

M.Th. Thesis Background Essay

16th. June 1990

# **“CONSCIENCE” IN HEBREWS**

Supervisor: Rev. Dr. J. Helm

Candidate: Rev. N. Due

# ‘Conscience’ in Hebrews

by the REV. Noel Due

**LITERATURE:** G.C. Bingham, ‘The Principle and Power of Conscience’ in *Living Faith Studies* Vol. IV pp. 196-216 (New Creation Publications: 1981); F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* NEW INTERNATIONAL COMMENTARY ON THE NT (Eerdmans: 1964); G. W. Buchanan *To The Hebrews* ANCHOR BIBLE (Doubleday & Co. Inc.: 1972); J. Calvin, *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews* CALVIN’S NEW TESTAMENT COMMENTARIES (Oliver and Boyd: 1963); R. W. Dale, *The Jewish Temple and the Christian Church* (Hodder & Stoughton: 1872); J. H. Davies *A Letter to Hebrews* THE CAMBRIDGE BIBLE COMMENTARY (Cambridge Uni.: 1967); P. T. Forsyth, ‘Christian Perfection’ in *God the Holy Father* (St. Andrew Press: 1957); D. Guthrie, ‘Hebrews, Epistle to the’ in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* Vol. II (Eerdmans: 1982); D. Guthrie, *The Letter to the Hebrews* TYNDALE NT COMMENTARIES (IVP Leicester 1983); P. E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Eerdmans: 1977); J. Moffatt, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* INTERNATIONAL CRITICAL COMMENTARY (T. & T. Clark: 1924); H. W. Montefiore *The Epistle to the Hebrews* BLACK’S NT COMMENTARIES (A. & C. Black: 1964); L.L. Morris, *Hebrews* BIBLE STUDY COMMENTARY SERIES (Zondervan: 1983); I. Pennicook, *The Shadow and the Substance* (New Creation Publications: 1985); D. Peterson, ‘The Prophecy of the New Covenant in the Argument of Hebrews’ in *The Reformed Theological Review* Vol. ?? pp. 74-81); C. A. Pierce, *Conscience in the New Testament* SBT MON. SER. 15 (S.C.M.: 1955); T. H. Robinson, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* MOFFATT NT COMMENTARY (Hodder & Stoughton: 1933); G. Selby, ‘The Meaning and Function of Συνειδησις in Hebrews 9 and 10’ in *Restoration Quarterly* Vol. 28 No. 3 (1986) pp. 145-154; M. Silva, ‘Perfection and Eschatology in Hebrews’ in *The Westminster Theological Journal* Vol. XXXIX, pp. 60-71; A. Snell, *A New and Living Way* (Faith Press: 1959); B.F. Wescott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Macmillan: 1914).

## Introduction

Συνειδησις appears in the letter to the Hebrews in only in five places, *viz.* 9:9 and 14; 10:2 and 22, and 13:8. The question that must be asked is whether these occurrences are incidental to the writer’s argument or central to it. That is, despite the relatively small number of occurrences, are they more significant than can be gained merely by a statistical analysis of the number of times the word is used? Allied to this question is another, and this has to do with the writer’s use of the related term, καρδια, which appears with more frequency.<sup>1</sup> In what way are συνειδησις and καρδια related to one another, and what meaning can we assign to them? In order to answer these questions we begin by

---

<sup>1</sup> There are eleven uses of this term. Of these 3:8, 10; 4:7; 8:10; 10:16 are direct quotations from the OT. (3:8; 3:10; 4:7 all quote from Ps. 95 while 8:10 and 10:16 both quote from Jer. 31). The six remaining uses—3:12; 4:12; 10:22 (2x) and 13:9—are the writer’s own.

## ‘Conscience’ in Hebrews

exegeting the passages in which συνειδησις occurs. Having examined the relevant pericopes we will then seek to draw together the elements of the writer’s theology of conscience in order to act as a basis of comparison for later work, particularly that in Paul.

