

Introduction

HEBREWS

IVP New Testament Commentary Series

by Ray C. Stedman

Dr. E. M. Blaiklock, a longtime professor of classics at the University of New Zealand and a noted biblical historian, made the startling statement: "Of all the centuries, the twentieth is most like the first." If that is true, it is evident that twentieth-century Christians should thoroughly understand first-century Christianity. All the New Testament books help us in this regard, but perhaps none so practically as Acts and Hebrews. Preeminently in these two books appear flesh-and-blood believers struggling to overcome the stranglehold of past traditions and adjust to the fresh movements of God in their fast-changing world. Readers of Hebrews in the twentieth century (and the twenty-first) will identify quickly with the first recipients of this letter when they see how they struggled to hold on to their faith in Jesus in the midst of growing world chaos and powerful cultural pressures to return to a more comfortable past.

It seems to me that issues usually handled in an introduction, such as authorship, place of origin, identity and locality of the readers, canonical acceptance, and so forth are best dealt with after, rather than before, the epistle has been studied. Let the letter speak for itself first, and then deal with the questions which reading the letter naturally raise. Presumably, interest in such matters is much higher then, and judgment on the weight of arguments is more precise. Hence my preference would be to put this introduction at the close of the commentary. But some readers may be helped by background information before the letter is read. In deference, then, to long-standing custom this introduction will seek to deal now with the questions of authorship, reader identity and so forth.

It was a standing joke at the seminary I attended for students to ask one another: "Who wrote the epistle of Paul to the Hebrews?" It was admittedly weak humor---on a par with "Who is buried in Grant's Tomb?" But it served to raise a primary question about Hebrews: who actually wrote this brilliant treatise on the person and work of Christ that has been a part of our New Testament from the beginning?

Even the ancient church was uncertain about the authorship of Hebrews. It is not an anonymous letter, since its original recipients dearly knew the writer, but nowhere does he divulge his name. Tertullian (d. 225) reported that current tradition held that Barnabas was the author. Clement of Alexandria (d. 215) thought Paul had written it in Hebrew and Luke had translated it, though the Greek of Hebrews seems too elegant to be a translation. Clement's successor, Origen (d. 254), wrote, "Men of old time have handed it down as Paul's, but who wrote the Epistle God only knows certainly." As we shall see in the commentary the internal evidence of Hebrews argues strongly against Paul's authorship (2:3), but the theology and thinking of Paul are everywhere in the letter. This suggests some close associate of Paul who reflects Paul's theology but brings his own gifts of eloquence and thorough knowledge of Judaism to the writing of this letter.

Four candidates for authorship come to mind: Barnabas, Silas, Luke and Apollos. The first three traveled with Paul extensively and were godly men, well known to many throughout the early church. But neither Barnabas nor Silas appears in the New Testament as capable of writing such a treatise as Hebrews. Barnabas wavered theologically at Antioch under the pressure of Judaists (Gal 2:13) and is seen in Acts as a warm, loving encourager of many, but not as a spokesman or teacher (Acts 14:12). Little is known of Silas, but such silence does not argue well for him being the author of such an outstanding epistle, and the suggestion that he is the author of the letter has gained little support. Luke also has been proposed by Calvin and Delitzsch, and though he surely knew Paul's thinking well, he too does not appear in Scripture as a doctrinal teacher or pastor but rather as a historian. The possibility that he was a Gentile would not explain the intimate knowledge of

Judaism which the writer of Hebrews possessed.

That leaves Apollos as the most likely author. He knew Paul well, having taught with him at Corinth. Luke, in Acts 18:24, calls him "mighty in the Scriptures," and his reputation in the church was that of an eloquent orator, well able to marshal arguments in an orderly fashion, just as the writer of Hebrews does. Further, he was a Jew from Alexandria, where the Septuagint originated and was widely employed, and where the religious philosopher Philo had lived and taught. As we shall see, Hebrews quotes the Septuagint without exception, and several scholars have seen the influence of Philo's thought upon some of the ideas presented in the letter (see Spicq 1952). Luther felt that Apollos wrote Hebrews, as do more modern scholars such as Manson, Spicq, Alford, Moulton, Farrar and A. T. Robertson. One argument against Apollos is that the Alexandrian church never credits him with authorship. Even though philosophical and exegetical evidence points to an Alexandrian author, doubt still lingers about Apollos being the one. The question remains open for debate and will probably never be settled till the writer himself in glory makes it certain.

