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978-0-521-35748-7 - The Theology of the Letter to the Hebrews

Barnabas Lindars

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## CHAPTER I

*The historical setting of Hebrews*

## INTRODUCTION

The author of Hebrews ranks with Paul and the Fourth Evangelist as one of the three great theologians of the New Testament. In each case we can see the emergence of a distinctively Christian theology in response to the gospel of Jesus Christ. So in Hebrews we see Christian theology in the making, as the writer (to whom I shall refer to as Hebrews) builds up his argument on the meaning of Christ's death. We share in a creative experience because Hebrews has seized ideas not previously exploited.

Two ideas are unique in the New Testament. The priesthood of Jesus after the order of Melchizedek is entirely new, and adds a fresh dimension to the development of christology. There is no evidence that this had been applied to Jesus previously.<sup>1</sup> We shall see that it was wrung from Hebrews by the special needs of the problem to which the letter is addressed. Similarly his use of the ceremonial of the Day of Atonement to expound the sacrificial death of Jesus goes beyond any previous expositions of the faith that 'Christ died for our sins' (1 Cor. 15.3). Again it arises directly from the particular character of the pressing problem which confronts Hebrews.

<sup>1</sup> It has been suggested that the idea is mentioned in 2.17 as something that is familiar to the readers. But here it is only a metaphor, which the author uses to prepare the ground for his statement that Jesus really is a high priest in 5.1–10. It has also been argued that 5.1–10 is based on an earlier christological hymn, but this is sheer speculation. The whole passage is thoroughly in the style of Hebrews and requires the context of the larger argument of the epistle.

Hebrews belongs to a creative phase in the early history of Christianity. It is a time when the church is moving into new places and different cultural situations. The simple gospel of the primitive kerygma raises questions not previously posed, and answers have to be found for them. The people addressed in Hebrews cannot be identified with any of the main groups of Christians known to us in the New Testament. They are not Pauline Christians and they are not Johannine Christians, and they do not belong to the mother church in Jerusalem. In Hebrews we have a glimpse into a segment of earliest Christianity unknown from other sources.

Theological argument is prominent in Hebrews, and so it is often held to be a theological treatise. But this is a misleading description, because it is really a practical response to an urgent situation. The readers are on the verge of taking action which Hebrews regards as nothing less than denial of the Christian faith. His object is to persuade them to change their minds and desist from this disastrous course. The theology is the argument which he develops to achieve his object. Hebrews, even more than Romans, is a sustained argument, and the theology is liable to be misrepresented if it is detached from the argument.

This practical purpose explains the rhetorical character of Hebrews. The Greek style of the author is the most accomplished in the New Testament. He has evidently had the benefit of some measure of Greek education, like Paul, and that means some training in the art of rhetoric. In this letter he uses all the resources at his disposal to press home his point. Rhetoric is the art of persuasion, and Hebrews is a work of persuasion from start to finish.

Unfortunately the argument of Hebrews is not easily grasped. Many readers are baffled by it. It is constantly interrupted by digressions and moral exhortations. These sometimes display an appalling rigorism, which has caused misery to readers of a tender conscience all through the centuries. When the main argument is resumed the reader hopes to follow it better, but soon gets lost once more.

A more serious difficulty is that the whole argument has an

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alien character from a modern point of view. There are constant quotations from Scripture, but the method of using it is difficult for modern people to appreciate. The preoccupation with the details of ancient laws of sacrifice is liable to make the reader feel out of sympathy with the author. In any case it belongs to a world view which is very different from our own. The connection with the death of Jesus often seems artificial. In general the argument seems to belong to an enclosed world of meaning which is archaic and not immediately accessible to us today.

At the same time every reader is likely to feel the writer's rhetorical power. The opening chapter, with its measured phrases and balanced clauses, describing Jesus as the culmination of the prophetic revelation and raised to the rank of divine Sonship above the angels, is enormously impressive. The recurring contrast between the old sacrifices and the permanent efficacy of the death of Jesus constantly introduces memorable and inspiring statements. The impact of the great 'faith' chapter 11, culminating in the stirring exhortation of 12.1-2, is irresistible. The beautiful blessing at the end, in which Hebrews invokes 'the God of peace, who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus Christ, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant' (13.20), is much used in modern liturgies for the blessing of the congregation. These examples at once illustrate the richness of Hebrews in theological ideas and biblical allusions and his capacity to appeal to the emotions of the readers.

The task before us is to seize the distinctive features of the theology of Hebrews and to see how it relates to the theology of the New Testament as a whole and what it has to say to us today. Because of the close connection between the theology and the practical purpose of the letter we shall have to keep the argument constantly in view. This means that we must first try to reconstruct the historical situation which has provoked the writing of this remarkable letter.