### **§1. Hebrews 9:7-14**

All commentators acknowledge that the writer of the letter to the Hebrews is concerned to set forth the superiority of Christ. He is superior to all the prophets (1:1-3), to angels (1:4-2:18), to Moses (3:1-4:13), to Aaron (4:14-10:18) and is superior as the new and living way (10:19-12:29).<sup>2</sup> But this superiority is not set forth as an end in itself. Christ is portrayed as superior to all these because these things attached to the Old Covenant, and Christ has appeared as the Mediator of the New Covenant. The relationship is one of shadow to substance. He is the goal of all that has gone before, and is thus by nature superior to it.

The pericope at hand is part of the writer’s developing argument apropos Christ’s superior priesthood. He has already shown that, while Christ is indeed qualified to be a high priest (5:5-10 cf. 5:1-4), He is a priest after the order of Melchizedek, and that this order of priesthood is superior to the Aaronic order (7:1-28). That the Aaronic order was linked with the Old Covenant is beyond doubt, but the promise of a New Covenant (as seen in chapter 8) means that the Old, with its cultus, is becoming obsolete (8:13). That old cultus is then summarized in (9:1-7), and the significance of this is expounded in (9:8-10). The new Priesthood of Christ, which the New Covenant must require, is then set out in the remainder of the chapter (9:11-28). The all sufficiency of Christ’s sacrifice as Priest is then underlined and further expounded in Heb. 10. What is of immediate importance to us is that the first reference to conscience appears in the midst of this argument. The Old is insufficient because it is insufficient to deal finally with the worshipper’s conscience. It is only in the New, and particularly in Christ that the issue of conscience is resolved.

**9:7 but into the second only the high priest enters, once a year, not without taking blood, which he offers for himself and for the sins of the people committed in ignorance.**

We are here brought to the key element in the writer’s unfolding argument. The holy of holies was very restricted in terms of access. Only “once a year” i.e. on the annual day of atonement (Ex. 30:10; Lev.16:29, 34) could the High Priest enter, and then he entered alone (Lev. 16:17). The holy of holies symbolized the very presence of God, the dwelling

---

<sup>2</sup> This outline follows P. E. Hughes’ in *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1977)

### 'Conscience' in Hebrews

place of His name, which was holy (cf. Ezk. 36:22f.) and thus the High Priest could not go in without a covering for sin. He took with him blood (Lev. 16:14f.) to atone for both "his own sins" and also for the "sins of the people committed in ignorance" (cf. Numb.15:27-31). That they were committed in ignorance does not lessen the fact that they needed atonement. Ignorance is more a moral problem than an educational one in the scriptures. The sins committed in ignorance were still sins, but they stood over against "sin with a high hand".

**9:8-10 The Holy Spirit is signifying this, that the way into the holy place has not yet been disclosed, while the first tabernacle is still standing, which is a symbol for the present time. Accordingly both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make the worshipper perfect in conscience, since they relate only to food and drink and various washings, regulations<sup>i</sup> for the body imposed until a time of reformation.**

i) This is the reading of p<sup>46</sup>, ⚭\*, A, I, P, 33, 81 etc. and is to be preferred over that of ⚭c, B, D\*, 451, etc. where the inserted καὶ is of no point.

Now our author draws out the significance of his observations of the old cultus. In all this, he says, the Holy Spirit is at work "signifying that the way into the holy place has not yet been disclosed". The same function of the Spirit is indicated in I Pet. 1:11 where δηλωσ is also used. The tabernacle (and the later temple which embodied the same principle) is a lesson in itself in that the access to God is not open. All this constitutes "a symbol (παράβλη) for this present time" This time is that in which he and his readers live, i.e. "the period inaugurated by the advent of Jesus with his new διαθήκη."<sup>3</sup> The symbol is teaching this: all the OT cultus "cannot make the worshipper perfect (τελειωσαι) in conscience". But if the worshiper could not be "perfect" in (lit. according to—κατα) his conscience, how are we to understand τελειωσαι here? That OT saints could know forgiveness of sins and access to God is self evident (see Ps. 32; Rom. 4 and the list of the people of faith in Heb. 11), but, as F. F. Bruce<sup>4</sup> points out, such experiences "had nothing to do with the Levitical ritual or Aaronic priesthood" and that "the whole apparatus of worship associated with that ritual and priesthood was calculated rather to keep man at a distance from God than to bring them near." In what sense, then, were such folk not perfected in conscience?