The identity of the recipients of this letter is also difficult to determine precisely. The title "To the Hebrews" was not a part of the Greek text, and certain modern commentators (James Moffat, E. F. Scott, Gerhardus Vos) have even concluded that the letter is addressed to Gentiles. But the constant comparison between Judaism and Christianity found in the letter strongly argues against this. There is also no reference to pagan practices or philosophies which were widespread in the Roman world.

But if the readers were Jewish Christians, where and when did they live? Some expositors favor Palestine and even Jerusalem, but the internal evidence does not support this. The writer admits in 12:4 that they had not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood. This could not be said of Christians in Jerusalem or Palestine, as Acts makes clear. Their obvious interest in and respect for the office of high priest and for the temple, though patently to be expected of Palestinians of Jewish background, would also be characteristic of Jews in the diaspora. The enormous number of pilgrims to Jerusalem during high holy days made this abundantly evident.

The links with Paul's letter to the Colossians, which we will note at several points in our commentary, indicate the readers may be a colony of Jewish Christians in the Lycus valley of provincial Asia. Their geographical nearness to Ephesus would support extensive contact with Apollos and Timothy and help explain the references in Hebrews to Sabbath observance, new moon festivals, food restrictions and especially the worship of angels, which are also treated in Colossians.

Arguments that the readers of Hebrews lived in Rome are based on extensive quotations of the letter by Clement of Rome and the reference of the writer to "those from Italy" in 13:24. As we shall see, the latter reference is so ambiguously put that it can refer to any group of Italian Christians found living anywhere in the empire. Priscilla and Aquila could be a case in point for they are seen in Rome, in Corinth and in Ephesus within the New Testament records. Incidentally, the use of a *masculine* participle referring to the author, in 11:32, rules out Priscilla as a possible author of the letter as a few scholars have proposed. The quotations from Clement merely show that a copy of Hebrews reached him soon after it was written, but the slowness of the churches of the West to accept the epistle as genuine would argue against a Roman origin.

Wherever the readers lived it is clear that they were largely second generation Christians; their first leaders had already passed away (13:7). They had professed Christ for some time (5:12) and had once shown great evidences of sturdy faith (10:32-34). But when the letter was written they had reached a state of discouragement and spiritual lethargy. Some had given up meeting with other believers (10:25); many found increasing opposition to their faith in Jesus among their Jewish families and friends, while they also faced sharpening hostility from gentile authorities and citizens.

These conditions indicate a date for the letter toward the close of the sixties of the first century, probably in A. D. 67 or 68. The temple was still standing in Jerusalem, and Jewish rituals were performed there as they had been for centuries. But evidence was increasing that Romans and Jews were headed for a bloody clash. The long-expected return of Jesus to set things aright seemed delayed beyond endurance. Faced with these difficulties some were wavering and wondering if perhaps they had made a terrible mistake; perhaps Jesus was not the Son of God as they had been taught but was only a creature, though perhaps the highest of the angels. He certainly was not what the apostles had claimed him to be. Should they continue to follow the uncertain

hope of seeing again one who may have been at best an archangel, or at worst, an impostor? (1)

Certainly such doubts might shake true Christians for a while, and the uncertainty raised by these questions would almost surely turn mere professors away from Christ back to their old faith. It must be made apparent to both that there can be no compromise---it is one or the other, Christ or judgment! So, tenderly, lovingly, with great pastoral concern and care, the writer of Hebrews brings his readers face to face with the central issue: Is Jesus the Son of God or is he not? Is he the great Antitype of all Jewish ritual and sacrifice and the high-priestly Mediator of the new covenant whom the prophets had predicted? Or is he only a man? The choice is plainly stated in 10:39: "But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved."

Despite the uncertainties that still linger around aspects of the epistle, there is little doubt of its early acceptance within the canon of Scripture. Clement of Rome used it in writing to the Corinthians within the first century. The rest of the West was slower in receiving it, perhaps due to its use by the Montanists who were in disfavor as a heretical group. It was not till late in the fourth century that Western churches gave it full acceptance. The Eastern churches had viewed it early as Pauline and received it readily. Polycarp and Justin Martyr both allude to it in their writings, and Irenaeus and Hippolytus seem acquainted with it, though they denied Paul's authorship. In Reformation times, Luther had some misgivings about its content but Calvin regarded it highly, saying, "There is, indeed, no book in Holy Scripture which speaks so clearly of the priesthood of Christ, which so highly exalts the virtue and dignity of that only true sacrifice which He offered by His death, which so abundantly deals with the use of ceremonies as well as their abrogation, and, in a word, so fully explains that Christ is the end of the Law" (Bruce 1964:xlvi).

