

THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS

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ITS DOCTRINE AND SIGNIFICANCE

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PREFACE.



It is only of late years that anything like an adequate study has been bestowed on the Epistle to the Hebrews. A few great passages of the Epistle have always been among the most familiar in scripture, but even professed theologians have concerned themselves little with its teaching as a whole. This neglect has been partly due to the character of the argument, which is cast in an archaic mould, and often impresses a modern reader as barren and artificial. To a still greater extent the Epistle has suffered from the mistaken views that have prevailed as to its nature and purpose. It has been commonly regarded as a mere appendix to the Pauline writings, or as a tract that has survived from a forgotten controversy, or at best as the manifesto of some isolated sect. A work that appeared to count for so little in the main development of Christian thought has not unnaturally been pushed into the background.

Within the last generation much has been done, and especially by English writers, to atone for past neglect of the Epistle. Not to mention a number of excellent commentaries, its teaching has been interpreted by such

distinguished scholars as Dr. A. B. Bruce and Dr. G. Milligan, and more recently in a beautiful and suggestive book, *The Epistle of Priesthood*, by Dr. A. Nairne. Another work on the same subject may be reckoned superfluous, but it appears to me that the writers just named, while they have illuminated many dark places in the Epistle, have been warped in their approach to it by the old prepossessions, and have thereby overlooked some of its essential aspects.

No excuse, however, is needed for making a new attempt to expound this noble New Testament writing. For many reasons, as I have tried to show in the concluding chapter, the Epistle to Hebrews, for all its air of antiquity, makes a peculiar appeal to the mind of our own age. It deals with questions which are ultimately the same as those which are now perplexing us, and suggests answers to them which are still valid. This has been felt by many, in all the Christian churches, who vaguely perceive the drift of the argument but cannot follow it in detail. I have tried in the present book to examine this difficult Epistle from several new points of view, and to throw some clearer light on its underlying ideas.

E. F. SCOTT.

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CONTENTS.



CHAP.	PAGE
I. THE LITERARY PROBLEMS	1
II. PURPOSE AND CHARACTER	22
III. THEOLOGICAL AFFINITIES	46
IV. THE RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND	69
V. THE NEW COVENANT	85
VI. THE TWO AGES AND THE TWO WORLDS	102
VII. THE HIGH-PRIESTHOOD OF CHRIST	122
VIII. THE NATURE OF CHRIST	143
IX. FAITH.	169
X. THE HISTORICAL AND RELIGIOUS VALUE OF THE EPISTLE	193
INDEX.	215

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CHAPTER I.

THE LITERARY PROBLEMS.

THE Epistle to the Hebrews is in many respects the riddle of the New Testament. Nothing is known of its origin; no agreement has yet been reached as to its literary character and theological affinities; the more it is studied in detail the more it abounds in problems—historical, doctrinal, exegetical—which seem to defy solution. Among early Christian writings it stands solitary and mysterious, “without father, without mother, without genealogy,” like that Melchizedek on whom its argument turns.

Almost from the beginning the church was aware of something strange and perplexing about this Epistle. As one of the most ancient and valuable of Christian books it had a paramount claim to a place in the New Testament, but this place was not fully conceded to it for several centuries. The earliest critics, like their modern successors, were puzzled by it, and were un-

willing to commit themselves to a judgment. It had come down without the credentials of Apostolic authorship ; it could not be classified under any of the acknowledged types of primitive literature. At last it was grudgingly admitted to the Canon, but only through the pious fiction, never really accepted until the Middle Ages, that it was an anonymous Epistle of Paul. But the doubt which hung so long over the canonicity of Hebrews need cause us no misgivings. It serves to remind us, rather, that the Epistle won its way into the New Testament by its intrinsic excellence, in spite of all conventional scruples. Without any formal passport it had approved itself in the experience of the church as one of the primary Christian writings, worthy to rank with the Gospels and the Epistles of Paul.