The verb τελειωω, in one form or another, appears nine times throughout Hebrews (2:10; 5:9; 7:19; 7:28; 9:9; 10:1; 10:14; 11:40; 12:23). Besides these verbal occurrences there are also a number of related terms. Τελειος appears in 5:14, and τελειοτης appears in

---

<sup>3</sup> J. Moffatt, *Hebrews* in THE INTERNATIONAL CRITICAL COMMENTARY series, (T. & T. Clark, Edin., 1924) p.118.

<sup>4</sup> F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, THE NEW INTERNATIONAL COMMENTARY ON THE NT, (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1964) p. 149.

### 'Conscience' in Hebrews

6:1, while in 12:2 τελειωτης and αρχηγος stand in very close relationship. Τελος appears in 3:14; 7:3; 6:8; 6:11.

One thing is clear from the large amount of research that has been devoted to this word group over the years<sup>5</sup>, and that is that the connotation of flawlessness associated with the term in modern parlance is not at all in the forefront of the term in the NT.<sup>6</sup> F. F. Bruce<sup>7</sup> (commenting on Heb. 2:10) defines perfection in Hebrews, as “unimpeded access to God”. Moises Silva, in his article “Perfection and Eschatology in Hebrews”<sup>8</sup> approves of this definition of the term, but suggests that it could mean even more than this.<sup>9</sup> The term, he says, must be understood eschatologically. In the light of the writer’s affirmation of 1:2 that Christ has appeared επ’ εσχρατου των ημερων τουτων, the theme of fulfilment takes an important place in the letter (see 2:5-9; 6:5; 7:12; 8:6-13; 11:39-40; 12:18-24). On any score 2:10 must be a *crux interpretum* for the matter. When this verse is seen in parallel with 5:8-9; 7:27-28 and 12:2 it is clear that the perfection of the Son is linked with his suffering and consequent exaltation. That He has always been Son by divine nature is not in doubt (1:2), but because He has made purification for sins and He has sat down at the right hand of God, He has inherited a more excellent name than the angels, viz. “Son” (1:4-5). Indeed, He has “unimpeded access to God”, but this as exalted Son, having become the eschatological fulfilment of all that was promised in the Old Covenant. And this fulfilment is not for His own sake, but for the “many brethren” whom the Father is also bringing to glory in and through the work of the Son (2:10). Thus G. Hughes comments<sup>10</sup>,

Jesus stature as ‘perfected’ priest includes his capacity to secure the same status, proleptically, for those who follow him. This is a fundamental notion in the epistle, and includes the whole complex of terms in which Jesus is designated ‘leader’ (αρχηγος), ‘forerunner’ (προδρομος) and the ‘source of salvation’ (αυτιος σωτηρις). It is on this count, and this alone, that Christians can already be designated τελειοι: ‘Their perfection depends altogether...upon their relationship with the αγιαζων.’<sup>11</sup>

That the Old system could not bring the conscience of the worshiper to perfection is linked to the goal of the system itself. Its failure was not because the system was wrong,

---

<sup>5</sup> For a good overview of the research of the word group in Hebrews, see G. Hughes “Excursus 1: ‘Perfection’ in the Epistle” in *Hebrews and Hermeneutics*, SOCIETY FOR NEW TESTAMENT STUDIES MONOGRAPH SERIES, No. 36, (Cambridge, 1979) pp. 32-34

<sup>6</sup> P. T. Forsyth’s essay, “Christian Perfection” in *God the Holy Father* (The Saint Andrew Press, Edin. 1957), is still the best (and most lively) practical exposition of the subject available. In it he says, “Perfection is wholeness. In our perfection there is a permanent element of repentance....It is not the will of God in this life that we should be sinless, lest we find perfection apart from forgiveness.” p. 111f.

<sup>7</sup> F. F. Bruce, *op. cit.* p. 44

<sup>8</sup> The Westminster Theological Journal Vol. XXXIX pp. 60-71.

<sup>9</sup> Silva assumes that Bruce has based his interpretation on the Septuagintal use of *teleioun* in ceremonial contexts. He agrees that there is a cultic background to the term, and that such a background is reflected in Hebrews, as is particularly evidenced in the close linking of perfection and sanctification in such places as 2:10-11 and 10:14.

