

Recent Literature on the Epistle to the Hebrews

by F. F. Bruce

This survey confines itself to work published within the past twenty years, and almost entirely to work published in the English language.

The great problem of the Epistle to the Hebrews is not the identity of its author but the life-setting of its readers – not so much their geographical location as the crisis of faith and action in which they found themselves at the time when the unnamed author judged it expedient to send them his ‘word of exhortation’. Since the Epistle must be dated in the same period as most of the other New Testament Epistles (its use by Clement of Rome establishes its first-century date, apart from considerations of internal evidence) it is natural to look in those other Epistles, alongside the Acts of the Apostles, for clues which might help us to solve the problem of Hebrews. More recently the discovery and study of the Qumran texts has seemed to some students to shed further light on this problem.

1. *Hebrews in relation to apostolic history and literature*

T. W. Manson, ‘The Problem of the Epistle to the Hebrews’, *BJRL* xxxii, 1949-50, pp. 1 ff., put forward the suggestion that the Epistle was written by Apollos to the churches of the

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Lycus valley, to deal with an earlier stage of the Colossian heresy than that dealt with by Paul in Colossians. In Hebrews 5-10 it is shown that the whole Jewish ritual system is superseded by the high-priestly work of Christ; in Heb. 1-4 the uniqueness and supremacy of Christ are established as against all other intermediaries; thus the first ten chapters of our Epistle present ‘a complete refutation of the Colossian heresy as that heresy is described by Lightfoot’, while Heb. 13:9 may contain a reference to the same dietary discipline as Paul condemns in Col. 2:16. If, ‘when the news about the Colossian heresy was later conveyed to Paul at Rome, a copy of Hebrews was sent along with the news,’ then, in T. W. Manson’s opinion, several facts in the early history of the Epistle could be explained.

Another destination for the Epistle in the province of Asia was suggested soon afterwards by W. F. Howard, ‘The Epistle to the Hebrews’, *Interpretation* v, 1951, pp. 80 ff. Howard thought of the addressees as a group of wealthy and cultured Jews at Ephesus. They had become Christians during Paul’s Ephesian ministry, but their faith waned after Paul’s imprisonment and execution in Rome. They looked down on their Gentile fellow-Christians as low-born and

uneducated, still too much influenced by the moral laxity of their former paganism. Timothy (Heb. 13:23) had obeyed Paul's summons to Rome (2 Tim. 4:9 ff.) and been himself imprisoned because his association with Paul laid him open to suspicion; but now that he was released he would be a very useful helper of the author in the attempt to restore the Christian loyalty of the wavering addressees in a place where he was already well known.

More important than either of these contributions is William Manson's *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (London: Hodder, 1951), based on the Baird Lecture for 1949. It considerably weakened the hold which had for quite a long time been maintained on scholars in the English-speaking world by the view (propounded especially by James Moffatt and E. F. Scott) that the religious situation of the addressees had nothing to do with any attraction exercised by Judaism but 'was determined by some form of secular drift to irreligion or to paganism'. William Manson accepts a Roman destination for the Epistle, as many (pre-eminently Harnack) had done earlier, but makes a contribution of his own to this thesis. The Roman church, which had a Jewish-Christian base (Rom. 11:18), was committed as a whole to the implications of the Gentile world-mission, but it included a small and conservative enclave of Jewish Christians who clung to the more exclusive traditions of their ancestral religion and found themselves increasingly out of sympathy with the forward movement of Gentile Christianity. The Epistle was written to encourage these

people to leave the fancied security of their *religio licita* and commit themselves unreservedly to the adventurous path along which Christ was leading His people. The influence of William Manson's work may be traced in a number of studies which have appeared since 1951, such as William Neil's commentary in the 'Torch' series (London: SCM, 1955) and the present writer's contributions to *Peake's Commentary on the Bible*, ed. M. Black and H. H. Rowley (London: Nelson, 1962), and to the 'New International Commentary on the New Testament' (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964).

The year after William Manson's book was published, C. Spicq's great French commentary in two volumes appeared in the 'Etudes Bibliques' series: *L'Épître aux Hébreux* (Paris: Gabalda, 1952). Spicq deals with every aspect of the study of the Epistle; so far as the life-setting is concerned, he revives with modifications a theory previously presented by K. Bornhäuser in *Empfänger und Verfasser des Briefes an die Hebräer* (Gütersloh, 1932), in which the addressees are identified with the 'priests' of Acts 6:7. He thinks of Caesarea or Syrian Antioch as the place where the recipients were living at the time when the Epistle was written, with a preference for Antioch: the allusions to the Maccabean martyrdoms in Heb. 11:35 ff. are matched by 'a Syrian notice of the cult which is markedly Antiochian in detail'.

Antony Snell, in *New and Living Way* (London: Faith Press, 1959), revives the identification of the author with Barnabas, and thinks of the recipients as Jewish converts in

Cyprus, for whom Barnabas had direct pastoral responsibility; in that case a setting for the Epistle might be found in the wave of patriotic excitement which the war in Judaea of A.D. 66-70 must have caused in the Jewish communities of Cyprus as of other places.

