

THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS

The Nature, Value and Theme of the Epistle

John Calvin the great Reformed theologian dedicated his Commentary¹ on the Epistle to the Hebrews to Sigismund August, 'King of Poland, grand Duke of Lithuania, Russia, Prussia, Lord and Heir of Muscovy', saying, 'I bring with me a present which that piety will not allow you to reject. Since the Epistle addressed to the Hebrews contains a full discussion of the eternal divinity of Christ, His supreme government, and only priesthood (which are the main points of heavenly wisdom) and as these things are so explained in it, that the whole power and work of Christ are set forth in the most graphic way, it rightly deserves to have the place and honour of an invaluable treasure to the Church'.

Calvin also has an introduction to the Epistle in which he sets out the theme. Philip Edgecombe Hughes in his Commentary² has a Synopsis of the Epistle which is most valuable. We also need to read this Letter many times before we commence looking at its text in particular. After we have made these readings, the outlines begin to appear and we realise this is a book of great stature. It is immediately apparent that the recipients of the Letter are members of a church which has had a powerful preaching of the gospel, who are former Jews, who have a rich history of fellowship and worship, yet who are in danger of minimising the stature and authority of Christ and are in danger of backsliding and even falling into apostasy.

The Letter, then, is one of exhortations and strong warnings against any decline in faith, doctrine and practice. At one point the writer charges his readers with being immature and dull of hearing. He has a marvellous comprehension of the great stature of Christ. In a way which no other Epistle does, he presents Christ as the great High Priest of history, the one who transcends all others, including Moses whom all Israel venerated. Christ is of an order of Priesthood which is eternal, which outmodes the ancient Aaronic priesthood, and which puts an end to all forms of worship, and all life and doctrine that does not comport with his. He-Christ-is the true minister in the sanctuary, and the sanctuary is not profane. Fine as was the Mosaic Covenant, it was nothing more-or less-than an antitype of the New Covenant, so that its powers and effects were minimal in comparison with the 'better Covenant' of which Christ is the Mediator. As he proceeds, the writer builds the magnificent picture of Christ that causes us to see him in majestic outline, and when he shows that this Son of God is Elder Brother to the brethren, that he causes many sons to come into glory, that he is one origin with them, that he is truly Man, and knows the weaknesses of his brethren, that he is one flesh with them in order to offer himself as the unique oblation in the marvellous propitiation which he is and which he effects, then we have no less a doctrine of the atonement than found in other Epistles, nor less a doctrine of his perpetual intercession.

¹ Calvin's Commentaries Volume 12 (Eerdmans, 1963, translated by W. B. Johnston, p.ixf.)

² A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews (Eerdmans, 1977, pp. 4-10).

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Faith in this Epistle is a present power for living for it is one with hope, and so much so that believers will go through the fiercest of trials and tribulations spurred on by the assurance of God's immutable promises, and the vision of the heavenly city. The life of the new community is a holy one, and takes in the practicalities of love, good works, purity in marriage, care and hospitality for strangers and for prisoners who suffer persecution for their faith. The writer's revelation of the church universal on earth and in heaven-as one in magnificent worship, brings us to heart of the Epistle. Worship is by virtue-as we have said-of Christ as minister in the sanctuary, and it is to the heart of that sanctuary where the Father dwells in the holy of holies, that Christ brings us. His exposition of the purified conscience by virtue of the propitiation of Christ the High Priest, brings those of the household of God into such living worship that they 'continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God' and this shows itself in doing good and in the sharing that the community has mutually and with others.

The revelation of the greatness of Christ, and his superiority over angels, Moses, the Aaronic priesthood in his office of Melchizedekian High Priesthood, as mediator of the New Covenant, and as the New and Living Way, all combine to bring us to a view of Christ which is not only breathtaking but life transforming. It establishes us in faith and in the faith. At the same time warnings against dullness in hearing, immaturity in understanding, failure to fellowship and worship together, backsliding and departing from the faith are such as to awaken us to what may well be happening in our own lives and of which we may not be conscious.

