

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_expositor-series-1.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php)

## THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS.

### THE NOTE OF WARNING TO THE JUDEO-CHRISTIAN CHURCHES.

THE Epistle to the Hebrews is one of the New Testament writings which brings the new economy before us as a transfiguration of the old. In the Epistle of James the moral law delivered to Israel is translated into the "law of liberty" the "royal law." In the First Epistle of Peter, the theocratic prerogatives of ancient Israel are handed down to the Church in a higher and abiding form. In the Revelation, we have the completed *history* of the kingdom of God, which was begun under the old covenant. In the Epistle to the Hebrews, the whole system of ceremonial worship is transferred to the heavenlies, and invested with a spiritual and truly life-giving significance.

In treating this Scripture, which is unique in its kind, we shall ask three questions, the answer to which will embrace all minor points demanding attention.

- I. To what Churches was this letter addressed?
- II. What was the object which the writer proposed to himself?
- III. Who was the writer, who, unlike the authors of the other New Testament epistles, never gives his name?

I. The superscription of the letter describes those to whom it was sent as *Hebrews*. Is this superscription from the pen of the writer himself? or was it added by those who were the first to enrol this Scripture among the other

apostolic writings, out of which they were compiling the sacred library of their Church? Obviously when we read such a heading as First Epistle to the Corinthians, we may be sure that it was not written by Paul himself. When he penned the first Epistle, he did not know that he should afterwards write a second; and indeed in a letter like that, such a heading was unnecessary, since the opening words described those to whom it was addressed. It is otherwise with the Epistle to the Hebrews. The writer enters at once upon his subject without any mention of names. Hence I am disposed to think that the superscription of the Epistle to the Hebrews is from the author's own pen. Weiss objects, that it was enough that the bearer of the letter knew its destination. This is true; but it might fall into other hands, or in some way go astray.

Who then are these whom the writer describes as "the Hebrews"? The word properly designates the members of the Jewish nation at large. It is so used in Philippians iii. 5. But it may have a more restricted meaning, as in Acts vi. 1, where, as used by the Christians of Jerusalem, it distinguishes the Hebrew-speaking Jews from the Hellenists, or Greek-speaking Jews of the same city. Neither of these meanings is admissible in the heading of the Epistle to the Hebrews, for the readers of this Epistle were certainly Christians and Greek-speaking Christians. It would be absurd to suppose such a letter addressed to Jews who were not Christians, or to Hebrew-speaking Jewish converts only. We must have recourse then to a third meaning. The reference here is to Judeo-Christian Churches generally. This is the sense in which the name occurs in the title "Gospel to the Hebrews," given in the second century to the Gospel used by preference in the Judeo-Christian Churches. The heading of this Epistle therefore indicates that the writer is addressing himself to certain Churches of Jewish origin.

But it may be asked whether, in thus expressing himself, he has reference to Judeo-Christians at large, or to one or more Churches in particular, coming within this category? The former supposition has been supported by many theologians, ancient and modern. M. Reuss maintains that in this Epistle we have a theological treatise intended for the whole Church. Hofmann describes it as a sermon in the form of a letter. This theory however fails to explain a number of passages in the course of the Epistle, which clearly indicate that the writer had in view one particular Church, or more than one. For instance, in chap. v. 11, 12, he reproaches his readers with being slow to apprehend Christian truth, though they had been so long converted. Again, in chap. x. 34, he praises them for their sympathy with the sufferings of those who were in bonds (the true reading *τοῖς δεσμίοις*), that is, certain prisoners known to them and to him, and for the readiness of their self-sacrifice on their behalf. Again, in chap. xiii. 7, he speaks of the death of their leaders, whose faith they should imitate. These passages are quite in harmony with the conclusion of the Epistle, which is of an epistolary character, and the genuineness of which has been gratuitously called in question. The writer is so evidently addressing himself to particular readers, that he speaks of coming shortly with Timothy to visit them.

Where then are we to look for these Christians of Jewish origin to whom this epistle is addressed? For the last century, criticism has been making exhaustive attempts to answer this question. The whole world has been scoured to find the readers of this Epistle. Some say they are to be found in Cyprus; others, in Asia Minor (Lycaonia, Galatia, Phrygia, Ephesus); others again, in Greece (Thessalonica, Corinth); yet others, in Spain. The hypotheses in support of which reasons more or less solid have been advanced, are the following: Antioch (Hofmann); Alex-

andria (Schleiermacher, Ritschl, Bunsen, and more particularly Wieseler); Rome, according to the theory now most commonly received (Holtzmann, Kurtz, Renan, Harnack, von Soden); lastly, the traditional view, strongly vindicated by Weiss, regards the Churches of Palestine as those referred to by the writer.