But the latest major work on the Epistle presents one of the most fascinating and carefully argued cases for a setting closely interwoven with the Pauline mission field that has ever been put forward. H. W. Montefiore's *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (London: A. & C. Black, 1964) suggests that it was written by Apollos to the Corinthian church, between A.D. 52 and 54. He finds a clue to the life-setting in 1 Cor. 16:12, where Paul tells the Corinthians that although he had urged Apollos strongly to pay them a visit, it was out of the question for Apollos to go to Corinth just then. Since Apollos could not visit Corinth, Canon Montefiore suggests, he wrote a letter to the church there instead, and this letter is our Epistle to the Hebrews, the title of which may point to the 'Hebrews' of 2 Cor. 11:22 as the people *against* whom the Epistle was especially aimed. A Corinthian destination had been suggested by other scholars, but Canon Montefiore builds up a more detailed case in its favour than his predecessors had done. 'Those from Italy' whose greetings are conveyed by the writer in Heb. 13:24 are his friends Priscilla and Aquila, the only people in the whole New Testament who are expressly named as having come 'from Italy' (Acts 18:2). Apollos's letter failed of its purpose; not only did the readers ignore his warning

about fornication (Heb. 13:4), but some of them used his letter to justify the formation of an Apollos party over against those whose watchword was 'I am of Paul'. Very soon after the reception of Apollos's letter at Corinth, Paul had to send the same church 1 Corinthians, in which Canon Montefiore thinks allusions to Hebrews can be detected.

2. *Hebrews in relation to the Qumran community*

When the newly discovered texts from Qumran began to be studied, attempts were almost inevitably made to find some link between the doctrines of the Qumran community and those presupposed in the Epistle to the Hebrews. In an article in *JBL* lxxiv, 1955, pp. 213 ff., on 'The Significance of the Qumran Texts for Research into the Beginnings of Christianity', Oscar Cullmann saw a connexion between the Qumran community and the New Testament 'Hellenists', not least the priests of Acts 6:7. In the same year F. M. Braun, writing in *Revue Biblique* lxxii, 1955, pp. 5 ff. on 'L'arrière-fond judaïque du quatrième Évangile et la Communauté de l'Alliance', expressed the view that 'of all the New Testament writings, the Epistle to the Hebrews is the one which gives the fullest answer to the basic tendencies of the (Qumran) sect'. In 1957 Jean Daniélou, in *Les manuscrits de la Mer Morte et les origines du Christianisme*, translated as *The Dead Sea Scrolls and Primitive Christianity* (New York: Mentor Omega Books, 1962), suggested that it was 'quite reasonable to view those to whom the Epistle was addressed as a group of

Essenian priests'. The account of the life-setting of the Epistle given by C. Spicq in his commentary was elaborated by him in an article 'L'Épître aux Hébreux: Apollos, Jean-Baptiste, les Hellénistes et Qumrân' in *Revue de Qumrân* i, 1958-59, pp. 365 ff., where he argued that the converted priests to whom the Epistle was addressed were 'Esseno-Christians', including former members of the Qumran sect, whose 'doctrinal and biblical formation, intellectual preoccupations and religious presuppositions' were well known to the writer of the Epistle. *Scripta Hierosolymitana* iv, 1958, which was devoted to 'Aspects of the Dead Sea Scrolls', contained two articles relevant to our present subject. David Flusser's article on 'The Dead Sea Sect and Pre-Pauline Christianity' (pp. 215 ff.) argues that since New Testament affinities with Qumran teaching occur in Pauline and non-Pauline documents alike they probably go back to pre-Pauline Christianity; among those affinities are some, like purifying washing, the new covenant, and the concept of the spiritual temple, for which specially valuable evidence is found in Hebrews. Yigael Yadin's article 'The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Epistle to the Hebrews' (pp. 36 ff.) identifies the addressees of the Epistle with Jews originally belonging to the Qumran sect, who were converted to Christianity but carried with them into Christianity some of their former beliefs and practices, with which the writer of the Epistle takes issue. Among these survivals of their former association Dr. Yadin makes special reference to the eschatological role of angels and to the figures of a

priestly Messiah and the prophet of the end-time.

A major contribution to this particular aspect of our subject was Hans Kosmala's *Hebräer-Essener-Christen* (Leiden: Brill, 1959). At the outset of this work Dr. Kosmala claims that it was from him that Dr. Yadin first got the idea of a connexion between Qumran and Hebrews, but that Dr. Yadin published it first. However, the connexion as elaborated by Dr. Kosmala differs somewhat from Dr. Yadin's thesis. Dr. Kosmala's view is that the addressees were not Jewish Christians who were inclined to revert to Judaism, but Jews who had come a good distance on the road to Christianity, but still stopped short of the goal – Jews, indeed, whose outlook was very similar to that of the Qumran community and other Essenes. He illustrates his thesis not only from the Qumran texts but also from some funerary inscriptions in the Beth-shearim area which he regards as Essene in character. Much of the most fruitful early Christian evangelization, Dr. Kosmala believes, was carried out among Essene groups.