If it lacked the Epistle to the Hebrews our New Testament would indeed be incalculably poorer. Notwithstanding its many obscurities it remains one of the noblest examples of Christian eloquence. There are not a few aspects of the Christian teaching, and these among the most vital, which have never been set forth so clearly and magnificently as in this Epistle. And from the historical, hardly less than from the purely religious point of view, it is one of the most valuable documents we possess. The very fact that it stands alone, with little apparent relation to the more familiar types of New Testament thought, makes its significance all the greater. By means of it we may hope to determine, in some measure, those hidden factors in primitive

Christianity which helped to bring about the later development. It is not rash to prophesy that New Testament criticism in the course of the next generation will occupy itself more and more with the Epistle to the Hebrews. Here, if anywhere, the key must be sought to some of the most difficult problems of early Christian history.

The present discussion will be mainly concerned with the teaching of the Epistle, and it is not necessary for our purpose to examine in detail the intricate literary questions which lie at the threshold. One cannot but feel, indeed, that students of the book have too often lost themselves in the mazes of its enigma, and have altogether neglected its essential message. The literature of the Epistle is overloaded with disquisitions on its authorship, date, destination, sources ; and we are left with the impression that the work itself is only so much material for forming a judgment on those vexed problems. The investigation of them must certainly prepare the way for any intelligent study of its teaching, but they are at best subsidiary. It will be enough to indicate briefly the most probable results of the modern critical inquiry, before proceeding, in the light of them, to discuss the larger issues.

The first thing necessary, in the study of any ancient document, is to fix the date of its origin ; and this can be done, in the case of Hebrews, within a fairly definite period, though not with absolute precision. It is quoted

4 THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS

by Clement of Rome in the year 95 or 96, and must by that time have existed long enough to secure some weight and authority. We are safe to assume that it was not written much later than the year 85. On the other hand, we are precluded, by clear references in the Epistle itself, as well as by the prevailing character of its thought, from assigning it to a much earlier date. The author classes himself with those who have received the gospel not from the Lord himself but from his Apostles—declaring, in so many words, that he belongs to the second Christian generation.¹ He exhorts his readers more than once to live worthily of their past, and reminds them of teachers who have laboured among them in bygone days.² It has sometimes been argued that an Epistle so full of ritual allusions must have been written before the destruction of the Temple in the year 70; and a confirmation of this theory has been sought in the emphatic references to the “forty years” which God’s ancient people had spent in the wilderness.³ Here, it is suggested, the writer is thinking of some primitive belief that the earthly career of the church was to be limited to a similar period, which was now on the point of expiry. This interpretation, however, is fanciful; and nothing can be inferred as to the date of the Epistle from the ritual allusions, which are not concerned with the worship of the Temple, but with that of the ancient Tabernacle. In view of the explicit statements that the church can now look back on a

¹ He 2⁸.

² 5¹² 6⁹ 10³² 13⁷.

³ 3⁹. 17.

past, apparently of some duration, we cannot assign the Epistle to the period anterior to the year 70. It was written, we may conclude, at some time between 70 and 85, and perhaps nearer to the later date.

Who was its author? This has always been one of the thorny questions of New Testament criticism, and almost every prominent figure of first century history has been put forward as a possible claimant. Paul, Barnabas, Apollos, Luke, Clement, Aquila and Priscilla—these are only a few of the names that have found their advocates from time to time. That Paul was not the author may be regarded as certain. The one conceivable evidence in his favour is the incidental reference to “our brother Timothy,”¹ and it proves nothing, since Timothy must have included most of the contemporary teachers in his circle of friends. The reference, moreover, belongs to a date when Timothy had undergone imprisonment, and of this episode in his career we have no trace during Paul’s lifetime. Against the one passage which might suggest Pauline authorship may be set another, which is of itself sufficient to exclude it—the passage already mentioned in which the writer declares himself a Christian of the second generation, indebted for his knowledge of the gospel to the teaching of others. Such an admission would have been utterly impossible for Paul, who rested his whole title to Apostleship on the ground that he had received the gospel not

