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The Interpretation of the Epistle to the Hebrews.

BY THE REV. A. C. DOWNER, D.D.

WE are gradually advancing in our interpretation of the Epistle to the Hebrews. But it is vital that we should establish a principle that will guide us through all the intricacies of this remarkable composition, and exhibit the working out of the writer's aim in a clear and logical coherence.

There are some problems belonging to the Epistle that have never been solved, and probably never will be solved, but the Divine teaching for the Church in all ages may be ascertained in an ever-increasing degree.

The uncertainties of the Epistle comprise—(1) its author, (2) the actual society or group of individuals he addressed, (3) the place in which it was written.

The certainties are: (1) The influence of the thought of St. Paul upon the Epistle. (2) The character of those to whom it was addressed—namely, that they were Hebrews of the circumcision without any Gentile admixture; that they were believers in the Messiahship of Jesus; that they had been, and probably still were, persecuted by the unbelieving Jews in consequence of their faith; and that, owing to such persecution, they were in danger of abandoning their confession and reverting to unbelieving Judaism. (3) The object of the Epistle, which was to fortify these Hebrews against the danger of apostasy from Christ.

The method adopted by the writer to attain his end is to show in various lights the pre-eminence of the Gospel above the Law by showing the superiority of Jesus, as Mediator of the New Covenant, to the official messengers and mediators of the Old Covenant; and, having done this, to press home the inference that the Hebrews were bound to adhere to the perfect and complete development of Divine truth as made known in Christ, and not go back to the imperfect and ineffective system that was only introductory to it.

The Epistle is in parts difficult; the argumentation is not easily followed, and certain passages are especially elusive and easy to misunderstand.

The question before us is this: "Is there any principle of interpretation which, while it preserves to us all that has been solidly ascertained concerning its teaching, will also help to clear up the difficult passages, and to make their interpretation fall into line with the rest?" I am persuaded that there is, and that when this principle has been found and consistently applied throughout, sifting away all unsound, partial, and opportunist interpretations of particular passages, we shall have remaining an exegesis that will make the teaching of the Epistle stand out with a clarity of meaning, a consistency of argument, and a cogency of application, that have been attained by no commentary upon it hitherto published.

This principle is in itself simple, and to a considerable extent has been employed already, though not consistently and completely. It is that, in interpreting the Epistle, we must adopt the strictly Hebrew point of view, not confounding the purely Hebrew readers to whom it was addressed with the mixed Church of Jews and Gentiles—the "Christian" or "Catholic" Church, as we are accustomed to call it. It must invariably be regarded as written to Hebrews who believe in Jesus and who read the Hebrew¹ Scriptures, who are true to their national ideals and loyal to their great teacher Moses, but who have found the true meaning of the Old Covenant in the New, and the perfect consummation of the former revelation in Christ Jesus, in whom Divine truth is embodied and perfection and finality are found. The Catholic Church, as such, must therefore be ruled out of this system of interpretation as not being in view; for it was not present to the mind of the writer, nor would it be to the minds of his readers, nor is it once so much as named or referred to in the course of the Epistle.

¹ That is, the writings of Moses and the Prophets; not necessarily in the Hebrew language, as the quotations from the Old Testament in the Epistle are all from the Septuagint.

So far, perhaps, most will follow me. But when we proceed to apply this principle in detail, taking the Epistle as addressed to Hebrews only and as appealing to their ancient Scriptures, and not to their present condition, we shall need courage to differ from commentators, some of them of the highest order, who, while admitting that the Epistle was addressed to believing Hebrews, and that it is in general an exposition of Old Testament Scriptures, depart from this principle in certain instances in order to bring in specifically Christian ideas, doctrines, and rites. It would seem that they have been misled by the similarity of certain Hebrew customs and ideas to their analogies or developments under Christianity, and have ridden off upon the language to something in each case foreign to the scope of the Epistle.

Coming to details, we will take as the first instance specially illustrative of our method the celebrated passage in chap. vi. 1, 2, in which the writer enumerates what the Authorized Version terms "the principles of the doctrine of Christ," or, more strictly, "the word of the beginning of the Messiah." It is common to take these as distinctively Christian, or at least inclusively so, and in this sense they are taken in Bishop Westcott's learned commentary. "Repentance from dead works," thus interpreted, includes the distinctive repentance of Pentecost. "Faith toward God," similarly, is "faith in Christ." "The doctrine of baptisms," notwithstanding the unusual form *βαπτισμῶν*, and the plural number, is taken to include Christian baptism. "The laying on of hands" comprises confirmation and ordination. And "resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment" are, on this principle, to be understood in their most developed New Testament sense.