<sup>10</sup> Hughes, *op. cit.* p. 34

<sup>11</sup> The last sentence is a quote from E. Käsemann, *Das wandernde Gottesvolk* (Göttingen, 1961) p. 89.

### 'Conscience' in Hebrews

but because it was designed as “a shadow, anticipating the substance. The substance, therefore, far from opposing the shadow is its *fulfillment—this is perfection!*”<sup>12</sup> In the OT system there was the constant reminder that sin was never fully put away, and this very fact was prophetic of a better sacrifice to come (10:1-2). The OT saints could not know the wonderful freedom of this fulfilment for they lived in the time of the Shadow. The readers of the Epistle, however, have come to Substance which is Christ. In Him and through Him they have complete and unimpeded access to God, and thus perfection of conscience. The OT saints could not know perfection apart from them (11:40), however much they may have known peace with God. The fundamental conception, then, is in terms of ‘perfection’ of relationships.<sup>13</sup> In the New Covenant, and under the new High Priesthood of Christ the Sanctifier, conscience achieves its perfect end precisely because it is Christ who sanctifies it. The OT saints lived in anticipation of this day, with the repeated sacrifices bearing testimony to it, but “they did not receive what was promised” (11:39).

In all of this discussion we have not examined the notion or action of conscience *per se*. This task will be undertaken after we have seen the other passages in which it is used. For the moment we conclude that conscience finds its fulfilment in the Substance to which the Shadow points. The ritual and ablutions of the Old cultus were basically external regulations, that pointed to the need of something new. That something new was needed is implied by the inner nature of conscience. This point is amplified by the writer below.

**9:11-12** But when Christ appeared *as a high priest of the good things to come*<sup>i</sup>, *He entered through the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this creation; and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption.*

i). B, D\*, 1739, it<sup>d,e</sup> etc., have γενομενων while ↯, A, D<sup>c</sup> etc. have μελλοντων. The matter is difficult to decide because both variants are well supported. The problem is not one of great moment for our discussion, however. Whether they are the “good things that have come” or the “coming good things”, the redemption remains eternal.

In these verses the writer begins his contrast (δε). “when Christ appeared” (aorist) indicates that a new thing was begun in Him. He appeared as a “high priest (αρχιερευς) of the good things to come” (or “have come” as some MSS have). Whatever reading we adopt the point is simply that a new state of affairs has been inaugurated in Him. What, however, is “the greater and more perfect tabernacle”? It is described as one “not made with hands” i.e. it is “not of this creation”. It is a reference to the heavenly tabernacle

---

<sup>12</sup> Silva, *art. cit.* p. 68. His italics.

<sup>13</sup> G. Hughes, *op. cit.* p. 34

### ‘Conscience’ in Hebrews

referred to in 9:24 (cf. Acts 7:48). The picture emphasizes that the work of Christ was not simply hammered out on an earthly or “horizontal” plane. Rather it is eternal in its dimensions and thus is effective forever, and totally so. As the True High Priest, Christ has entered the True Holy Place, to which the earthly tabernacle pointed. What is the significance of His ministry there? In accord with the function of the earthly High Priests, who were types of Christ, He represents His people before God (cf. 6:20; 9:24), He blesses them from the right hand of the Majesty on High (cf. 7:1; 8:1), and He intercedes for them (cf. 7:24f.; 4:15f.). His people are therefore able to have confidence in their access to God in a way that was not possible before.

Thus He has entered into the true holy of holies, the very and actual presence of God, “not through (i.e. by virtue of) the blood of bulls and goats”, but “through (δία + gen.) His own blood”. Whereas their shed blood was the symbol, His shed blood is the reality to which theirs pointed. “The single sacrifice had eternal value, owing to his personality.”<sup>14</sup> *A fortiori*, His work has “obtained an eternal redemption”. The following verses explicate this statement.

**9:13-14 For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled, sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your<sup>i</sup> conscience from dead works to serve the living God?**

i) A, D\*, K, P, 451, 1739\* etc. have ημων, while ∟, Dc, 33, 81, 88, 104 etc. have υμων. Neither variant affects our discussion, so the reading of the NASB has been retained.

