

Hebrews

(The following is taken from the Introduction to MacDonald's commentary on Hebrews. It provides a good overview of the book generally and maybe helpful to some people who wonder about various passages in the book which are confusing.)

In a general way, this work deals with the tremendous struggle in leaving one religious system for another. There is the violent wrenching of old ties, the stresses and tensions of alienation, and the formidable pressures exerted on the renegade to return.

But in this Epistle the problem was not just a question of leaving an old system for a new one of equal value. Rather it was a matter of leaving Judaism for Christ, and as the writer shows, this involved leaving shadows for the substance, ritual for reality, the prior for the ultimate, the temporary for the permanent—in short, the good for the best.

We do not know the identity of the author. Many are convinced it was the Apostle Paul. Others are equally sure it was not. The safest position is to say that we do not know. But this in no way affects the inspiration of the letter; it has always been accepted by Christians as an integral part of God's Word.

We do know that the letter was written sometime between the ascension of Christ in A.D. 33 and the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70. The Lord Jesus was already seated at the right hand of God in Heaven (Heb 10:12); and the argument of the Epistle indicates that the sacrificial system was still being carried on by the Jewish priests in the Temple.

We also know that the letter was written to people of Hebrew background. These Hebrews had heard the gospel preached by the apostles and others during the early days of the Church, and had seen the mighty miracles of the Holy Spirit which confirmed the message. They had responded to the good news in one of three ways:

The covenant of the law given by God through Moses. The divinely appointed furniture in the sanctuary, and the magnificent veil. The services in the sanctuary, and especially the ritual on the great Day of Atonement. (This was the most important day in the Jewish calendar.)

We can almost hear the first-century Jews presenting all these glories of their ancient, ritualistic religion, then asking with a sneer, "And what do you Christians have? We have all this. What do you have? Nothing but a simple upper room, a table, and some bread and wine on the table! Do you mean to say you have left all this—for that?"

The Epistle to the Hebrews is really an answer to the question, "What do you have?" In a word the answer is Christ. In Him we have:

One who is greater than the prophets.

One who is greater than the angels.

One who is greater than Moses.

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One who is greater than Joshua.

One whose priesthood is superior to that of Aaron.

One who serves in a better sanctuary.

One who has introduced a better covenant.

One who is the antitype of the typical furniture and veil.

One whose once-for-all offering of Himself is superior to the repeated sacrifices of bulls and goats.

Just as the stars fade from view in the greater glory of the sun, so the types and shadows of Judaism pale into insignificance before the greater glory of the Person and work of the Lord Jesus.

Yet there was still the problem of persecution. All who professed to be followers of the Lord Jesus faced bitter, fanatical opposition. For true believers this could lead to the peril of discouragement and despair. They therefore needed to be encouraged to have faith in the promises of God. They needed endurance in view of the coming reward.

Some believed on the Lord Jesus Christ and were genuinely converted. Some professed to become Christians, were baptized, and took their place in local assemblies. However, they had never been born again by the Spirit of God. Others flatly rejected the message of salvation.

Our Epistle deals with the first two classes—truly saved Hebrews and those who had nothing but an outward veneer of Christianity.

Now when a Jew left the faith of his forefathers, he was looked on as a turncoat and an apostate; and was often punished with one or more of the following: disinheritance by his family, excommunication from the congregation of Israel, loss of employment, dispossession, mental harassment, and physical torture, public mockery, imprisonment, martyrdom.

Of course, there was always the escape route. If he would renounce Christ and return to Judaism, he would be spared from further persecution. As we read between the lines of this letter, we can detect some of the strong arguments that were used to persuade him to return to the Jewish fold:

The rich heritage of the prophets.

The prominent ministry of angels in the history of God's ancient people.

Association with the illustrious lawgiver, Moses.

National ties with the brilliant military commander, Joshua.

The glory of the Aaronic priesthood.

The sacred sanctuary where God chose to dwell among His people.

For those who were only nominal Christians, there was the danger of apostasy. After professing to receive Christ, they might utterly renounce Him and return to ritualistic religion. This was tantamount to trampling on the Son of God, profaning His blood, and insulting the Holy Spirit. For this willful sin there was no repentance or forgiveness. Against this sin there are repeated warnings in the letter to the Hebrews. In 2:1 it is described as drifting away from the message of

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Christ. In 3:7-19 it is the sin of rebellion or of hardening the heart. In 6:6 it is falling away or committing apostasy. In 10:26 it is the willful or deliberate sin. In 12:16 it is spoken of as selling one's birthright for a single meal. Finally in 12:25 it is called a refusal to hear the One who is speaking from Heaven. But all these warnings are directed against different aspects of the same sin—the sin of apostasy.

As we shall see, the message of the Epistle is as timely today as it was in the first century of the Church. We need to be constantly reminded of the eternal privileges and blessings that are ours in Christ. We need encouragement to endure in spite of opposition and difficulties, and all professing believers need to be warned against reverting to ceremonial religion after having tasted and seen that the Lord is good.

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