Entering God’s Rest: 
Eschatology And The Socio-Rhetorical Strategy Of Hebrews

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Since C. K. Barrett's important article on "The Eschatology of the Epistle to the Hebrews," one can say that, with a few exceptions, scholars have come to concede the importance of the eschatological or, better, the apocalyptic elements of this text. I consider "apocalyptic" a better description since it combines both the spatial and temporal elements of early Christian interest in the world beyond their present, visible situation. One need no longer work strenuously to defend the thesis that the text of Hebrews has more than a superficial connection with early Christian apocalypticism. There remains, however, considerable debate concerning the particulars of the author's apocalyptic vision, both in its cosmological and eschatological dimensions. Moreover, attention has not yet been adequately focused on the rhetorical application of this eschatological vision, that is to say, how the author draws explicit attention to selected aspects of "eschatology" and shapes those aspects in a specific and strategic way to provide the necessary argumentative topics and arouse the strategic emotional responses that will move the hearers toward the path the author wishes them to pursue.

My paper will attempt to clarify one particular facet of the author’s apocalyptic scheme, namely the meaning of the image of “entering God’s rest” that dominates Heb 3:7–4:11, and to explore the connection between the author’s rhetorical goal and the eschatological scheme he invokes. In this paper, I am particularly concerned to call into question the tendency of some brothers and sisters to invoke the concept of the millennial kingdom, the interim kingdom of Christ, as a means by which to explicate various aspects of Hebrews’ eschatology, particularly the “rest” of Heb 4:1–11 and the “unshakable kingdom” of Heb 12:26–28. This imports into the text a concept that the author himself never names, and leads to the ver...

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