“The blood of bulls and goats” (cf. Ps. 50:13; Is. 1:11) serves as shorthand for the whole of the old cultus. For the ritual of the red heifer see Numb. 19:9f.<sup>15</sup>

Such sacrifices, says our writer, αλαζει προς της σαρκος καθαροτητα. That is, the cleansing related to ceremonial purity so that the worshiper could continue to have communion with God *via* the cultus. He takes as a “given” the need for bloody sacrifice, and that the sacrifice of Christ must be of the same type. Thus while the outward sacrifices of the Old cleansed in an outward way, the αιμα του Χριστου is able to cleanse the συνειδησις from νεκρων εργαων. That this is able to happen is linked with two things that are expressed in a parenthetic clause. Firstly Christ offered himself δια πνευματος αιωνιου, and secondly such was αμωμον τω θεω. Here we see the power and

---

<sup>14</sup> Moffatt, *op. cit.* p. 121.

<sup>15</sup> The reason for the mention of this ritual has been the occasion of no little debate. Does the seemingly superfluous mention of the rite here betray the background of the readers as members of the Dead Sea Sect? Or is there here simply an allusion to such passages as Is. 52:15? Whatever is the case, the writer’s fundamental point remains unchanged, for no matter what the background may be to the statement in the readers’ minds, the author’s point that the offering of Christ has made it null and void remains.

### 'Conscience' in Hebrews

value of his sacrifice. Christ's was an unblemished sacrifice, and this must mean in the moral sense in contrast to the physical sense of the Old (4:15; 7:26; I Pet. 2:22 cf. Lev. 22:20; Mal. 1:13f.), and the (self) offering of the sacrifice was made through the Spirit. Christ, who was both High Priest and victim, was also Son of God. The sacrifice of Himself on the cross was eternal, in contrast to the need for repeated temporal sacrifices under the old covenant. He was indeed the Servant of Isaiah, upon whom the Spirit rested (Is. 42:1; 61:1 cf. Mk. 1:10; Lk. 4:18 etc.), but He was (and is) also Son and Priest forever. "What is in the writer's mind", says Moffatt, "is that what Jesus did by dying can never be exhausted or transcended."<sup>16</sup> It is for this reason that He has been able to offer Himself εφ'αυτοῦ (v. 12).

Such a sacrifice as this, and only this sacrifice, is able to bring inward cleansing and to provide access to God freely. The cleansing and the access are integrally related. According to the writer the συνειδησις must be cleansed from νεκρων εργαων. Conscience, or rather the impurity of such, is here seen to be the real barrier to worship. At core, worship is a moral activity, not a ceremonial one. The OT system held this ever before the congregation of Israel, and the whole system of the Old Covenant pointed to the need of definitive cleansing. Such cleansing comes only through Christ's blood. What are the "dead works"? The phrase appears in 6:1 also, but nowhere else in the NT. What is clear is that the dead works are not the outward works of ceremonial worship, but something that attaches to the inward state of the worshiper. The term "presents briefly and suggestively...the teaching of Scripture regarding the state of unregenerate man and his activities."<sup>17</sup> There are at least three reasons why the works are "dead". They proceed from those who are themselves dead (Eph. 2:1 etc); they are those which reap a harvest of death (cf. Rom. 6:21; Gal. 5:19ff.); and they end in judgement (cf. Rom. 6:21ff.; Phil. 3:19; Rev. 21:8).<sup>18</sup> These things apply equally to Jewish or Gentile contexts. Says Calvin, "every sin is a dead work, either because it works death or because it arises from the spiritual death of the soul".<sup>19</sup>

The cleansing of Christ has the object of freeing the worshiper to "serve the living God". The sacerdotal term is applied freely to the one who is cleansed. Hughes comments, "What begins with God also ends with God. It does not end with man. Moreover, the work of God, ever dynamic as it is, does not lead to a static result—a motionless state, as it were, of purgation. God's work is, and must be, dynamic in its effect, that of dynamic service."<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> Moffatt, *op. cit.* p. 124.

<sup>17</sup> P. Hughes, *op. cit.* p. 197.