The *primâ facie* argument in favour of this opinion is that there is not the slightest allusion in the whole course of the Epistle to the presence of any section of Christians of Gentile origin among the readers. Now there were no purely Judeo-Christian Churches except in Palestine and in those regions of the East where dwelt those "myriads of Jews who had believed," as James says (Acts xxi. 20). It was to these same Churches, it would appear, that James himself addressed his Epistle (Jas. i. 1). It is further manifest, from the tenor of the whole Epistle, that it appeals to men who were hindered in their spiritual progress by such an obstinate attachment to the worship of the visible sanctuary, as was in danger of leading them to renounce the gospel. Such an attitude of mind is conceivable only among persons living in proximity to the Temple of Jerusalem, where the old worship was still celebrated. This hypothesis is supported by chap. v. 12, where the readers are spoken of as converts of long standing; and by chap. ii. 3, where we see that they had been brought into the faith by those who had themselves heard the Lord. Lastly, the reference in chap. xiii. 7 to the glorious death of the leaders of the flock agrees perfectly with that which Josephus tells us (*Ant.* xx. 9. § 1) of the judicial murder of James and other chief men of the Church in Jerusalem, which took place in the year 62, under the high priest Ananus. Thus the position taken up on this question by the early Church, which is stated by Clement of Alexandria, and upheld among critics by Hug, Bleek, de Wette, Tholuck, Thiersch, Delitzsch, Riehm, and Weiss, appears to us,

after all that has been advanced to the contrary, unassailable. It is also, as we have seen, the only explanation which bears out the meaning of the title, "Epistle to the Hebrews."

What considerations then, we ask, have led so many writers to seek another solution? In the Epistle itself there is, as it seems to me, only one passage which presents any difficulty from the traditional point of view. This occurs in chap. vi. 10, where the writer commends his readers for the love they have shown and are still showing in ministering to the saints. If these words refer to collections made on behalf of suffering Christians, they would seem to have no application to the Church of Jerusalem, which was itself in deep poverty, and on behalf of which other Churches made contributions. But the writer may have in view the many Churches scattered over Judea, rather than the Church in the capital. Even in that Church there certainly were some rich persons who could, if it were needful, minister to their poor brethren. The expression which Paul uses (Rom. xv. 26), that the "contribution is for the poor *among* the saints that are at Jerusalem," clearly distinguishes the poor from the whole body of the faithful. According to 2 Corinthians viii. 2, the Christians of Macedonia were in deep poverty, and yet, as the Apostle says, "the abundance of their joy abounded unto the riches of their liberality." Why might it not have been the same in the Church of Jerusalem, even the poor contributing to the help of those who were yet poorer and suffering persecution, like those of whom James speaks in his Epistle?

In favour of the hypothesis that the Epistle was addressed to the Church in Egypt, stress is laid on the Alexandrine style of the writer, a certain correspondence of ideas with Philo, and, lastly, the many quotations from the Septuagint. This, if well founded at all, is an argu-

ment for the Alexandrine origin, not of the readers, but of the writer. As however he says, in chap. xiii. 19, "that I may be *restored* to you the sooner," there seems reason to suppose that he belonged originally to the Church to which he was writing. In weighing these arguments in favour of Alexandria however, we must bear in mind that Alexandrine culture was diffused more or less among all oriental Jews. In Acts vi. 9 we read of a synagogue of the Alexandrines at Jerusalem. There can be no doubt that in the worship of this synagogue, the Septuagint version of the Old Testament would be read; and Alexandrine ideas, and even those of Philo, may easily have found their way into the Judaism of Palestine. The objections which occur to me to the theory that this Epistle was addressed to Alexandria are, first, that that Church was far from being purely Judeo-Christian; and, second, that the Alexandrine teachers (Clement and Origen) never hint that their Church had any such claim.<sup>1</sup>

The opinion that the Epistle to the Hebrews was addressed to the Judeo-Christian portion of the Church in Rome found at one time great acceptance. This was at the time when critics were inclined to think that the Roman Church contained a largely preponderating Judeo-Christian element. That time is past, and the only pretext for the idea just referred to is found in the words (chap. xiii. 24), "They of Italy salute you." At one time great importance was attached to these words, as showing that the Epistle was written from Italy. Now, those who advocate the theory that the letter was addressed to the Church of Rome, adduce the same words in support of their hypo-

<sup>1</sup> Wieseler, in his zealous advocacy of this view, brings forward the fact that a temple was built at Leontopolis in Egypt, to serve as a visible sanctuary for the Israelites of that region. This temple however never attained any importance, and the writer could not compare it to the Temple of Jerusalem, as on this theory he would be doing throughout the Epistle. This idea is now abandoned.

thesis. How can this be? Those whose salutation the Apostle conveys are supposed to be Christians from Italy, who had taken refuge in the place from which the Epistle was written. They make the writer the medium of their greetings to their fellow countrymen. But if this were the case, why does he not add a salutation from the Church in the midst of which he finds himself with these Italian refugees? Again, does it seem probable that any Church of Italy (whether of Rome, according to Holtzmann, or of Ravenna, according to Ewald)—should have been so strongly tempted to fall back into Judaism, as those seem to have been for whom this Epistle was intended? The argument drawn from the passage quoted has nothing solid to rest upon. It has not been observed that the preposition *ἀπό* (of) stands in connexion here, as in many other places, both with the pronoun *οἱ* (they) and the verb *ἀσπάζεσθαι* (salute you). “They of Italy salute you from Italy”; as in Acts x. 23, where the *ἀπό* (“from Joppa”) refers both to the subject, the brethren, and to the verb, “went with him”; or again, in Acts xvii. 13, where the same preposition *ἀπό* stands in connexion both with the pronoun *they* and the verb “should come.” This construction occurs also in classic Greek, as in the *Anabasis* (v. 2, 24): “When that house fell, those from the houses fled also (from those houses),”<sup>1</sup> where the *ἀπό* refers undoubtedly both to the verb *fled* and the subject *they*.