For those who love this Epistle it is not only an exciting thing to set out on fresh readings in which new and stimulating insights come, but such readings strengthen the faith, hope and love of the reader. It is always possible that we have stopped short of the unveiling of the great mystery of Christ, that we have halted at the elementary things and so have missed what is primary to all life-the wonder of worship of the community in the great High Priesthood of Christ, in the true sanctuary of God in which 'innumerable angels in festal gathering' join with 'the assembly of the first born who are enrolled in heaven' who are 'the spirits of just men made perfect' who are one with the people of faith on earth.

Thus we have much to look forward to in our study of this Epistle.

Why The Epistle Was Written

As we will already have gathered to some degree, the Letter was written to show its readers that the New Covenant was superior to the Old Covenant, which, as Jews, they had known before Christ's coming. Thus he speaks in 1:2 of 'these last days' or 'the last of these days' namely the days³ introduced by the coming of Christ. From the internal structure of the Epistle we can see what we have outlined above, that the writer is showing Jesus as greater than, and so superior to prophets and angels, greater than Moses, Aaron and the Levitical priesthood, because of his being ordained High Priest after the priestly order of Melchizedek, and so a better High Priest and Mediator of a better covenant-the New Covenant.

³ Cf. Acts 2:17ff. where Peter says that Pentecost inaugurates the last days leading to 'that great and notable day of the Lord'..

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The Epistle had to be written because some Jewish converts seemed to be in danger of reverting to their former Judaism, and that, in essence, would be apostasy. They needed to see afresh that Jesus was indeed the Messiah of the Scriptures, and to reject pressures and temptations to revert to the Judaism they lived in prior to their conversion.

Those to Whom the Letter Was Written

It seems that the letter was written to a group of Jewish converts.

Other letters of the New Testament suggest converts to Christianity-both from Judaism and paganism-had problems in understanding and accepting all the teaching of the gospel. In the flush of the first experience of God's grace in Christ most would have accepted all the apostolic teaching because of its authoritative nature. Then there would be the natural tug back to cultural patterns of life,⁴ and former ways of thinking. The writers of the New Testament Epistles tackled these problems. Certain heresies often linked with former ways of thinking-also presented problems, and these had to be addressed. We know that 'a great company of the priests' became 'obedient to the faith' (Acts 6:7). We also know that many Pharisees joined the Church (cf. Acts 15:5). These must have carried into the new faith some elements of their old cultural and theological images or eikons with which they would have to struggle until the grace of the New Covenant became fully known to them beyond dispute.

This Letter faced certain problems which primarily pressed upon Jewish Christians, or those who were close to receiving the Christian faith. As we have said, cultural ties are strong, and none stronger than those that are Jewish. Until the temple at Jerusalem was destroyed in AD 70⁵ there was still a strong pressure for Christian Jews to worship at the temple or the local synagogue. The church had to discuss the admission of Gentiles into the church, and the minimal 'cultural' requirements that should be made upon them. We know a group of Jewish Christians-primarily those of the sect of the Pharisees-still had problems concerning Gentiles converts in regard to the Jewish law, especially in regard to circumcision and certain hygiene laws. Of course Jews who were not Christian were hostile to the Christians, and often expressed their hostility and this was an added pressure on Jewish converts.

The Date of the Writing of the Epistle

Whilst the Jewish Christians to whom the letter was written were possibly those of a later date than those addressed in the Pauline letters⁶, yet some of the same difficulties remained with them. They naturally felt at home and secure in their old culture of worship, laws and customs, and change was not easy for them. Judaism in the sight of

⁴ It is a known phenomenon that some Muslims who have converted to the Christian faith, after experiencing the first rapture of the new faith, and perhaps seeing some of the deficiencies of people in the church, have gone back to their 'brotherhood' of Islam, only to return to the Church because they see the vast differences between their old culture and new, living faith of the gospel and community of Christ.

⁵ It seems evident that the Letter was written prior to the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem in AD 70, for the writer would have shown that the era of the Temple had literally passed.

⁶ Paul's letters were written before the fall of Jerusalem, and since Timothy is mentioned in this Letter (13:23), it may be that the Epistle was contemporary with Paul. Certainly some have Paul's contemporaries have been mentioned as possible authors of the Epistle.