<sup>18</sup> So I. Pennicook, *The Shadow and the Substance*, (NCPI, Blackwood, 1985) p. 101f.

<sup>19</sup> *Hebrews and I & II Peter* in CALVIN'S NEW TESTAMENT COMMENTARIES, (Eedmmans, Grand Rapids 1963) p. 72.

<sup>20</sup> P. Hughes, *op. cit.* p. 362 cf. Calvin, "We are not cleansed by Christ so that we can immerse ourselves continually in fresh dirt, but in order that our purity may serve the glory of God." p. 122.

## ‘Conscience’ in Hebrews

The reference to Him as the “living God” (cf. 3:12; 10:31; 12:22; Matt. 16:16) is not to be overlooked. How can He who is living be served by those who have consciences full of dead works? There is an implicit, yet powerful contrast here. The conscience, which had once been full of dead works, is now free to serve God truly. To be sure, the writer states that it is the worshiper, not the conscience who is freed to serve the living God, but the point remains that the worshiper was not free to do so prior to the coming of Christ precisely because of the bondage of his conscience. Later we read of a “good conscience” (13:18). Do we not see the foretaste of it here? The good conscience is no longer “evil” (10:22) because it has been freed to find its true vocation in service of the living God who has cleansed it.

### §2. Hebrews 10:1-4

**10:1-4** For the Law, since it has *only* a shadow of the good things to come *and* not the very form of things, can never by the same sacrifices year by year, which they offer continually, make perfect those who draw near. Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, because the worshippers, having once been cleansed, would no longer, have had a consciousness of sins? But in those *sacrifices* there is a reminder of sins year by year. For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

i) p<sup>46</sup>, D<sup>\*.c</sup>, H, K, Ψ<sup>vid</sup>, 88, 181 etc. have δυνάται, while ⚭, A, C, Db, P, 33, 81, 104 etc. have δυνάται. The third person sing. makes better sense and has been retained.

This “is the author’s final verdict on the Levitical cultus”.<sup>21</sup> The νόμος, here, is the Law in its specifically ceremonial aspect. By virtue of its position as σκίον it cannot “make perfect those who draw near”. Such a task it could never do (note the emphatic position of δυνάται) by virtue of its place in the economy of God. Such could only be done in the time of fulfilment.

This must be self evident, argues the writer, for if the νόμος achieved lasting and final access to God, why were not the sacrifices stopped? So long as they continued the worshipers had a συνειδησις αμαρτιων. If they had indeed been cleansed, the worshipers would not have had such a συνειδησις. The term here thus indicates an inward consciousness of the fact of sin and the need for forgiveness, and this was continually reinforced by the repeated sacrifices which were a αναμνησις αμαρτιων. There is an implicit relationship between the συνειδησις αμαρτιων and the νόμος. The voice of conscience is linked with the Law, for in the OT cultus the conscience was “Law

---

<sup>21</sup> Moffatt, *op. cit.* p. 135.

### 'Conscience' in Hebrews

informed" i.e. the cultus itself ever held the transgression of the Law before the worshipper. By implication where there is the once for all sacrifice of Christ, and therefore total cleansing of sin, there is no longer a συνειδησις αμαρτιων. Rather the conscience is free to serve God truly, without continual reference to sin. What is αδυνατον for the blood of bulls and goats is possible with the blood of the Son.

### §3. Hebrews 10:19-22

**10:19-22** Since therefore, brethren, we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which he inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a sincere heart and full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled *clean* from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

The writer draws together the force of his arguments in order to both encourage (10:23-25) and warn (10:26-31) his readers.

In view of the finality of the work of Christ's shed blood we have παρρησια to enter τα αγια (cf. II Pet. 1:11). The confidence is in and through Christ, not the worshiper. This indeed, is a προσφατον και ζωσαν οδον, in contrast to the old way, which did nothing to ultimately bring life. In sum, this new and living way is the σαρκος of Christ which ushers the worshiper into the very presence of God within the veil (cf. 6:18). Under the Old Covenant,

the very existence of the veil hanging between the outer and inner sanctuary was interpreted as proof that access to God's presence was as yet imperfectly realized. The high priest carried once a year inside the veil the blood of victims slain outside it; that was all. Jesus, on the other hand, sheds his own blood as a perfect sacrifice, and thus wins entrance for us into the presence of God. Only, instead of saying that his sacrificial death meant the rearing of the veil...he allegorizes the veil here as the flesh of Christ; this had to be rent before his blood could be shed, which enabled him to enter and open God's presence for the people.<sup>22</sup>

Σαρκος αυτου, is thus an abbreviated term for the totality of Christ's sacrifice, which the writer has described earlier in his discussion.