But, if our principle is correct, all this is beside the mark; and, not only so, but it entirely obscures the real meaning and force of the passage. The "repentance from dead works," although a germinal form of that repentance which accompanies the preaching of the Gospel, is not the *τελειότης* of it, since it stands in no relation to the Cross of Christ, but is no more than the repentance which was preached by John. Nor is the

“faith toward God” the perfect faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, but only that which any pious Jew possessed before the coming of the Messiah. The βαπτίσμοι are not Christian baptism in the name of the Trinity, notwithstanding the fact that the earlier washings of Old Testament days doubtless prepared the way for that, Christian baptism being always βάπτισμα. Trench, in his “Synonyms of the New Testament” (pp. 347-349), excellently deals with the connotation of the word here used: “βαπτισμός has not there [*i.e.*, in the New Testament], as I am convinced, arrived at the dignity of setting forth Christian baptism at all. By βαπτισμός in the usage of the New Testament we must understand any ceremonial washing or lustration, such as either has been ordained of God (Heb. ix. 10) or invented by man (Mark vii. 4, 8); while by βάπτισμα we understand baptism in our Christian sense of the word (Rom. vi. 4; 1 Pet. iii. 21; Eph. iv. 5), yet not so strictly as to exclude the baptism of John (Luke vii. 29; Acts xix. 3).” The fact that, in chap. ix. 10, βαπτισμοῖς stands quite obviously for Old Testament lustrations, and not Christian baptism, is a strong reason for understanding the same word in chap. vi. 2 in the same way. This being the case, we must exclude the idea of Christian baptism from the passage before us. Similarly, “the laying on of hands” is not identical with that imposition of hands which we find in Acts viii. 17 *et seq.* and Acts xix. 6, by which the gift of the Holy Spirit was communicated, and which has been perpetuated in the rite of confirmation; nor is it that other χειροθέσια of Acts vi. 6, 1 Tim. iv. 14, and other places in the New Testament, by which candidates for the sacred ministry are solemnly set apart and endued with special gifts of the ordaining Spirit, but is that pre-Messianic rite which we shall find in various connections in the Old Testament—*e.g.*, Lev. xvi. 21, etc.; while resurrection and judgment are to be understood as they were taught in the Old Testament, and not in the further, fuller light of the second coming of Jesus Christ. The Hebrews are exhorted not to lay again the foundation which consisted in these, but to press on to perfection—that is, to the full know-

ledge and belief that belong to the Gospel, and especially the knowledge of Jesus as the risen and ascended Messiah of His people. If we understand "the word of the beginning of the Messiah" as equivalent to the full Gospel of Jesus Christ, the exhortation has no meaning; there is nothing left to which to press on. Thus the force of the appeal is lost.

The next passage I take for consideration is chap. ix. 6-10. On ver. 6, in which the Revised Version gives, "the priests go [not "went," as the Authorized Version] in continually into the first Tabernacle," Conybeare and Howson well say: "The writer appears to speak as if the tabernacle were still standing." And again: "Manifestly he is speaking of *the sanctuary of the First Covenant* (see ix. 1), as originally *designed*." But they unhappily go on to add: "And he goes on to speak of the existing Temple-worship, as the continuation of the Tabernacle-worship, which in all essential points it was." There is no reference in the passage, or anywhere in the Epistle, to the Temple-worship, as such. The translators of the Authorized Version, owing to their misunderstanding of the passage, have—as, indeed, Conybeare and Howson themselves point out—mistranslated many verbs in the following passage which are in the *present* tense, rendering them by the *past* tense (*e.g.*, εἰσίστασιν, ix. 6; προσφέρει, ix. 7; προσφέρονται, ix. 9; εἰσέρχεται, ix. 25; προσφέρουσι, x. 1; ἀποθνήσκει, x. 28); and Conybeare and Howson add: "The English reader is thus led to suppose that the Epistle was written after the cessation of the Temple-worship." But this difficulty disappears if we understand the passage as referring, not to the Temple at all, but simply to the Tabernacle as it appears in the pages of Exodus and Leviticus, and take the present tenses—εἰσίστασιν, etc.—as the historical present, or, as we may say, the present of interpretation.

Westcott well says: "The present εἰσίστασιν expresses the ideal fulfilment of the original Mosaic institution. The writer here deals only with the original conception realized in the Tabernacle, though elsewhere (chap. viii. 4) he recognizes the perpetuation of the Levitical ritual." We may admit Westcott's

view, here given, of viii. 4 (*δυντων τῶν προσφερόντων κατὰ νόμον τὰ δῶρα*), without in the least invalidating our argument, especially as in the following verse (ver. 5) the writer proves his point by an appeal to Exod. xxv. 40. At the same time, we are under no compulsion to take ver. 4, with Westcott, as implying the perpetuation of the Levitical ritual, since it may well be understood, and I myself so understand it, in strict reference to the provisions of the Law itself—that is, to the page of Scripture.

