first Sabbath of Av, not frequently enough to be specially associated with that day. It is possible that the conflicting number of *sedarim* attested in the Genizah lists and elsewhere allowed the triennial cycle to be adapted to intercalated years, and perhaps even to ensure that certain parts of the Torah were read during appropriate seasons of the year. But this would have required changing the number and length of *sedarim* as well as their corresponding haftarot.

There is no reason to believe that the lectionary would have been adjusted to ensure the concurrence of Jer 31:33–40 and the Tisha b’Av. Gelardini assumes that readings listed for the Sabbath immediately before the fast day were intended to commemorate the fast
itself. We can set aside the fact that this treats the Sabbath as if it were the first day of the week rather than the last. We can also pass over the fact that in years when Jer 31:33–40 coincided with the first Sabbath of Av it would not immediately precede the Tisha b’Av if the month began on Sunday, Monday, or Tuesday. (If Tisha b’Av falls on a Sabbath, it is observed the following day.) As with other fast and festival days, special portions of Scripture would have been read that are not included in the lectionary cycle.

Several biblical passages are attested as readings for the Tisha b’Av in different Jewish traditions from late antiquity until today, but Jer 31:33–40 is never among them. The only evidence in favor of associating Jer 31:33–40 with the fast of Tisha b’Av is Gelardini’s misinterpretation of the Encyclopedia Judaica chart. Nor is Jer 31 among the passages Naomi G. Cohen and Elsie R. Stern discuss in their studies of the haftarah cycle around the Tisha b’Av, additional works relevant to Gelardini’s argument but absent from her bibliography. (Cohen, “Earliest Evidence of the Haftarah Cycle for the Sabbaths between ש重工 and ויקרא in Philo,” JJS 48 [1997]: 225–49; Stern, From Rebuke to Consolation: Exegesis and Theology in the Liturgical Anthology of the Ninth of Av Season [BJS 338; Providence, R.I.: Brown University, 2004], esp. ch. 2). The fact that Jer 31:33–40 appears as a reading during this time of the year in Mann’s reconstruction provides no evidence to the contrary, since the proposed starting point of “the” triennial cycle is pure speculation.

Jeremiah 31 is quoted or alluded to in several texts that unquestionably predate the destruction of the temple (1 Cor 11:25; 2 Cor 3:1–6; CD VI, 19; VIII, 21; XX, 12). Rather than see a connection between Hebrews’ quotation and the observance of Tisha b’Av after 70 C.E., it is more reasonable to conclude that the passage was significant to the Qumran community and the Christ-movement because it mentions a “new covenant.” Finally, it should not go unnoticed that the passage quoted by the author of Hebrews is Jer 31:31–34. The portion most important to the author’s argument is verse 31, where the “new covenant” is mentioned. This is not part of the haftarah in question, which begins at verse 33. In haftarot as in horseshoes, close is not good enough.

The summaries of problems presented here do not address all the serious deficiencies in this work. However, they are enough to show that Gelardini’s foundational premises about synagogue homilies and the triennial cycle cannot bear the weight of her novel thesis regarding the occasion and purpose of Hebrews. As a result, this book does very little to increase our understanding of Hebrews and its social context.