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## THE SITUATION OF THE READERS

The traditional view is that Hebrews is written to a group of Jewish converts who are in danger of relapsing into Judaism. They have lost their original fervour and hanker after the temple worship with its splendid ceremonial and miss the security of the traditions of their Jewish past. The aim of the letter is to persuade them to remain in the church with renewed confidence in the Christian confession of faith.<sup>2</sup>

This view still has its supporters today, and a fresh, and I hope more convincing, version of it is given below and forms the basis of interpretation for our study of the theology of Hebrews. Some of the more recent presentations of it strain credulity by bringing in speculative reconstructions based on supposed links with other parts of the New Testament. Thus Spicq, observing the Jewish Hellenistic character of Hebrews, connects it with the group around Stephen (Acts 6–7). This is fine as far as it goes. But Spicq then suggests that the preoccupation with sacrificial ceremonial points specifically to the ‘great crowd of priests’ who ‘became obedient to the faith’ mentioned in the same context (Acts 6.7) as the addressees. He assumes that they are exiled from Jerusalem, and long to return to their old life and to minister once more in the temple. He disregards the fact that Hebrews never once suggests that the readers might themselves have officiated in the temple. In fact Hebrews always refers to the tent, or tabernacle, in the wilderness, as described in Exodus and Leviticus, and what he has to say is theoretical and not related directly to the experience of the readers.<sup>3</sup>

The theory of Montefiore also gets into difficulties because of his identification of the author.<sup>4</sup> Following a suggestion of Luther, he ascribes the letter to Apollos, the Jew from Alexan-

<sup>2</sup> See the careful argument for this position in F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, New London Commentary (London, 1965), pp. xxiii–xxx.

<sup>3</sup> Spicq, *L'Épître aux Hébreux* (2 vols., Paris, 1952, reprinted in Sources bibliques, Paris, 1977), I, pp. 226–31. Spicq later modified this view by assuming that the addressees were drawn from the predominantly priestly Essenes (‘L'Épître aux Hébreux: Apollos, Jean-Baptiste, les Hellénistes et Qumran’, *RQ*, 1 (1958–9), 365ff.).

<sup>4</sup> H. W. Montefiore, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, Black's NT Commentaries (London, 1964), pp. 9–29.

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dria who was converted at Corinth (Acts 18.24–8; 1 Cor. 1.12; 3.4–6, etc.). He imagines that Apollos is writing to Jewish converts at Corinth, who are under pressure from the local Jews to relapse, but at the same time are deeply opposed to Paul's championship of the Gentiles. It is so difficult to relate Hebrews to what we know of the situation at Corinth from Paul's letters that Montefiore has to date Hebrews to the time before 1 Corinthians was written. It is then difficult to explain what effect it might have had on the situation that Paul actually had to deal with. In any case Hebrews shows no sign of opposition to Paul.

A common feature of these views is the assumption that the readers, if they return to Judaism, would be able to participate in the worship of the temple at Jerusalem, or at least be associated with it by paying the temple tax and by occasional pilgrimages, as was common among Jews of the Dispersion. This requires a date before AD 70, when the temple was destroyed and the sacrificial system ceased. But Hebrews never refers to the temple, as just pointed out, and the theoretical way in which he speaks about the tent and its cultus has suggested that the letter was written after the destruction, perhaps late in the century. It cannot have been written later than 90–95, because it is quoted by Clement of Rome in his letter to the Corinthians, generally dated about 96. Most theories of the later date make little attempt to relate the emphasis on the details of sacrifice to the situation of the readers. Some even think that the readers are Gentile Christians, who have a deep interest in the Jewish Scriptures, and need to understand the Christian gospel in relation to them more accurately.<sup>5</sup> This is then claimed to be part of a general slackness and loss of fervour among the readers, which is the reason for the bracing exhortations which so often interrupt the argument. More will be said about these theories in a later section. They are unsatisfactory, because they cannot account for the urgency and anxiety which characterise the letter from end to end.

A recent exception is the theory of Schmithals, who connects

<sup>5</sup> Notably Moffatt and Windisch; cf. Bruce, p. xxv.

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the writing of Hebrews with the growing estrangement between church and synagogue in the period after the fall of Jerusalem, culminating in the exclusion of Gentile Christians (and Jewish Christians too).<sup>6</sup> He argues that this would deprive Christians of the official protection given to Jews by the Romans at the same time as making them endure continuing Jewish hostility. Hebrews thus aims to give them fresh confidence in their isolated and vulnerable situation by showing that their Christian profession fulfils all that they have valued in the scriptural tradition of Judaism and points the way forward to a more perfect following of Christ. The chief problem with this attractive reconstruction is that, though it allows for a hankering after Judaism, return to active association with Judaism is no longer a live option. We thus miss the sense that Hebrews is extremely anxious to dissuade the readers from taking what he regards as a disastrous course of action.