But Conybeare and Howson say that chap. ix. 25 (*ὁ ἀρχιερεὺς εἰσέρχεται εἰς τὰ ἅγια κατ' ἐνιαυτὸν κ.τ.λ.*) and chap. xiii. 11-13 (*εἰσφέρεται . . . τὸ αἷμα*) speak of the Temple services as still going on. This is an error. The writer is plainly throwing back the minds of his readers to Lev. xvi., interpreting Moses' commandment as to the Day of Atonement, and is not speaking of contemporary worship. This mistaken point of view is continually appearing in Conybeare and Howson, as when they say on chap. ix. 8 (*ἔτι τῆς πρώτης σκηνῆς ἐχούσης στάσιω*): "It may be asked, How could it be said after Christ's ascension that *the way into the holy place was not made fully manifest*? The explanation is that, while the Temple-worship, with its exclusion of all but the high-priest from the Holy of Holies, still existed, the way of salvation would not be *fully manifest* to those who adhered to the outward and typical observances, instead of being thereby led to the Antitype." The unsatisfactory character of this explanation will appear when we consider that after the Ascension the way into the holiest was indeed fully manifested and proclaimed with the utmost clearness to all who heard the Gospel, although some of them might reject it for themselves, and, in point of fact, did reject it. Again the difficulty vanishes when we take the statement, as I have already said, of the Tabernacle as originally designed. As before, chap. ix. 8 is simply interpretative of Lev. xvi. "The ritual of the Day of Atonement," writes Westcott, ". . . is present to the mind of the writer throughout this section of the Epistle."

The passage of powerful warning—chap. x. 26 *et seq.*—becomes clearer when interpreted according to the principle

now laid down. The contrast is between the sacrifices ordered in the ritual of the Day of Atonement, which could not remove sin, and the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, which could do so. If Christ's sacrifice were rejected, there was no other that could effect pardon ("there remaineth no more a sacrifice for sins"). It is not said that the sacrifice of Christ is unable to atone for the sin of backsliding, but that there is no other that can do so, the sacrifices of the Old Covenant being admittedly inadequate; so that there is nothing to stand between the sinner and judgment if Christ's sacrifice be refused.

The last passage for consideration in illustration of our principle of interpretation is perhaps the most characteristic of all—the famous passage, chap. xiii. 10-12: "We have an altar, whereof they have no right to eat which serve the Tabernacle. For the bodies of those beasts, whose blood is brought into the holy place by the high-priest as an offering for sin, are burned without the camp. Wherefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people through His own blood, suffered without the gate." Upon this passage, and especially upon the vexed and puzzling question, what this "altar" is, many laboured explanations have been given, all of which but one leave the meaning darker than before. For example, Alford, without a glimpse of the true interpretation, gives five different explanations of the altar (*θυσιαστήριον*), with the authorities for each. Thus, it is (1) merely a term to help the figure (Alford cites Schlichting, Sykes, Michaelis, Kuinoel, Tholuck); (2) Christ Himself (Suicer, Wolf, Cyril of Alexandria); (3) the Lord's Table (Cornelius a Lapide, Böhme, Bähr, Ebrard, Bisping, Stier); (4) the heavenly place (Bretschneider); (5) the Cross (Thomas Aquinas, Jac. Capell., Estius, Bengel, Ernesti, Bleek, De Wette, Stengel, Lünem., Delitzsch). The last of these is adopted by Alford himself. Kay, however, in the "Speaker's Commentary," will not admit the possibility of Alford's solution, and sees in the altar nothing but the Divine-human personality of Christ.

Moberly, in his "Ministerial Priesthood," will have it to be

the Communion table. Westcott takes it of "Christ Himself, Christ crucified," and quotes Thomas Aquinas: "Istud altare vel est crux Christi . . . vel ipse Christus." Saphir says that the Hebrews are exhorted to look away from the *Temple altar*. Conybeare and Howson very wisely say nothing about it. All these, and many other expositors of all ages, agree in the error that the altar is a Christian altar, whether it be Christ Himself, the cross on which He died, or the Holy Communion table; this error arising from the fact that they have one and all forgotten the Hebrew point of view from which the Epistle and every part of it must be regarded, and the vital point that we must not interpret any of its references as alluding to contemporary worship, but to the directions given by Moses in the Law.