It follows then that this letter was certainly written from Italy, from one of the Churches associated with those of Judæa. I do not say from Rome, though this supposition would naturally suggest itself; but as, according to chap. xiii. 23, Timothy, who had been just released from prison, probably in Rome, was coming to join the author in the place from which he was writing, it is presumable that he was not in Rome.

<sup>1</sup> ἔφευγον καὶ οἱ ἀπὸ τούτων τῶν οἰκιῶν.



II. What was the religious state of those to whom the Epistle was written? and what was the purpose of the writer? These questions can only be answered by a rapid review of the contents of the letter.

The Epistle to the Hebrews is properly a treatise consisting of two parts—one didactic (chap. i.–x.), the other practical (xi.–xiii.). It concludes with a short epistolary appendix (xiii: 22–25). In this respect it resembles the Epistle to the Romans, with this difference, that there we have an epistolary preamble, which is altogether wanting in the Epistle before us. It has been conjectured that there may have been such a preamble originally, but that it was suppressed when the Epistle was placed among the canonical Scriptures. But such a liberty would scarcely have been taken with a writing which was to have the honour of being enrolled among the apostolic Scriptures preserved by the Church.

#### THE DIDACTIC SECTION OF THE EPISTLE.

The first two chapters are seen at a glance to form a section by themselves in this grand argument. They contain a comparison of Jesus, the Messiah, with the angels. He is first shown to be higher than they by His Divine nature; and, next, to be made a little lower than the angels by His incarnation and death. This very humiliation however gives Him a higher fitness for His work as a Saviour.

The superiority of Messiah to the angels is demonstrated in chap. i. by a series of passages from the Old Testament, some of which are applied in the original context to Jehovah Himself. Hence it is evident that the writer regarded the person of Messiah as nothing less than the supreme manifestation of Jehovah. This didactic statement is immediately followed by a short practical application (chap. ii. 1–4). If every act of disobedience to

the law of Moses, which was given by angels, had been severely punished, how much heavier must be the guilt of neglecting the salvation brought by the Son of God!

With chap. ii. 5 commences the second section, showing forth the state of humiliation by which Messiah had been made a little lower than the angels. The perfect world for which we are looking had been made subject by prophecy, not to an angel, but to One who for a little while was made lower than the angels (Ps. viii. 5). Jesus was such an One. He stooped below the angels, and made Himself one with us for the suffering of death. But He did this, that He might bring many sons unto glory, and might become the faithful Intercessor for all those who were subject to temptations such as He Himself had known by experience.

A short exhortation (chap. iii. 1) gives the practical application of this second section. "Let us consider this Apostle and High Priest of our confession, even Jesus." Happily the truth here brought out is quite independent of the application made by the writer of the passage from Psalm viii.; for that application rests, not upon the real sense of the Hebrew text, but upon the Septuagint version, which is now known to be inexact.

It may be asked, What led the writer to open his argument with this comparison between Jesus and the angels? It must be remembered that, from a Jewish point of view (chap. ii. 2, Gal. iii. 20), the law, the distinguishing privilege of Israel, had been given through the medium of angels. This then was the highest theocratic authority, next to God Himself; and the writer would now show the inferiority even of the angelic hierarchy to Jesus.

This is made clear by the section which follows (chaps. iii., iv.). The writer compares Jesus to the two greatest personages in Jewish history—Moses and Joshua. This section also is divided into two parts: in the first (chap.

iii.), we have the comparison between Jesus and Moses ; in the second (chap. iv.), that between Jesus and Joshua. Each of these divisions, like the foregoing, consists first of a didactic statement, and then of a solemn warning.

Just as the master builder is greater than the man who builds the house, so Jesus is greater than Moses (*vv.* 2-6). The long practical application which follows may be thus summed up. If the Jews in the wilderness were punished for their unbelief of Moses by not being allowed to enter Canaan, how much more certainly will those who let go their faith in Jesus be shut out from the rest of God !

This introduces the second section, the comparison with Joshua (chap. iv. 1-10). How can the writer speak of the shutting out of the Jews of his time from the promised rest, when from the time of Joshua they had been in actual possession of the land of Canaan? The answer is given in the words of Psalm xcv. 11, which show that the Canaan into which Joshua led the tribes was not the true rest of God. Jesus alone leads His people into this true rest. Hence a solemn charge to hold fast their profession of faith in Jesus the Son of God, who is passed into the heavens (chap. iv. 11-16).