There are certain striking emphases in Hebrews which mark its uniqueness in the canon of Scripture. No other New Testament book deals as fully as Hebrews with the present priesthood of Jesus. No other book traces both the comparisons and contrasts of that Melchizedek priesthood with the ancient Aaronic or Levitical priesthood. None other urges believers with such passion and confidence to call upon their great high priest for help in daily pressures and trials.

No other letter focuses as fully on the present greatness of Christ as Hebrews, except for the book of Revelation. Passages in Paul, notably in Ephesians and Colossians, briefly extol his exaltation "far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come" (Eph 1:21), but only in Hebrews is this developed to contrast with the great human leaders of the past (Abraham, Moses, Aaron, Joshua) as well as angelic authorities, leaving Jesus as alone occupying the place of ultimate authority in the universe. He shares the very throne of God by right and conquest.

There is also a unique eschatological orientation to Hebrews. Except for Revelation, no other book describes a city of God coming to earth and answering the petition of the Lord's Prayer, "thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Abraham was the first to see it approach, and Hebrews traces that hope through the centuries by listing the lives of many heroes and heroines of faith (Heb 11), ending with the time of his readers (including us) who "are looking for the city that is to come" (Heb 13:14). That coming city is linked here with "the age to come" which is not put under the authority of angels but of men who share with the Son of Man dominion over all the earth (Heb 2:5-10). In their redeemed spirits believers already live in that city (Heb 12:22-24), but they await its physical appearance upon the earth, as promised to Abraham long before.

Without this epistle in our Bibles today, the people of God would be greatly impoverished. Modern readers may lack the Jewish background which the original recipients possessed, yet the letter forces all Christians of any age to face certain issues. Do we believe that Jesus is God the Son, infinitely higher than any angel, who is both the creator of all things and the final arbiter of all human events? Are we trusting in his death on the cross and his subsequent bodily resurrection as the full and complete ground of our salvation, or are we still looking to some act by us or some ritual or sacrament performed for us to bring us safely to heaven? Do we habitually turn to Jesus as our great high priest, to find inner strengthening to face pressures, resist temptations, conquer guilt, or achieve self-control in daily situations? Are we permitting our cultural context to lure us into practices or deeds that are inconsistent with the new life we have been given in Christ? Do we count it a high privilege to take up our cross daily and glory in bearing his reproach in the midst of a confused

and immoral world? Is the expectation of the return of Jesus as King over the whole earth a bright and shining reality to us, frequently renewing our vision and outlook? Do we recognize the loving hand of God upon us in the midst of hardships, disappointments and trials, as strengthening us and also giving us opportunity to display his character to those who are near us?

These are the concerns of the writer of Hebrews These are the "things that accompany salvation" to which he refers in Hebrews 6:9 They must all become our daily concern if we are to lay full hold of the "better things" which Jesus' birth in Bethlehem's manger introduced The central thrust of this great letter is summed up in the words of an old hymn:

Rise up, O Church of God
Have done with lesser things;
Give heart and mind and soul and strength
To serve the King of kings.

NOTES:

1. David Gooding in "An Unshakeable Kingdom" captures well the line of rabbinic persuasion that former Jews would have faced when their Christian faith began to waver:

To think that you---you who as Jews have heard the oneness of God proclaimed ten thousand times in your home, in the synagogue, in the temple, ever since you were childrento think that you could be taken in by this fanatical sect who worship the man Jesus as if he were God!

And who are you to say that our high priest and Sanhedrin were wrong to have Jesus crucified? . . . Just because you have heard stories of the miracles Jesus is supposed to done and have been impressed by his popular religious propaganda, you imagine he must have been more than human. But our high priest and rabbis knew what they were doing. They saw through his deceptions and had the courage to do what the Bible commands to be done with such deceivershave him executed.

So be sensible. Stop imagining you know better than your rabbis. Show some respect and gratitude to your father and mother for your upbringing. Come back to the faith of your fathers, and don't ruin your lives and break your parents' heart and disgrace your family by abandoning everything you were brought up to believe by running off with this fanatical sect.

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- [Text of Hebrews: New International Version](#)
 - [Outline of Hebrews](#)

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