¹ He 13²³.

from men, but by direct revelation of Christ. But it is unnecessary to argue from particular passages. In its whole manner of composition—polished, deliberate, academical—the Epistle has nothing in common with the abrupt and intensely personal style of Paul. In its thought, as we shall see repeatedly, it is still more remote from him. His great fundamental doctrines are entirely absent, and even where his ideas seem to reappear they are invested with a wholly different meaning. If internal evidence means anything, the case against the Pauline authorship of Hebrews is beyond dispute. As for the other theories we can form no such definite judgment, since we have to deal for the most part with mere historical names. Luke may be set aside, for we know his mind sufficiently to be fairly certain that the theological conceptions of the Epistle were foreign to him. His interest in the gospel was not theological, but social, ethical, directly religious. To the ritual side of worship he was indifferent, or rather saw in Christianity a new type of faith in which ritual had ceased to have any place or value. The claim of Barnabas is more serious, resting as it does on a tradition which is at least as old as Tertullian. It finds support, too, from superficial resemblances to Hebrews in the extant Epistle ascribed to Barnabas, indicating that a certain mode of thought had early come to be associated with his name. But perhaps the whole tradition had its origin in the known fact that he was a Levite, and for this reason had presumably a leaning

towards speculations of a ritual nature. That Barnabas was the author of our Epistle is hardly probable, for in that case it would have carried an apostolic authority equal to that of Paul, and the long hesitation about accepting it would be inexplicable. Barnabas, too, who was a colleague of the primitive Apostles in the days before Paul's conversion, would not have ranked himself with the Christians of the second generation, who only knew the gospel from the reports of others. More can be said, at least on grounds of internal evidence, for the theory, popular since the days of Luther, that Apollos was the author of the Epistle. Apollos, as we know from the Book of Acts, was a man of Alexandria, eloquent, mighty in the scripture; and the Epistle is certainly the work of an eloquent student of the Old Testament, steeped in Alexandrian ideas. Paul's allusions to the teaching of Apollos at Corinth may be held to bear out the view that he gave a philosophical turn to Christian doctrine, such as we find in Hebrews. But the conjecture that Apollos wrote our Epistle, however felicitous, remains at best a conjecture. As the first century wore to a close, the church drew to itself not a few men of the type of Apollos, men of literary and philosophical culture, who sought the key to Christian doctrine in the symbolism of the Old Testament. In the character of the Epistle there is nothing to warrant us in assigning it to one representative of this group of teachers rather than another. It is not necessary to review all the other names that have

been suggested. Against all of them it can be urged that they are supported by no positive evidence, or by evidence that is purely fanciful or accidental. All of them, too, may be ruled out by the general consideration that if the Epistle was the work of one of the prominent figures of the Apostolic Age some reminiscence of this would have lingered in the tradition. With regard to the problem before us, as to so many other problems of the New Testament, we are compelled to admit that our knowledge of the early history, and especially of the period which immediately succeeded the death of Paul, is fragmentary. The church had many leaders and teachers, and among them men of conspicuous gifts, of whom no record has come to us. The writer of Hebrews, it is fairly certain, was one of those forgotten teachers, and the search for his name is labour wasted.

A peculiar difficulty arises in connection with the literary character of the work. It stands in our New Testament among the Epistles, and in the final chapter we have a series of requests and greetings in the regular epistolary form. Yet there is no opening address or salutation, and we should never guess, until we reach that concluding passage, that we have been reading a letter. On the other hand, we find all the marks of a spoken discourse. The style is balanced and rhetorical, with here and there a splendid outburst of eloquence. The theme is carefully planned out, and is developed