After comparing Jesus with the angels, and with Moses and Joshua, the lawgiver and leaders of Israel, there remained yet a third comparison to be drawn. This occupies the third section, in which the writer establishes a parallel between Jesus and Aaron the high priest. The priesthood constituted, with the law and the possession of Canaan, the third great theocratic privilege of the chosen people (chaps. v.-x.).

This third section, like the others, consists of two parts. The first is a comparison of the ministry of Jesus with that of Aaron in its nature and origin (chaps. v.-vii.); the second, a comparison of the two priesthoods as to their efficacy (chaps. viii.-x.).

In comparing the nature of the two priesthoods, the writer treats first of their equality (chap. v.), and next of the superiority of the priesthood of Jesus (chaps. vi., vii.).

Their equality is demonstrated by four characteristics which they have in common. These are as follows: 1st, Aaron was taken from among men to be their representative before God. 2nd, He was compassed with infirmity, that he might feel for the infirmities of his brethren. 3rd, He offered a sacrifice for himself, and not for the people only. 4th, He was directly called of God to his office.

We can but wonder at the boldness with which the writer applies these four characteristics to Jesus, especially the third. He is here alluding to the scene in Gethsemane, in which he sees the sacrifice offered by Jesus for Himself, before bearing our sins on the cross. In the agony in the garden, He consummated the voluntary offering up of His own human nature, that by this perfect obedience He might become the sacrifice for all mankind. Jesus is equal to Aaron on these four points, hence He is truly a high priest. But the writer is leading up to a far higher point. He will show that Jesus is the perfect High Priest, and in order to this, he must show that His priesthood is higher in its nature than that of Aaron.

Before entering on this subject however he gives a long preamble (chaps. v. 10–vi. 20), in which he complains of the want of spiritual insight in his readers. He reminds them of the awful truth that if any one fall away after receiving the grace of regeneration and spiritual enlightenment, no further renovation is possible. He does indeed afterwards express the hope that such may not be the sad lot of any of his readers, but that they will hold fast even to the end, knowing that their hope of salvation rests, not only upon the promise, but upon the very oath of God.

After this introduction he takes up again the argument commenced in chap. v. 10, and proceeds to show how the

priesthood of Jesus is higher than that of Aaron. He finds in the history of the patriarchs a point of comparison which, read in the light of some words of David, supplies the elements he needs for his argument. The point thus taken up is the history of Melchisedec (Gen. xiii.) in connexion with Psalm cx. 4, in which David, addressing the future Messiah, hails Him as the "priest after the order of Melchisedec."

The outline of the argument is this: Christ is equal to Melchisedec; Melchisedec is higher than Aaron: hence Christ is higher than Aaron (vii. 1-23).

The first of these propositions is proved by the fact that Abraham paid the tenth of the spoil which he had taken in war to "Melchisedec, king of Salem and priest of God Most High." Now the payment of tithe is a tribute paid by the lower to the higher. Hence Abraham, and in him Levi and Aaron himself, were declared to be of a lower order than Melchisedec (vii. 1-10).

The second proposition is proved by the fact that Jesus does not come of the tribe of Levi, which was the priestly tribe, according to Moses, but that like Melchisedec *king of Salem*, he was descended from the royal tribe of Judah, deriving, like Melchisedec, his priestly right not from human descent, but from the power of an endless life within Him (vii. 11-16).

From this fundamental analogy, which shows the identity of nature between Christ and Melchisedec, a third proposition follows. The priesthood of Christ, being equal to that of Melchisedec, which is higher than that of Aaron, is itself higher than that of Aaron.

This the writer proceeds to confirm by a few particular points of superiority. 1st, The oath of God, which, according to Psalm cx. 4, inaugurated the messianic priesthood—an honour not conferred on the priesthood of Aaron. 2nd, The permanence of the priesthood of Christ (noticed also in

Psalm cx.), while the sons of Aaron die one after another. 3rd, The one completed sacrifice of Christ for Himself and for the people, while in the Jewish temple fresh victims needed to be offered day by day. Lastly (4th), The spotless character of Christ, "the Son perfected for evermore," in contrast to the human infirmity of the descendants of Aaron (*vv.* 17-23).

But of what avail to us would be this superiority of the priesthood of Christ, in its nature and origin, to that of Aaron, unless it were also more efficacious in our behalf? This forms the theme of the third section of the Epistle, and is the key-note to the whole didactic portion (chaps. viii.-x.).

Its treatment is introduced by the analysis of a passage in the prophecies of Jeremiah (xxx. 31 and following), which foretells the substitution of a new covenant for the covenant of Sinai, which could bring nothing to perfection. The writer proceeds to set forth the superiority of this new covenant, showing how the sacrifice on which it is based is more efficacious than that of Aaron, on which the old covenant rested.

1. As to the place where the sacrifice is offered—the first, an earthly sanctuary; the second, heaven itself (chap. ix. 1-5).

2. As to the manner of the priest's entrance into the holy place—under the old covenant, *once in the year*; under the new, *once for all* (*vv.* 6-11).

