

THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS - PART I

THE BACKGROUND, THEMES, STRUCTURE, AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE LETTER

I. The Letter to the Hebrews is a theological treatise on the theme that Christ fulfills all of the promises, worship and law of the Jewish people and, in so doing, joins us to the court of heaven.

A. The book describes Jesus as the high priest who fulfills and perfects all of creation and in particular the Old Covenant in numerous ways, by fulfilling the ministry of angels, the law of Moses, the Levitical priesthood, the sacrifices of the Old Covenant, and all the promises that the great Jewish heroes lived and died for.

- The author argues that all of these things are helpful in preparing the way for Christ, but only Christ can really bring us in union with God.

B. In making this presentation, the author continually cross references the Old Testament and then demonstrates how it is fulfilled by Jesus. No other book of the Bible cross references other passages in Scripture so much.

- Thus, for example, the letter begins by saying that Christ fulfills all prophecies by revealing God to us. The next nine verses then apply to Jesus eight quotations from the Old Testament that refer to God and the future Messiah. See Heb. 1:4-13. And just before the final farewell, it ends by describing Jesus as the final and greatest sacrifice that enables us to approach the true Jerusalem in heaven. It then exhorts the faithful to imitate Him by offering the sacrifices of suffering, praise, and works of charity. See Heb. 13:7-16.

- The letter thus gives a model of reading the Old Testament in light of the New Testament, and sensing the great tradition that led up to the New Covenant in Christ. Cf. Vatican II Council, Dei Verbum 16 (1965)

C. The letter also presents Christ's faithful as very much in union with the great figures of Jewish history, sharing the same hope and the same suffering. See Heb. 11:1-12:13. In fact it goes so far as to say that we are "surrounded by so a cloud of witnesses (in Greek martyres)," i.e. the great heroes of Jewish history. Heb. 12:1.

II. The overall style is something like that of a written sermon, with the form of a letter, but in much more general language than the typical letter. A modern papal encyclical would be along similar lines.

A. Unlike the typical letter, especially of St. Paul, there is no introductory greeting and the only really personal notes come at the end.

- There are a few admonishments warning against a weakness in faith or endurance, see Heb. 5:12-14, 12:4, and some compliments about good works, see Heb. 6:9, 10:32-36. However, these references are general without specifying much detail.

B. The overall structure seems to be that, between the introduction and the closing greeting, there are several sections (commentators usually list three to five), each of which begins with a discourse on how Jesus fulfills the Old Covenant, goes on to give a moral exhortation on the response a Christian should have, and then returns to complete the theme.

1. The four-verse introduction describes the theme that Jesus is the source of all creation and the mediator between this realm and heaven.

2. The first central section, from chapter 1, verse 5 to chapter 2, verse 18, describes Jesus as greater than the angels. It then instructs the faithful that we must be even more attentive to His word than the people of old were to the message of the angels. For because He can sanctify us as no angel could, to reject Him is to reject salvation.

3. The second central section, from chapter 3, verse 1 to chapter 4, verse 13, describes Jesus as greater than Moses. It calls us to supreme faith in Him who lead us to rest in the new Promised Land. The section then concludes with a discourse on the power of Jesus, *the Word of God*, Who fulfills the words of the Mosaic law.

4. The third central section, from chapter 4, verse 14 through chapter 7, describes Jesus as the fulfillment of the Levitical priesthood, offering Himself for our sins. It says that to fall back away from Christ is to reject the very source of life-giving cleansing. The section then picks up on the theme again, saying Jesus restores and fulfills the primordial priesthood of Melchizekek, of which the Levitical priesthood was but a temporary application.

5. Along similar lines, the fourth central section, which consists of chapters 8 through 10, describes how the New Covenant fulfills and supercedes the Old Covenant. The Old Covenant used the Temple, ceremonies, and sacrifices that were an image of the angelic worship in heaven and a foreshadowing of the true Temple who is Christ, offering Himself for our sake. It then exhorts the faithful to remain united and true to the faith and avoid anything that would offend the Holy Spirit of the New Covenant. The letter concludes by reassuring the faithful that Jesus is near and will return to reward them.

6. The final main section, which goes through chapters 11 and 12, describes in sweeping terms many great figures of Israel. It argues that these figures longed for the promise that Christ fulfills. The letter then urges the faithful that, surrounded by these great witnesses, we also should accept the sufferings of this world as necessary discipline and sacrifices. It says we are strengthened by the glorious presence of Christ who, with His angels and saints, is with us even now and will shake heaven and earth to give His faithful an unshakable kingdom.

7. The concluding section, in chapter 13, then spells out in quick order many of the moral duties through which we keep the covenant described earlier. The earlier sections urged in general terms the keeping of the faith and God's law, but did not specify specific precepts of that law. This section fills in many of the gaps, with instructions on such subjects as hospitality, charitable works, purity, and loyalty to the faith and to Church leaders. It then concludes with a blessing and some news about Timothy as well as greetings from the Italian Christians.

III. The letter to the Hebrews stands in the tradition and thought of St. Paul, although its authorship has been heavily debated from an early time.