with skilful pauses and transitions and variations—all the devices of which a practised speaker avails himself in order to carry an audience with him through the windings of a complicated argument. More than once the author himself seems to indicate that he is in the act of *speaking*.¹ It has therefore been conjectured that the work is really a discourse or homily, furnished with a few extra sentences of a personal nature, and so dispatched in the form of a letter. But this theory will scarcely account for all the facts. Why, for example, were not some additions made at the beginning as well as at the end? What of the exhortations and rebukes which are always recurring? They were meant, presumably, for the audience which the speaker was addressing, and could not have been transferred, just as they were, to some quite different audience. They might, to be sure, have been inserted when the speech was revised for its second errand, but they are so woven into the argument that they must have been integral to it from the first. No attempt to determine the character of the writing has been altogether satisfactory. Perhaps we might best explain it as the work of an eloquent teacher who was separated from his church and wrote a discourse for some one else to deliver in his name. To a vicarious address of this kind he might naturally append a few words of personal remembrance and greeting. The work would thus come to bear its twofold character of speech and Epistle.

¹ He 2⁵ 6⁹ 11³².

That the author addressed a definite group of readers or hearers is indubitable. Again and again he touches on particular circumstances which give weight to his admonitions, and the whole tenor of his argument, as we shall see, presupposes an audience of a quite peculiar kind. In what place are we to discover this audience? Here again we are left to conjecture, and Jerusalem, Rome, Alexandria, Antioch, and other less prominent churches have all been suggested, on more or less plausible grounds. The closing salutation, "they of Italy greet you," is ambiguous, and may possibly mean that the author is in Rome, and sends remembrances from the Roman church. But it may equally imply that Italian Christians at a distance wish to be remembered to their friends at Rome, and this reading of the words appears to be borne out by several allusions in the body of the Epistle. The writer addresses a church which has been long established and has had an honourable history. Eminent teachers have laboured in it and have shown a noble example. It has distinguished itself by its liberality—a virtue for which the Roman church was always conspicuous. It has been exposed, in a special degree, to persecution. Here, it is true, we encounter the gravest argument against the Roman hypothesis, for the persecutions which have been endured are described as comparatively light. "Ye have not yet resisted unto blood." "Ye suffered reproaches, and took cheerfully the spoiling of your goods." A church that had undergone the terrible

massacre under Nero had surely displayed a constancy to which language like this is quite inadequate. But it must be borne in mind that the Epistle is addressed to the existing community, which had not yet been put to a heroic test. Not improbably the great persecution is in the writer's thought when he eulogises the bygone teachers and bids his readers follow them, "contemplating the issue of their life."¹

Apart from these allusions which point to a Roman destination we have other evidences, tending to the same result. The Epistle is quoted by Clement not many years after it was written, and from this it may be inferred that the Roman church was well acquainted with it, before it came into general circulation. Again, the Epistle reflects a mode of thought which differs widely from that of Paul, although affected in no less a degree by Hellenistic influences. If we regard it as a product of Roman Christianity this divergence from Paulinism is capable of a natural explanation. The Roman church had grown up independently of Paul, and while faced with his problem of adapting the gospel to Gentile conditions had solved it in a fashion of its own. There were doubtless other Gentile churches which lay outside the Pauline orbit, but Rome is the only one that is positively known to us, and the peculiar theology of Hebrews may well have originated in this great independent church. Once more, the teaching of the Epistle, in not a few of its broad features, bears

¹ He 137.

the characteristic marks of Rome. Here, to a greater extent than in any other New Testament book, we meet with the principle of authority, which associated itself with the Roman church from the beginning. The writer takes his stand on the authority of Scripture, on the authority of the received "confession" and of the teachers of past days. For him the fundamental truths, which Paul is always striving to test and explain, are "the rudiments of the doctrine of Christ"—the premises which must be taken for granted before we can begin the quest for higher knowledge. In some of its aspects the Epistle is nothing but a prolonged plea to live worthily of the old traditions, and to hold fast to them in spite of all temptations to fall away. Typically Roman, too, is the entire absence from the Epistle of anything that can properly be called mysticism. There is no suggestion of a union with Christ or of a new life imparted by Him to believers. The Holy Spirit is regarded solely as the source of prophetic inspiration and of the charismatic gifts. The sacraments are barely alluded to, and of sacramental doctrine there is no trace. This absence of mysticism, which we shall have to consider more fully at a later stage, may be partly accounted for by the writer's temperament, and by his fidelity, in spite of Hellenistic culture, to the Hebraic and primitive Christian tradition. But it may also mark his connection with Roman Christianity, which in all its known phases, from the letter of Clement downwards, has shown itself averse to mystical specula-