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Rome was a legal religion, that is, it was not illicit. Christianity was illicit, although it was often tolerated. When strong persecution swept over the church Jewish Christians would be tempted to revert to Judaism where they would be secure. At least the tug was there. We can, then, probably place the writing of the Letter to a time before AD 70. If we take 8:14; 9:9 and 10: 1 as indicating that the Temple sacrifices were still being offered, then it certainly before AD 70. Even so, the writer is not referring to the Temple, as such, but to the Tabernacle of Moses' time and this could even be an argument for the fact that he could not refer to the Temple because it was not still standing. His reference to Timothy (13:23)⁷ does seem to indicate the earlier date.

THE WRITER OF THE EPISTLE

Someone wrote the Epistle-that is certain. 2:3 shows that the writer was a second generation Christian who does not claim he is an apostle. The author's request 'Pray for us' (13:18) followed by 'I urge you the more earnestly', indicate that the writer and his friends were well known to the readers. Timothy was named a 'our brother Timothy'⁸. Many ideas exist as to who wrote it, such as Barnabas, Apollo, Stephen, Philip, Peter, and Aquila with Priscilla, and of course, Paul. Early users of the Epistle thought it was Paul, because he was a prolific writer. Many good arguments are adduced for some of these suggested authors. Calvin is sure Paul was not the author, whilst Luther thought it must have been Apollos. Some still hold out for Paul suggesting that if Paul's style could change in some of the later Letters attributed to him, then it could further change, plus the fact that much of the vocabulary of Paul is found in this Epistle. Even so, the style of the Greek is much different, and the theological approach is not that of the Paul we know. Paul does not use the idea of law in the way that the writer of Hebrews does, and so some arguments may be adduced within the Letter that it is not purely Pauline in theology.

The story of its acceptance into the New Testament as a canonical book is interesting. Because it was thought to be Paul who wrote it gained acceptance. There can be no doubt that whilst it was not written by an apostle it was certainly apostolic in doctrine and can easily be recognised as having the marks of inspired authorship, the kind that comes through the Holy Spirit.

AN OUTLINE OF THE EPISTLE

- 1:1-4. Introduction: Jesus creator and sustainer of creation; greater than all prophets
- 1:5-14: Jesus-greater than angels, the subject of Psalms 2 and 110.
- 2:1-4 Exhortation-Jesus the author of 'great salvation'
- 2:5-18 Jesus-as greater than angels-is the true and perfect man.
- 3:1-6 Jesus-greater than Moses.
- 3:7-4:13 Exhortation relating to obedience and the Sabbath rest of God.

⁷ Some commentators think the last few verses were added by some scribe and that they are not part of the original text.

⁸ In 13:24 there is the statement 'Those who come from Italy send you greetings,' and this could either mean the letter was from Italy-Rome perhaps-or it was not from Italy because these had come 'from Italy'.

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- 4:14-5:11 Jesus-greater than the Aaronic priesthood, being like Melchizedek.
5:11-6:20 Exhortation to grow to maturity and not to withdraw from the truth of the gospel which can prove to be apostasy.
7:1-28 Teaching regarding Melchizedek and his order of Priesthood. Christ's High Priesthood after this order, for his life, the divine oath of God, his continuing ministry, and his better sacrifice show him in time to exercise unique High Priesthood.
8:1-10:18 Jesus-High Priest and mediator of a new and better covenant. The sacrifice efficient for all sins to bring forgiveness and sanctification.
10:19-39 Exhortation to the right way as against the wrong way.
11:1-40 Faith-the essence of any relationship with God-and its ultimate fruits.
12:1-13:17 Exhortation to regard Jesus, to accept Fatherly discipline, to practice holiness, to understand and share in true worship, this working out in the practices of true living.
13:18-25 Personal epilogue: doxology and exhortations.

CONCLUSION TO INTRODUCTION

We can only conclude that this Epistle is one of the great spiritual landmarks of history. Calvin once said that this Letter finished all religions and all other forms of worship. This is not just an exclusivist cultic claim for uniqueness, but is a stating that Christ's uniqueness as the incarnate God is the basis for his High-Priesthood which outdistances and transcends all other images and views of God, that brings salvation and worship in a way impossible in other faiths, religions, philosophies and ideologies.

As a part of the whole text of Scripture it is an inexhaustible goldmine for doctrine, for theology, for devotion and for practice of life. It is one of the great treasures the Holy Spirit has brought to us, and warrants humble, patient and faithful reading and study.

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