A. In presenting the Old Covenant as fulfilled in Christ, in presenting the sacrifice and glorification of Christ as the central reality, and in exhorting Christians to persevere in the faith with Christ as the model for our lives, the letter follows Pauline thought. Like the undisputed letters of St. Paul, each section gives a theological discourse and then a moral application, calling upon the faithful to put their trust in Christ and imitate Him. St. Thomas Aquinas, in his commentary to the letter, says that the other letters of St. Paul deal with various aspects of the grace Jesus won for us. This epistle summarizes the whole of Christ's mission.

B. The authorship of the letter has been much debated.

1. Origin, the prolific Scriptural commentator of the third century, thought that "The ideas of the epistle certainly belong to

the Apostle [i.e., St. Paul]; however, the language and composition seem to belong to someone else, who wished to record Paul's thinking, writing down the words of the Master." But he added "if any church holds that this epistle is by Paul, let her be commended for this. For now without reason have the ancients handed it down as Paul's." See Eusebius, Ecclesiastic History VI, ch. 25, sec. 13-14. He based this conclusion on the fact that the themes (e.g., the summation of Jewish history in Christ, and Jesus as God's sacrificial offering) are Pauline, but language is more majestic and less personal than that of St. Paul. Tertulian, the sharp-worded theologian of the late second and early third century who would later leave the Church for the Montanists, believed it was written by St. Barnabas on the ground that it reflects Pauline thought but is linguistically different from St. Paul.

2. However, because of the closeness of the thought to that of St. Paul, the Eastern Church from an early time accepted the letter as written by St. Paul. In the Western Church, St. Jerome and St. Augustine at first had some doubts about whether St. Paul wrote the letter (although they clearly considered it inspired in any case); but they would later conclude that it was written by St. Paul, and that view then prevailed in the West.

3. In his commentary to the letter, St. Thomas Aquinas agreed that it was written by St. Paul, and addressed two objections to his authorship: (1) that there is no identification in the letter of St. Paul as the author, as there is in the undisputed Pauline letters; and (2) that the style is more elegant than those letters. He said that St. Paul did not indicate that he was the author because many Jews despised him as a turncoat; thus identifying himself as the author would have created a distraction. He said that the language was more elegant because St. Paul was writing more in his native tongue, rather than in Greek, which he learned later. If such is the case, there must have been a translation into Greek, for it is generally accepted that the text as published was Greek.

4. In the Renaissance era, scholars such as Erasmus (the most famous Dutch Catholic humanist of the time) and Cardinal Cajetan (the cardinal theologian of the sixteenth century) questioned Pauline authorship based upon examinations of the vocabulary used in the Greek, and in particular upon the fact that the letter to the Hebrews seemed to use the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament used heavily by the evangelists, while the undisputed Pauline epistles seemed to use the Hebrew more directly. They, as well as Martin Luther and many early Protestants, supported the view that the letter was written by an associate of St. Paul, who recorded Pauline thoughts. Luther thought the author was Apollos, an associate of St. Paul. Other commentators have, like Tertulian of old, proposed St. Barnabas, as the author. In 1917, the Pontifical Biblical Commission indicated that the letter is of the Pauline tradition, but may well be from another author.

5. The majority of modern theologians would hold that it was not written by St. Paul, but rather by someone from his school of thought.

C. The letter was probably shortly before or after St. Paul's death in 67 A.D.

1. Given that it is, in many ways, the culmination of St. Paul's thought, but that the other Pauline letters do not seem to rely on it (if anything it is the reverse), it is likely this letter was written near the end of his life.

2. On the other hand, because it refers to the Temple sacrifices continually, but not to the destruction of the Temple, which occurred in 70 A.D., it seems likely that the letter was written before that year. The first letter of St. Clement of Rome, which was written around 95 A.D., seems to quote from Hebrews, thus giving strong evidence that it was at least written before that year.

D. The letter was written, apparently in Italy, to Christians who were converts from Judaism probably to emphasize that their faith was the fulfillment, not the abandonment of their Jewish heritage.

1. The emphasis on Jewish customs, and the numerous references to the Hebrew Scriptures, without any perceived need to explain them, indicates that the author and the readers were of Jewish origin.

2. Near the end, the author sends his greetings "from Italy" thus indicating that the letter was written from that area, although it is possibly that the phrase refers to a community of Italian Christians that the author was living with. See Heb. 13:24.

- In the nation of Italy, the most likely place of writing was Rome, where St. Paul would have lived for much of the 60s. However, the place of writing could have been elsewhere.

3. The community to whom the letter was written seems to have endured an earlier persecution that caused suffering, but not death, among her members. See Heb. 6:9-11, 10:32-34, 12:4. That community seems to have had a respite from the persecution but was apparently again facing pressure to return to Jewish practices. See Heb. 6:4-6, 10:23-25, 12:4-13.

4. Probably the most common theory is that the community to whom the letter was written was being criticized by their

families for abandoning the faith at a time when the Jewish nation needed them most. The letter argues that these new Christians were not abandoning the faith of their fathers, but rather living its fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

- The idea is that, in the late 60s A.D., there was a rebellion in the Jewish nation that attempted to overthrow the Roman imperial authority. After some initial victories by the Jews, Nero sent the Roman general (and later Emperor) Vespian to reconquer Palestine; his son Titus would complete the re-conquest in 70 A.D., with the Roman soldiers destroying the Temple and all of Jerusalem. Thus, the great climax in the struggle between the Romans and Jews was probably the background to this letter. The author is emphasizing that the traditions of the Jewish faith were fulfilled in Christ and lived out by Christians, who were already being persecuted by Nero.