This Christ is a ιερεα μεγαν επι τον οικον του θεου. This one phrase sums up the arguments of both Christ's superiority to Aaron and Moses. As priest, He is the representative of His people, and as head (Son) over the house (cf. 3:1ff.) He controls access to it, so the readers' confidence in Him is well placed.

---

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, p. 143.

### ‘Conscience’ in Hebrews

By virtue of His great position and ministry there is great encouragement to “draw near” in contrast to the imperfection of the Law (cf. 7:19:10:1). Such is to be done with a *ἀληθινῆς καρδίας ἐν πληροφορίᾳ πίστεως*. What do these terms mean?

*καρδία* in the OT characteristically means the centre of spiritual, intellectual, and emotive life.<sup>23</sup> It deals with “the total orientation, direction, concentration of man, his depth dimension, from which his full human existence is directed and formed.”<sup>24</sup> There is no reason to assume a different background for our author than this. Five of the eleven uses of the term occur in OT quotations, and those times in which the writer does use the term in his own work are thoroughly congruent with the OT passages. To have a true heart is therefore to have an undivided heart towards God, to have “no reserve of feeling”<sup>25</sup> towards Him. It is thus equivalent to having a whole heart toward God, and this indeed is the point of the phrase as it appears in Is. 38:3 (LXX). In the light of this the “full assurance of faith” must be nothing less than a whole hearted, unwavering trust. In the context of the writer’s argument, this trust is first and foremost in the totality of Christ’s cleansing action, and His utter trustworthiness as Priest over the house of God. The perfect passive participle (*περαντισμενοι*) makes this plain. The faith and the cleansing go hand in hand. One can have full confidence to draw near because cleansing has been effected, the barrier of sin has been removed.

Such cleansing is of the *καρδία*, the implication being that before such cleansing was effected the pollution of the *καρδία* was the key reason not to draw near. Moreover, the *καρδία* is said to be cleansed *ἀπο συνειδησεως πονηρας*. From what we have seen above we conclude that the conscience is “evil” in that it has knowledge of sin, and this continually. There is an accusing function implicit in the description—the conscience bearing witness to the heart that it is not fit to approach God. Now, however, since the cleansing has come, the conscience is no longer evil, and, by implication, no longer is the heart. In 3:12 the writer speaks of an “evil, unbelieving heart” while in 4:12 he asserts that the Word is able to judge “the thoughts and intentions of the heart”. In 13:9, however, he says that it is “good for the heart to be strengthened by grace”. In sum, then, the heart and the conscience are not identical, but they are closely related. Both are internal, and therefore can only be cleansed by the eternal action of Christ, not by outward forms of observance. The one refers to the set of a person’s life, their innermost being, while the other refers to

---

<sup>23</sup> D. G. Burke, “Heart” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Vol. II p. 651. Thus the heart may be glad (Ex. 4:14; Deut. 28:47), grieved (Gen. 4:30; I Sam. 2:33), bowed down (Ps. 107:12), dull (Lam. 3:65) full of fear (Deut. 28:16; Ps. 27:3) or full of courage (II Chron. 17:6; Ps. 27:14; Jer. 4:9). It is the centre of volition (Deut. 8:2; I Sam. 2:35; II Sam. 7:3; I Kings 8:17 etc.) and contains thoughts and ideas (I Chron. 29:18) so that people are said to “purpose” or “reason” in their hearts (Gen. 24:45; Dt. 7:17; I Sam. 1:13 etc.). It is the seat of ethical and moral thought (II Sam. 24:5 cf. I Sam. 25:31; II Kings 22:19; II Chron. 34:27; Os. 24:4; 73:1) and thus the term approximates to our term “conscience”.