3. As to the victims offered—under the old covenant, "the blood of goats and of calves"; under the new, Christ "offered Himself without blemish unto God" (*vv.* 12-24).

4. As to the offering of sacrifices—under the old covenant, the constant repetition of the same sacrifices proved their inadequacy; under the new, "the sacrifice once offered perfects for ever them that are sanctified" (*v.* 25-x. 18).

This central passage closes, like the rest, with a practical application. It is an invitation to enter at once, through the blood of Jesus, into the holiest of all (intimate communion with God), access to which was closed under the old covenant, but is now open to the followers of Christ by a new and living way. Then follows another solemn warning. "Beware of forsaking the assembling of yourselves together, lest you forsake also your faith itself; for there would remain no more sacrifice for the expiation of such a sin" (*vv.* 16-20). Thus repeatedly does the writer hold up before his readers the danger of falling away, with its awful consequences.

#### THE PRACTICAL PART OF THE EPISTLE.

The general application, contained in chaps. xi.-xiii., is to the didactic portion, as a whole, what each particular parenthesis was to its didactic premisses.

If we remember the tenacity with which the Churches addressed appear to have clung to the visible sanctuary at Jerusalem, and the value which they attached to the maintenance of their oneness with the chosen nation settled in the land of Canaan, we shall easily understand the scope of the writer's observations in chap. xi., in which he held before them the picture of the life of faith and endurance led by the patriarchs and prophets. All these, each in his own manner, let go the seen that they might grasp the unseen. This is the very essence of faith according to *v.* 1, which is, as it were, the text of the whole chapter.

In chap. xii. the writer adds to the duty of faith the duty of patience. Keeping the eye fixed upon Jesus, who was the first to mark out clearly the track of faith, and the first to reach its goal, the believers are to accept without dismay the sufferings by which God is educating them as His children, and are to strive after holiness; for they are already

citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem, and are already realising the efficacy of the blood which speaketh better things than that of Abel. Let them fear then to turn away from Him who speaketh to them from heaven, "for our God is a consuming fire." Lastly, to the two duties of faith and steadfast patience he adds, in chap. xiii., that of utter self-renunciation. He had long been leading up to this. It is indeed the gist of the whole Epistle. At length (chap. xiii. 13) he speaks out, and demands the supreme act of sacrifice. "Let us therefore go forth unto Him without the camp, bearing His reproach." As Jesus was led forth in ignominy outside the walls of Jerusalem, bearing His cross, so the time is come for those believing Jews who have cherished till now the bond of oneness with the Jewish nation and religion to make the great surrender, and break with a bond which threatens to lead them to their ruin. "Break loose from Judaism. Be wholly His who is better to you than the angels, better than Moses or Joshua, better than Aaron and his priesthood. Be all for Jesus, in whom you possess the eternal reality of all the good things of which Judaism offers you only the shadow."

Such, as it seems to me, is the thought brought out in the Epistle to the Hebrews. The writer only adds in conclusion a sort of epistolary postscript. He excuses himself for having written such a letter of exhortation to such readers. He speaks of his approaching visit with Timothy, who has lately been set at liberty. Then he greets the heads of the flock in his own name and that of the Christians of Italy, and desires that grace may be with them all.

What was the spiritual need which this Epistle was intended to meet? There can be but one answer. These Christians of Jewish origin were on the point of reverting to Judaism, from which they had never more than half broken loose. It is this falling back to the things behind,



against which the writer of the Epistle would fain put them on their guard. It is at this he is aiming in all the practical exhortations to which each separate didactic period leads up. A critical time had come for the Churches in Judæa, especially for the Church in Jerusalem. The general cause of the danger is easy to define. It was the overweening attachment of these Judeo-Christians to outward rites and ceremonial worship. This ceremonialism had been a real hindrance to the development of spiritual life in these Christians, the firstfruits of the gospel; and, as the writer of the Epistle points out reproachfully, they had become spiritually "dull of hearing." And when "by reason of the time, they ought to be teachers, had need to be taught again the rudiments of the first principles of the oracles of God" (chap. v. 11, 12).

Beside this general cause of a stunted Christian life, there were also particular circumstances which added to the gravity of the position. There was the impending war with the Roman power, which placed the Christians in a strait between their faith and their patriotism. There was also the rapidly advancing work of Paul among the Gentile nations, which, tending as it did to minimise the obligations of the ceremonial law, was a constant source of irritation to those who still clung to Mosaic institutions (see Acts xxi. 19-25).

Thiersch argues that after Paul's last visit to Jerusalem (Acts xx.), the believing Jews were excluded from the temple, into which James alone was still permitted to enter (according to Hegesippus), and that this deprivation of the worship to which they had been accustomed from childhood greatly discouraged them and inclined them to go back to Judaism. It must be borne in mind also, that this was about the time of the departure of the apostles, and of the death of James and other leaders of the flock, who had succeeded to the apostolic charge. There is also one

other circumstance to be taken into account, on which de Wette rightly lays stress: namely, the twofold disappointment caused, first, by the persistent refusal of the Jewish people to accept Jesus as the Messiah (whereas the Christians had always been looking for their conversion); and, second, by the prolonged delay of the return of Christ, for which they had looked as immediate. If we put all these things together, we shall easily comprehend the distress of mind that took possession of the Judeo-Christians in the years 65, 66, at which time it seems to us probable this Epistle was written.