In like manner, a great cloud of words has gathered round the expression, *οἱ τῆ σκηνῆ λατρεύοντες* ("those who serve the Tabernacle," or "in the Tabernacle"), some taking it of the Jewish priesthood of the period of the Epistle along with those associated with them in observing the ceremonial law, and some even of Christians—a strange idea arrived at by a tortuous piece of arguing (see Alford). These expositions leave the subject and the mind of the student in a state of hopeless confusion, and their strained endeavours to make that cohere which is essentially incoherent, and to reduce to orderly sequence that which is illogical, only exhibit the darkening results of a false system of interpretation.

When we come back to the Hebrew point of view all is clear. The "we" implied in *ἔχομεν* is not "we Christians," but "we Hebrews." *ἔχομεν* does not mean "we have now," in the sense of at the moment of inditing the Epistle, and in reference to a substantial object to be dealt with, but as we find it in the pages of the Old Testament, or as Moses delivered it to us in the ceremonial law. *οἱ τῆ σκηνῆ λατρεύοντες*, then, means the Levitical priests, as they appear in the writings of Moses, and perhaps also the lay worshippers. There is no slur upon them conveyed by this expression, as though because they served in

the Tabernacle they were ignorant of Christ and His salvation ; they are simply spoken of in their official capacity. "Tabernacle" is not equivalent to "Temple," the Temple, as such, not being in question, because the time under consideration here, as throughout the Epistle, is the giving of the Law at Sinai, and not the time when the Epistle was composed. The *θυσιαστήριον* is not a New Testament, but an Old Testament, altar ; not Christian, but Jewish ; and it can be nothing but the altar of sin-offering in Lev. xvi. And the Hebrews are not being urged to look away from the Temple altar of their own day, but to understand the true typical import of the sin-offering of the Day of Atonement. Further, we must, by a well-understood metonymy, take *θυσιαστήριον*, not as the material altar, but as the sacrifice offered in connection with the altar. And the conjunction *γὰρ*, "for," indicates beyond question that ver. 11 is the explanation and amplification of ver. 10, or, in other words, that "the bodies of those beasts, whose blood is brought into the holy place by the high-priest as an offering for sin," are one and the same thing as the altar or altar sacrifice spoken of in the previous sentence. But the sacrifice of ver. 11 is manifestly the sin-offering of Lev. xvi., and consequently this is the true meaning of the "altar" in ver. 10. This has been admirably elucidated in a short publication by the late Rev. E. B. Elliott,¹ which deserves wide circulation.

The Rev. George Milligan, in his "Theology of the Epistle to the Hebrews," comes very near to a sight of the principle we are seeking to establish. He sees the mistake of the translators of 1611 in substituting past tenses for present ones in chap. ix. 6, 7, 9, 25 ; chap. x, 1, 28. He says : "The *present* tenses, under which the old Jewish ritual is described, and which are appealed to in this connection, are the presents not of actual observance, but what we may call Scripture-presents. The writer speaks from the point of view of the record in Scripture. While a further blow is given to this whole theory [*i.e.*, that Jerusalem

¹ "We have an Altar." By the late Rev. E. B. Elliott, M.A. Seeley and Co. Price 3d. (Reprint from the *Christian Observer*, November, 1871.)

was the locality in which the intended readers of the Epistle dwelt] by the fact that the references throughout are not to the services of the Temple at Jerusalem at all, but to the old Tabernacle ritual of the wilderness." Nothing could be sounder or more to the point. But as soon as he comes in view of chap. xiii. 10 he loses sight of his own principle, and propounds an interpretation inconsistent with it, following the ruck of interpreters. "'We,'" he says, "we Christians, 'have an altar'—an altar, moreover, 'whereof they have no right to eat which serve the Tabernacle,' and whose ministry, consequently, is outward and earthly." Of course this is, so far as the present passage is concerned, entirely destructive of what he had so well said before.

Mr. Milligan, Westcott, and others in a less degree, occasionally see the principle I have laid down; but they do not uniformly apply it, and hence even they are not free from confusion of thought. We have only, with the Hebrew thread as a clue in our hand, to follow it up consistently and courageously, from the beginning to the end of the Epistle, to obtain a clear and powerful exposition—an exposition, moreover, which, because it has never yet been given unmixed with confusing and inconsistent elements, will come with all the force of novelty.

Let but a commentator arise, duly equipped with the necessary learning and scholarship, who shall give us such an exposition, governed throughout by this principle, and I venture to think that it will come as a revelation to the theological student. The Epistle to the Hebrews will emerge from the cloudy vagueness in which it has been enveloped, and will stand out with an illuminating brilliancy which it has never yet possessed, an apologetic of the highest value, the vehicle for truth of the highest order, and the touchstone of many of the errors that afflict our day.