<sup>24</sup> G. C. Berkouwer, *Man the Image of God*, (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1962) p. 203.

<sup>25</sup> B. F. Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, (Macmillan and Co., Lond., 1914) p. 324.

### ‘Conscience’ in Hebrews

that which informs the innermost being. With the cleansing of Christ comes a new heart, in accord with Ezk. 36:25, and a re-directed conscience. “Because the blood of Jesus has provided for the cleansing of conscience [the] readers are given the assurance that they live continually in fellowship with God.”<sup>26</sup> Jeremaiah’s prophecy of a new heart is not free standing. It is only possible through and under a new covenant. Jesus Christ is the mediator of that new covenant (9:15f.), and in His cleansing He “consecrates his people to God in the relationship of heart-obedience envisaged by Jeremaiah”<sup>27</sup>.

Doubtless all of this is a matter of faith, and there is need for constant encouragement in it. Thus the writer goes on to exhort his readers to “hold fast the confession of our hope”, “to stimulate one another with love and good deeds”, to not forsake the common assembly and to “encourage one another” (10:23-25). However, it is plain that a new situation is now extant, and in this new situation, conscience is not understood negatively.

#### **§4. Hebrews 13:18**

**13:18 Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a good conscience, desiring to conduct ourselves honourably in all things.**

The writer has finished his main argument, and in this chapter he is giving his concluding pieces of pastoral advice, personal information and blessings. In this context we have our final reference to *συνειδησις*.

The description of the conscience as *καλη* stands in sharp contrast to the evil conscience of 10:22. Here the conscience is good because, having been cleansed, it has not a consciousness of evil, but of a ministry well discharged (cf. II Cor. 2:12, 6:3) i.e. despite the seemingly severe tone of the letter in some places, the writer has his readers’ welfare at heart. The reference point for conscience, then, is not the failure of the Law to deal with sin, but the positive action of love. The conscience is good because the writer has the welfare of the other in mind. The role of conscience as the judge of action is plain, but here the judgement is not one of condemnation. Indeed, it is a perfected conscience, for it has been freed by Christ.

---

<sup>26</sup> G. S. Selby, “The Meaning and Function of *Suneidésis* in Hebrews 9 and 10” in *Restoration Quarterly*, 28, No. 3 p153.

<sup>27</sup> D. Perterson, “The Prophecy of the New Covenant in the Argument of Hebrews” in *The Reformed Theological Review*, Vol. ?? p. 81

## Conclusions

Hebrews is a book in which the concept of conscience figures prominently. Though the term itself is not a frequent one in the letter, in all but its last occurrence it appears at the heart of the writer’s argument. Even in its last occurrence it is still significant, for it betrays a new (or better, re-newed) conscience which stands in contrast to the evil conscience seen earlier in the letter. Conscience has a close relationship to the heart, but it is distinct from it, and in some ways superior to it, for it has a judging function over the heart. Because of its very nature the conscience cannot be cleansed by outward ritual, but only by the efficacious self-sacrifice made once for all by Christ. The writer has not given us a systematized theory of the atonement, but such an atonement is none the less real and effective in his thinking. Says Dale, “The conscience bows before the cross and is at peace, even when the intellect is baffled and defeated in the attempt to construct a theory of the atonement.”<sup>28</sup>

Under the New Covenant conscience has been freed from the old law which governed it to the liberty of grace. The old system continually reminded the conscience of sin, now the one sacrifice of Christ assures the conscience of the freedom of forgiveness.<sup>29</sup> The conscience is now “grace informed” rather than “law informed”. There is no accusation, for there is nothing left of which to accuse the believer. Faith must continually rise to see this is so, and such faith is in the hearing of the word. There should be no forsaking of assembling together therefore, but a continual encouragement to hear the word of grace. This effective sacrifice of the Son, and His eternal Priesthood, enables the believer “to serve the living and true God” with confidence and in hope.



---

<sup>28</sup> R. W. Dale, *The Jewish Temple and the Christian Church*, (Hodder and Stoughton, Lond., 1872) p.230

<sup>29</sup> In this regard Col. 2:13f. expresses that which the writer of Hebrews has been saying and should be examined.