The key to a more satisfactory reconstruction of the situation is provided by careful observation of the rhetorical structure of Hebrews.<sup>7</sup> As the identity of the author and of his readers, the place of writing and the date are all unknown, we are completely dependent on internal evidence. Fortunately a good deal of information can be gleaned from chapter 13.

In the first place it is clear from this chapter that Hebrews is definitely a *letter*. This is often denied, because there is no epistolary opening at the beginning.<sup>8</sup> It is then regarded as a homily or treatise. But the ending (13.22–5) is that of a letter. Some scholars take this concluding section to be an interpolation aimed at bringing Hebrews into line with the tradition of Paul's letters (which would also account for the mention of Timothy in 13.23). But it is already clear from 13.19 that the author writes from a distance. Hence Buchanan even removes

<sup>6</sup> See W. Schmithals, *Neues Testament und Gnosis* (Darmstadt, 1984), pp. 138ff., summarised in R. McL. Wilson, *Hebrews*, New Century Bible (Basingstoke and Grand Rapids, 1987), p. 14.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. B. Lindars, 'The Rhetorical Structure of Hebrews', *NTS*, 35 (1989), 382–406.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. J. Swetnam, 'On the Literary Genre of the "Epistle" to the Hebrews', *NovT*, 11 (1969), 261–9.

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the whole of chapter 13 as a later addition.<sup>9</sup> But it has far too many links with the body of the letter for this to be plausible. We must conclude that Hebrews is written as an address to be read at the Christian assembly, finishing with the blessing in 13.20–1. It has been written by an amanuensis, but the author has added a final appeal and greetings in his own hand before sending it off. It thus functions as a letter in much the same way as Paul's letter to the Romans. The author himself actually calls it a 'word of exhortation' (13.22). But the point is that Hebrews embodies his address to these people from afar.

Next we should notice that he expresses the anxiety which he feels about the reception of the letter in 13.22 by making an appeal in his own hand. Though the letter has been composed with immense care, he cannot be sure of winning the agreement of the readers. This implies that he is dealing with a most difficult and delicate issue. It is not enough to suppose that all they need is a pep-talk.

Looking further back to verses 18 and 19, we find that the same anxiety is apparent when he asks the readers for their prayers. It is also clear that he is well known to them, though he has to be absent for the time being. In fact it is most natural to assume that he is a member of the same community of Christians. Some commentators think that his enforced absence means imprisonment, but Westcott pointed out that the reference to Timothy in verse 23 implies some freedom of movement.

Before this he charges the readers to 'obey your leaders and submit to them' (verse 17). From this we can deduce that they are not the whole congregation, but a dissident group, such as is implied in 1 John.<sup>10</sup> This illuminates the opening words of the chapter: 'Let brotherly love continue' (13.1). It will become clear, as we become more familiar with Hebrews, that he varies his tone according to the needs of the moment. He knows the value of both understatement and exaggeration. Here the function of the final chapter requires understatement,

<sup>9</sup> G. W. Buchanan, *To the Hebrews*, Anchor Bible (Garden City, 1972), pp. 267f.

<sup>10</sup> For the dissident group in 1 John see R. E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York and London, 1979).

because nothing must be done to alienate the readers after they have been subjected to an address of such emotional power. We are thus justified in perceiving a major disruption behind the command to maintain brotherly love. When he says further that the leaders will have to give account of the readers, and might have to do so 'sadly' (verse 17), we should probably think of the coming judgment (Bruce compares Phil. 2.16), which Hebrews asserts is near (10.25). The implication is that the situation is extremely serious, and the leaders are at their wits' end to know how to cope with it.

This then suggests the reason why Hebrews has been brought into the affair. It is because he is a member of the church who is much loved and respected. The leaders have written to him, urging him to intervene in the crisis. Perhaps they hope that he will be able to come in person. This is impossible, however, and so he has responded with this letter. If this is correct, then we can understand why it has been composed with such immense care, using every available device of rhetorical skill to make the most powerful impact on the readers. For this letter is the last resort. If it fails, the leaders have nothing more that they can do to save the situation.