This date is confirmed by the passage in which the writer speaks of the liberation of Timothy, and of his approaching arrival with himself. Timothy had no doubt repaired to Rome at the summons of Paul in his second captivity (2 Tim. iv. 19). He had then been imprisoned with Paul, and after Paul's martyrdom had been set at liberty. This seems the natural explanation of chap. xiii. 23, and fixes the date of the Epistle as approximately A.D. 66. Some critics assign to it a date after the fall of Jerusalem. Zahn gives the year 80; Holtzmann, Harnack, von Soden date it under Domitian, between 80 and 96; others about the year 100, or a little later. It is no argument against these opinions, to say that the present tense of the verb is used in speaking of the worship of the sanctuary, for we still use to-day in referring to the Mosaic institutions, such expressions as "the sacrifice is offered morning and evening." But Hilgenfeld rightly asks, How could the writer have said, "Now if Jesus were on earth, He would not be a priest at all, seeing there are those who offer the gifts according to the law," if he had been writing at a time when no sacrifice could any longer be offered? Or how could he have said, "In that He saith, A new covenant, He hath made the first old: but that which is becoming old and waxeth aged is nigh unto

vanishing away" (chap. viii. 13), if the worship of the old covenant had already ceased? Or how could he have expressed himself thus, "Else would they not have ceased to be offered," if they had actually already ceased to be offered? Hilgenfeld concludes from these considerations that the Epistle was written between the years 64 and 66. The writer would certainly not have taken so much trouble to prove the insufficiency of that which no longer existed. If God had already sealed the doom of the old worship, no argument was needed on the part of man; he had only to appeal to this decisive judgment.

The deep earnestness of this Epistle, its solemn warnings, threats, and exhortations, are only to be explained by the presence of a very real danger; namely, that tendency to falling away from the faith which we have described above.

### III. Who was the writer?

The opinion which has become traditional and general in the Church since the close of the fourth century, and which assigns the authorship of this Epistle to St. Paul, had been accepted in the East long before that time. It was promulgated by the Alexandrine doctors, Pantenus, Clement, Origen. But until the close of the fourth century it had not been received in the West by Irenæus, or by the author of the *Fragment of Muratori*, or by Tertullian, Hippolytus, or Cyprian. Jerome testifies to this difference of opinion between the two great sections of the Church, up to the time when the question was resolved in the Synod of Carthage, in 397, in favour of the apostolic authorship. This decision was arrived at under the influence of Augustine, who had himself yielded on this point to the Eastern tradition.

The Alexandrine doctors did not however disguise from themselves the difficulties which stood in the way of their view. Pantenus admitted that the Apostle acted in a

way quite contrary to his custom, in not mentioning his own name at the beginning of the letter. He explained this omission as arising from the modesty of Paul, who was unwilling to style himself an Apostle to the Hebrews, inasmuch as Jesus Himself was their Apostle (chap. iii. 1). Clement recognises that there is a great difference between the style of this Epistle and the other Epistles of Paul; but he explains it on the theory that Paul wrote the original in Aramaic, and that it was translated into Greek by Luke. Origen says that any one competent to judge of differences of style will observe that this Epistle is far more Greek in its form than the other writings of the Apostle; but, on the other hand, the thoughts are admirable and on a par with those which abound in the Epistles of Paul. The substance of the Epistle then is of Paul; as to the writer of it in its present form, God only knows who he is. Tradition, he says, points either to Clement, who became Bishop of Rome, or to Luke, the writer of the Gospel and of the Acts.

Criticism, after being long repressed by the decisions of the Council of Carthage, reasserted itself at the time of the Reformation. Erasmus attributed the Epistle to the Roman Clement; Luther conceived the idea that Apollos was its author. Calvin pronounced in favour of Luke. The Council of Trent confirmed the old traditional opinion, which was accepted in the Lutheran Church till the middle of the 18th century, when rationalism lifted up its voice. From the time of Semler appeared a succession of writings for and against the authorship of Paul, until between 1826 and 1840 Bleek published his great work, which decisively turned the scale against the old received opinion. At the present day Hofmann is the only theologian of any weight who maintains the Pauline origin of the Epistle to the Hebrews.

Ebrard and Döllinger are in favour of Luke; Riethmaier

and Bisping, two Catholic divines, support Clement of Rome; Semler, de Wette, Tholuck, Bunsen, Kurtz, Farrar, De Pressensé, Hilgenfeld, hold that the author is Apollos (following in this Tertullian, whose testimony we shall presently quote); Ullmann, Wieseler, Ritschl, Grau, Thiersch, Weiss, Renan, Zahn, Keil, conclude in favour of Barnabas; Mynster and Böhme support Silas; lastly, Ewald, Grimm, Lipsius, von Soden, attribute the Epistle to some Alexandrine Christian of name unknown. Reuss hesitates between Apollos and Barnabas.