tions. A similar conclusion may be drawn from the striking fact that the polemical motive plays hardly any part in the Epistle. Its one reference to "strange teachings" is of an incidental nature,¹ and concerns some ascetic tendency which does not seem to have affected any cardinal Christian belief. In other New Testament writings of approximately the same date heresy is already the burning question, but the writer to the Hebrews is content to leave it to one side. This silence, however else we may explain it, points to a church which as yet had been little troubled by false teaching, and Rome answers best to this condition. The attempt to drag Christianity into the syncretistic movement began in the East, and Ignatius does not use the language of mere compliment when he declares the Romans to be "filtered clear from every foreign stain." It is noticeable that the one reference to false doctrine in our Epistle touches on the same form of error with which Paul deals, in order to condone it, in the fourteenth chapter of his letter to the Romans. This coincidence must not be pressed, for an interval of about a generation lies between the two Epistles, not to speak of the cataclysm under Nero. But it is not impossible that the ascetic tendency of which Paul was aware had persisted in the Roman church, and had grown to be something of a danger to the higher religious interests.

On all these grounds the Roman destination of the Epistle is by far the most probable; but even if we

¹ He 13⁹.

accept it a further difficulty arises. The writer has before his mind a homogeneous body of men who were exposed to the same temptations and were living under similar conditions. He could hardly have written in this manner to the whole Roman church, which was already a large body, including all sorts of members, from ignorant slaves to philosophers and scions of the imperial house. If the letter was addressed to Rome it must have been meant for one of the communities which carried on their separate life within the great church; and a number of indications seem to point to a still more definite conclusion. The group in question was of a peculiar kind—made up of members who had been long converted and were now proceeding to higher instruction. It will be necessary later to dwell at some length on this conclusion, for it affords us, in some measure, the key to the Epistle. Much in the argument that would be otherwise inexplicable takes a new meaning when we think of the writer as addressing not so much an ordinary congregation as an inner circle of men who aspired to be teachers, and were aiming at deeper insight into their Christian faith.

The problem of the destination of the Epistle merges, however, in a much larger one. From an early time it has borne the title "To the Hebrews," and this conjecture of some ancient scholar embodies a view which has been endorsed by all subsequent criticism, down to our own time. The Epistle is based on assiduous

study of the Old Testament. It seeks to establish the worth and meaning of the new religion by contrasting it, in certain respects, with Judaism. From all this it has been inferred that the writer addresses a community of Jewish Christians, with the object of warning them against the danger of relapsing into their ancient faith. This view of his purpose has usually been accepted as self-evident, and has formed the starting-point of most interpretations of the Epistle ; but the more it is examined the more we are compelled to question it. If our previous conclusions are admitted, it would fall to the ground almost of its own accord. Towards the end of the first century the cause for which Paul had fought had definitely triumphed, and Jewish Christianity had ceased to maintain itself outside of Palestine. In Rome especially, the division between the Jewish and Gentile sections of the church had been obliterated. Christianity had come face to face with its great practical task of overcoming the pagan world, and the old controversy about the claims of the Jewish ordinances could no longer be regarded as a living issue. It is hardly conceivable that in the cosmopolitan church of the capital, in the troubled interval between two fiery persecutions, there was still a community whose one concern was with the Jewish ritual, and which needed to be warned against its seductions by a long-drawn argument. But apart from these considerations of date and origin there are convincing reasons, grounded in the whole character of the Epistle, against