What, then, is the crisis to which the letter is addressed? We can get an idea of it by looking back to 13.7–16. The readers are exhorted to remember their leaders, but this means 'those who spoke to you the word of God'. This, it is generally agreed, refers to the original missionaries who first evangelised them. It is implied that they are not a former generation, unknown to the present members of the church, but people whom they should be able to remember personally. The notable thing about these evangelists is the quality of their life which issued from their faith. Some commentators think that the unusual word for 'outcome' (*ekbasis*) of their life is intended to suggest martyrdom, but it need not do so. But the point is that the exemplary quality of their life was the fruit of the faith which they maintained. We shall see that in Hebrews faith does not mean the content of the Christian confession, i.e. what I believe, but the quality of faithfulness in living in accordance



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with the Christian confession, i.e. what I do as a believer. Thus the outcome of the life of these evangelists was their life of faith based on the confession. The readers can have the same quality of life if they are equally true to the original confession.

Behind this brief instruction there lies the major issue of the whole letter. The readers are tempted to take a course of action which is inconsistent with the gospel which they originally received. They might be less likely to do so, if they remembered how effective faithfulness to the gospel was in the lives of those who first preached to them. In the following verses, 8–16, Hebrews summarises the practical aspects of this major issue. We must not forget that at this point he has deliberately dropped the severe tone which he has used in the body of the letter, as he does not want to alienate the readers. One feature of what he now has to say is the use of allusive references to matters that are so well known that he does not need to specify them exactly. This makes these verses difficult to interpret, so that there are considerable differences of opinion among modern scholars. But the device is deliberate, as it helps Hebrews to take his readers, who do know what he is talking about, into his confidence, and so increases the rapport which he wants to build up so as to gain acceptance of his whole attempt to make them change their minds. Persuading people to change their minds is always difficult, and especially so when their emotions are strongly engaged in their intended course of action. It can only be done by winning their emotions. Cold logic is not enough.

So first he reminds them of the basis of faith, Jesus Christ, and the point is that this is unchanging, ‘the same yesterday and today and for ever’ (verse 8). There may be an allusion here to the most primitive form of the confession of faith, ‘Jesus is the Christ.’<sup>11</sup> This is in fact the point from which the whole letter started (1.1–4). Hebrews had taken care to begin the letter with a statement of faith which he knew the readers

<sup>11</sup> ‘Jesus Christ’ would not be the primitive confession as such, which would be *Christos Iêsous* (= Jesus is the Christ); see V. Neufeld, *The Earliest Christian Confessions* (Leiden, 1963), pp. 140–6.

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shared, because it was just as important to begin in a way that would be likely to gain their goodwill as to finish in this way.

The next words warn against 'strange teachings' and unprofitable 'foods' (verse 9). What is meant has to be deduced from the substance of the whole of the letter. We are helped by the contrast in verse 10, where Hebrews claims that 'we have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat'. Those who serve the tent are clearly the Levitical priests, as described in chapter 9. This suggests that the strange teachings are the details of atonement sacrifice which were there set out. If so, the whole point at issue is a felt need on the part of the readers to resort to Jewish customs in order to come to terms with their sense of sin against God and need for atonement. Thus the central argument of the letter is precisely a compelling case for the complete and abiding efficacy of Jesus' death as an atoning sacrifice. What, then, are the 'foods, which have not benefited their adherents'?<sup>12</sup> We can think of the sacrificial meals in the temple. But if, as seems more likely, the readers are far away in the Dispersion, the reference is probably to synagogue meals, held especially at festival times to give the worshippers a stronger sense of solidarity with the worship of the temple in Jerusalem. This of course does not mean meals directly associated with atonement sacrifices, but meals which strengthen the sense of solidarity with the temple where the whole sacrificial system, with its daily offerings, is performed on behalf of Jews everywhere.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Some scholars argue that the reference is to the Christian eucharist, which Hebrews disapproves. If so, the 'strange teachings' must be some Christian teaching which he regards as heretical. It also follows that the Christian assembly referred to in verses 10–15 is non-eucharistic, as Hebrews is on this view an anti-sacramentalist. With regard to the latter point it must be said that it depends entirely on the words in verse 9, and if that is not a reference to the eucharist there is nothing to show whether the assembly was eucharistic or not. The important point is that it was an occasion when 'the Lord's death is proclaimed', as in the eucharistic description of 1 Cor. 11.26. With regard to the 'strange teachings' it really is most strange that Hebrews should bring in a new topic at this very late stage in his letter without making it clear what the teachings are. My interpretation has the merit of taking these verses closely with the letter as a whole. For the debate on these verses see especially the commentaries of Bruce and Wilson.

<sup>13</sup> For Jewish life in the Diaspora see E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, revised edition (3 vols., Edinburgh, 1973–87), III.i, pp. 138–49.