In favour of the authorship of Paul, Origen insists on the beauty of the thoughts; but surely there were many men in the primitive Church whose thoughts were admirable. Another point urged is the exact agreement of the quotation given in chap. x. 30 with that of Paul (Rom. xii. 19), which does not tally verbally with Deuteronomy xxxii. 35, 36, either in the Hebrew or Septuagint version. This is no doubt a point difficult to explain. But if the letter was written from Italy, the writer might have read in Rome the Epistle to the Romans, and quoted from memory the words as given by Paul. In any case, such a point of detail is not sufficient to outweigh the much graver arguments against the apostolic authorship.

In the first place, we note the *order* of the Epistle—the absence of any heading or introductory thanksgiving, and the recurrence of short pareneses at the close of each didactic portion. All this is quite foreign to the manner of Paul. The style also is markedly different from that of Paul. Here we have rounded, oratorical periods, while Paul's phraseology is unstudied, broken, abrupt. Hofmann explains this difference by saying that Paul, released from prison, and awaiting at Brindisi the arrival of Timothy, had ample leisure to give attention to style in a way he had never done before. It is strange indeed that he should have written in polished Greek to the Hebrews, while all his

life he had been writing to the Hellenes in a style abounding with rugged and barbarous Hebraisms. With regard to the vocabulary of this Epistle, as compared with that of Paul's letters, we commend to our readers' study Prof. Gardiner's work, *The Language of the Epistle to the Hebrews as Bearing upon its Authorship*. We know no other work on the subject to compare with this, either for solidity or for the delicacy with which points of comparison are treated. Prof. Gardiner himself was constrained to change his opinion as to the origin of the Epistle, so cogent and unexpected were the results of his researches (p. 19). In the citations from the Old Testament, the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews servilely copies the Septuagint, even when the translation is inexact. Paul, on the contrary, often corrects the Septuagint by the Hebrew. Again the writer cites from the text of Codex Alexandrinus, Paul from the Codex Vaticanus. The writer further reproduces long passages, which must have been copied; Paul uses only short quotations, generally made, as far as we can judge, from memory. The writer of this Epistle quotes with such introductory formulas as "God saith," "the Holy Spirit thus testifying," etc. Paul either mentions the sacred writer from whom he quotes, or makes no allusion to his authority.

The difference is very marked, further, from a *religious point of view*. We cannot here go into the question whether the author was writing on the basis of Pauline teaching, modified by Alexandrine influence, or whether he was simply working out the primitive apostolic teaching under Pauline influence. But one point seems to us perfectly clear. According to the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews, the redemptive work of Christ is carried on rather in the heavenly sanctuary, as the outcome of the resurrection and ascension of the Lord; while in the teaching of Paul it centres in the cross. This is not a contradiction,

for that which the Redeemer presents in the most holy place in the heavens is the blood shed upon the cross; and in the teaching of Paul himself, the cross of Christ only saves us as it leads on to His resurrection and intercession in the heavens. Still the same truth is regarded from two very distinct points of view.<sup>1</sup>

We draw attention, in conclusion, to one passage, which could never have been written by St. Paul, the passage, namely, in which he says that he was taught the Gospel by those who had heard it from the mouth of the Lord (chap. ii. 3). Paul, when speaking of himself, categorically denies any such attitude of dependence on the other apostles of the Lord (Gal. i. 11-17).

Dr. Biesenthal<sup>2</sup> has reproduced in our day the theory first invented by Clement of Alexandria, that the Epistle to the Hebrews was written by Paul in Aramaic, and translated by Luke into Greek. In the translation however he is supposed to have fallen into a number of errors, as Dr. Biesenthal proves by himself re-translating the Epistle from Greek into Hebrew. But how many times has it been shown that the Epistle to the Hebrews cannot be a translation? It abounds in compound words which are essentially Greek, and have no analogues in Aramaic or in Hebrew, and it contains plays upon words such as could only occur in a composition originally Greek.<sup>3</sup> Can the writer of this original composition be St. Luke? The Christology of the third Gospel presents indeed some analogy with that of the Epistle to the Hebrews (as, for instance, the growth of Jesus in knowledge and obedience); and that which is said (chap. xiii. 23) of the personal relations of the author with Timothy might well apply to Luke. But could

<sup>1</sup> The difference in the conception of faith, which has often been remarked, seems to me easily resolved if we look at Rom. iv. 20, 2 Cor. v. 7.

<sup>2</sup> *Das Trost-schreiben des Ap. Paulus an die Hebräer.* 1878.

<sup>3</sup> Ἐμαθεν—ἐπαθεν; μένουσαν—μέλλουσαν; διαθήκη (covenant and testament). Comp. v. 8; xiii. 14; ix. 15-26.

a Gentile Christian, a disciple of Paul, ask the Churches of Judea to pray for him "that he might be restored to them the sooner" (chap. xiii. 19)? The style of Luke's writing moreover is clear and flowing, but not at all oratorical.

