RE-OPENING KATAPESTASMA ("VEIL")
IN HEBREWS 6:19
ROY E. GANE
Andrews University

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 καταπετάσματος), [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).¹ Having shown that καταπετάσμα 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,² and interpreted καταπέτασμα in this context as referring


²For 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).³

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 ἐσωτέρου τοῦ καταπέτασματος, "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.⁴ 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, ἐσωτέρου τοῦ καταπέτασματος renders בְּנֹחַ הָבֵית, "within the inner veil." While Greek καταπέτασμα by itself can refer to various veils, the Hebrew word בְּנֹחַ unambiguously denotes the inner veil.⁵ Another Hebrew word,
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]).

MT can speak of the inner veil as הָעָרֹב (Exod 35:12; 39:34; 40:21; Num 4:5) or even just הָעָרֹב (Num 3:31) because the הָעָרֹב served as a special kind of הָעָרֹב, “screen.” הָעָרֹב 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 הָעָרֹב category, הָעָרֹב 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 bara', “dais,” via Akkadian *parakku, “cultic base/pedestal, high seat; shrine/apartment (of deity).”

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

i.e. the most holy place, and (2) the (outer) altar. In Num 18:7 the prepositional compound הָעָרֹב ensures that the text refers to entrance within/behind/inside the veil in question. But this does not rule out the normal meaning of הָעָרֹב. 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 הָעָרֹב 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 הָעָרֹב 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 ἐγγὺς ἐσώτερον τοῦ καταπετάσματος, “the (most) holy (place) within the veil” (article + explicit noun ἐγγὺς) 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 ἐνδιάθεν τοῦ καταπετάσματος, “that which is within the veil” for הָעָרֹב הָעָרֹב in Num 18:7.

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

* 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).

καταπετάσματος; 30:6). 9 Within the context of this range of spatial terminology, ἡ ἱππα and its Greek rendering ἑσώτερον τοῦ καταπετάσματος 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,10 comparison with other passages within the book of Hebrews (9:3; 10:20)11 and in the Gospels (Matt 27:51; Mark 15:38),12 Philo’s use of καταπέτασμα exclusively for the inner veil,13 and the idea that ἑσώτερον is to be understood as a superlative: “innermost.”14 While at least some of these arguments are susceptible to parrying,15 the most decisive element is the simple fact elucidated in the present article: The LXX phrase ἑσώτερον τοῦ καταπετάσματος exclusively renders the unambiguous Hebrew expression ἡ ἱππα ἡ ἱππα, “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 ἑσώτερον τοῦ καταπετάσματος 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.

9Gane and Milgrom, 756.
10Attridge, 184; Buchanan, 115-116; Ellingworth, 347; Hagner, 98; Hendriksen and Kistemaker, 176; Lane, 154; Schneider, 629-630.
11Bruce, 250-251, n. 87; cf. Ellingworth, 347; Grässer, 384.
12Grässer, 384; Hendriksen and Kistemaker, 176; The New Interpreter’s Bible (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 12:82.
13Dods, 305; Michel, 254.
14Grässer, 384, n. 88.
15See Rice, 66-71.