Could the writer be Clement of Rome? But he has no originality of thought or brilliancy of style. It is enough to read a few lines of his Epistle to the Corinthians, to be struck with the difference between that and the Epistle before us. Clement imitates the Epistle to the Hebrews, but he is only a copyist.

Can the writer be Apollos? But how could this young Christian, a catechumen of Priscilla and Aquila, two disciples of Paul, say that he learned the gospel from those who had themselves heard the Lord? How could such a one have the boldness to write such a letter to the Churches of Judea, the oldest and most venerable Churches of Christendom? How, lastly, could he speak of being restored to them, from whom he had never come out, and to whom he had never belonged?<sup>1</sup>

We come now to the man who commands to-day the majority of votes—Barnabas. He was certainly one of the members of the primitive Church of Jerusalem, and one of its most eminent members, a disciple of the apostles, and almost their equal (Acts iv. 36, 37). He was moreover by birth a Levite, and consequently familiar from childhood with all the traditions of the temple worship. He was a Hellenist Jew from Cyprus, and competent as such to write in excellent Greek. We seem almost to read his very signature in the epilogue of the Epistle when he says (chap. xiii. 22), "Bear with the word of exhortation" (τοῦ λόγου τῆς παρακλήσεως), reminding us of the name which the Apostles had given him (Acts iv. 36), "*son of exhortation*" (τοῦ λόγου τῆς παρακλήσεως). The fact moreover that in the East an

<sup>1</sup> As to the Alexandrinisms of the Epistle to the Hebrews, see Prof. Gardiner, p. 21.



epistle was ascribed to him, of which he was certainly not the author, seems to prove that some genuine letter from his pen had existed. Lastly (and this is important), Barnabas is the only one of all the reputed authors in favour of whom a positive tradition can be shown; for it is of the Epistle to the Hebrews Tertullian is speaking when he says: "There exists also a writing entitled *To the Hebrews*, by Barnabas, a man sufficiently authorised of God."<sup>1</sup> One grave difficulty seems to me however to counter-balance all the arguments just brought forward. How is it possible that a well-known and all but apostolic name, like that of Barnabas, should have been almost completely lost? And is not the fact that another writing was falsely assigned to Barnabas, an added argument against the suppression of his name in an Epistle really written by him?

We cannot help asking if a less illustrious name would not solve the problem more easily? May not the writer have been Silas—himself also an eminent member of the primitive Church of Jerusalem, and even a prophet in that Church (Acts xv. 32); who was also honoured by being made a delegate from the apostles to the Churches of Syria, who succeeded Barnabas as fellow labourer with Paul on his missionary journey, and assisted him in forming the Churches of Greece; who was subsequently associated with the work of Peter (1 Pet. v. 12), and as one of the founders of the Churches in Greece, must have come much into contact with Timothy (1 Thess. i. 1; 2 Thess. i. 1; 2 Cor. i. 19)? This gives the key to the relations between the writer and Timothy implied in Hebrews xiii. 23, "with whom, if he come shortly, I will see you." Silas was with Paul during nearly two years of his ministry in Corinth, and this accounts for the apostolic character of the teaching which many modern critics have observed in the Epistle to the Hebrews. The writer had come largely under the

<sup>1</sup> *De Pudicitia*, c. 20.

influence of Paul. If we compare 1 Corinthians iii. 2, "I fed you with milk, not with meat," with Hebrews v. 12-14, "Ye are become such as have need of milk, not of strong meat . . . "; or again, 1 Corinthians x. 1-11 with Hebrews iii. 12-19—can we not clearly catch the echo of the teachings to which the writer had listened from the lips of Paul at Corinth? Lastly, as the companion of the Apostle Peter towards the close of his career, Silas may have gone with him to Rome; which would explain how he was able to tell the Judean Christians of the liberation of Timothy and of his approaching departure from Italy, adding the promise that he would visit them with him.

Whatever conclusion may be arrived at from a consideration of all these various theories, we are glad to close this study of the Epistle with the words of Thiersch: "If it should be found that a noble picture, which had been attributed to Raphael, was not by that artist, there would not be one masterpiece the less, but one great master the more."

To us it seems certain that the admirable Epistle we have been studying is not from the pen of Paul; but this very fact only serves to reveal to us the abundance and excellence of the spiritual gifts possessed by men who occupied only the second rank in the apostolic Church. Whether they were named Barnabas or Apollos, Aquila or Silas, these stars of the second magnitude were able to send forth far-reaching rays of light; and we recognise the fitness of the title *prophets* applied to some of them, "first apostles, then prophets" (1 Cor. xii. 28). Though the Epistle to the Hebrews is not of apostolic origin, it is none the less a prophetic scripture, a true document of revelation.<sup>1</sup>

F. GODET.

<sup>1</sup> Different opinions prevail as to the epistolary supplement (chap. xiii. 22-25) and its relation to the rest of the letter. Delitzsch attributes these four verses