In the volume on *Hebrews, James, I and II Peter* in 'Layman's Bible Commentaries' (London: SCM, 1962), J. W. Bowman regards the recipients of Hebrews as members of the Hellenistic Jewish-Christian church in Palestine who had come under Qumran influence, and whose understanding of the Gospel was so defective that an exposition along the lines of the Epistle was urgently required. The particular group of Hellenistic Christians addressed is located at Sychar, where in earlier days John the Baptist and Jesus, and later Philip

the Hellenist, had preached. But since Philip's missionary activity in that region, 'the centre of Christian evangelistic effort had passed from Jerusalem to Syrian Antioch, bypassing Samaria and its Hellenistic-Jewish community on the way.'

All such views receive a sober and critical examination from Joseph Coppens in *Les affinités qumrâniennes de l'Épître aux Hébreux* (Bruges-Paris: Desclée De Brouwer, 1962). He points out that the contacts with Qumran, even the best substantiated ones, are much less prominent than those with Philonic Judaism. To his critique this may be added. The recipients of the Epistle were probably Jewish Christians whose background was not so much the normative Judaism represented in rabbinical tradition as the non-conformist Judaism of which the Qumran and other Essene communities are representatives, but by no means the only representatives. Traces of this non-conformist Judaism survive in Roman Christianity as late as the beginning of the 3rd century A.D. (e.g. in the *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus); this was probably the form of Judaism to which the Roman recipients of the Epistle had formerly adhered, and to which they were in danger of slipping back. But to say this is quite a different matter from attempting to establish for them anything like a direct contact with one of the Essene communities of Palestine.

3. Other questions

The view that Hebrews 13 was written by Paul as a 'letter of commendation' to validate the author's thesis

(so G. A. Simcox, 'Heb. xiii; 2 Tim. iv', *Exp. Times* x, 1898-99, pp. 430 ff.) or that it is a fragment of a Pauline letter (e.g. of the 'severe letter' to Corinth) mistakenly tacked on to a work with which it had nothing to do (so E. D. Jones, 'The Authorship of Hebrews xiii', *Exp. Times* xlvi, 1934-35, pp. 562 ff.) has been brought to mind afresh by A. Q. Morton's conclusion, based on literary statistics, that 'the last chapter of Hebrews is Pauline' (*British Weekly* March 18, 1965).

The structure of the Epistle has been investigated by A. Vanhoye, S. J., in *La structure littéraire de l'Épître aux Hébreux* (Paris-Bruges: Desclée De Brouwer, 1963) and *Épître aux Hébreux: Texte Grec Structuré* (Fano: Typis Paulinis, 1966); he argues that the Epistle is a carefully constructed and balanced work.

A number of students have dealt with the Old Testament exegesis of the Epistle. R. Rendall ('The Method of the Writer to the Hebrews in using Old Testament Quotations', *Evang. Quarterly* xxvii, 1955, pp. 214 ff.) and S. Kistemaker (*The Psalm Citations in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Amsterdam: Van Soest, 1961) have drawn attention to the crucial part played by selected psalms in the author's exposition of his theme – especially Psalms 8, 40, 95 and 110. Markus Barth ('The Old Testament in Hebrews', in the *Otto Piper Festschrift, Current Issues in New Testament Interpretation*, ed. W. Klassen and G. F. Snyder, New York: Harper, 1962, pp. 53 ff.) finds that for the author's exegesis is the endeavour to help people in need by telling them what the Bible says of their shepherd Jesus Christ'. F. C. Synge (*Hebrews*

and the Scriptures, London: S.P.C.K., 1959) maintains that the Epistle is based on a collection of *testimonia* relating to a 'heavenly companion' with whom God is represented as conversing – a companion whom the author identifies with Jesus. S. G. Sowers (*The Hermeneutics of Philo and Hebrews*, Zürich: EVZ Verlag, 1965) shows that, while the author of Hebrews had received some training in the allegorical exegesis characteristic of Philo, he abandons it in favour of a typological exegesis because his mind had come to be controlled by the common thought and faith of the church and he had learned to understand the history of salvation in terms of the two covenants.

The author's affinities with Philo and his radical divergences from Philo have been treated judiciously by Père Spicq in Chapter 3 ('Le philonisme de l'Épître aux Hébreux') of the introductory volume of his commentary: 'the language and the arrangement of thought are Philonic, . . . the doctrine is apostolic' (p. 91). R. V. G. Tasker (*The Gospel in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, London: Tyndale Press, 1950) shows how the Epistle, for all its distinctive features, is true to the primitive preaching, especially as it presents the Old Testament preparation, the fulfilment thereof in the coming of Christ, the consequences in the inauguration of the new age, and the appeal to repentance and faith. C. K. Barrett ('The Eschatology of the Epistle to the Hebrews' in the *C. H. Dodd Festschrift, The Background of the New Testament and its Eschatology*, Cambridge: University Press, 1956, pp. 363 ff.) shows how the eschatology of the Epistle retains the two foci of

early Christian eschatology; Christ has been manifested 'at the consummation of the ages' (Heb. 9:26) while His appearance is still to be witnessed by those who look for Him (Heb. 9:28). But the Platonic schema which the author introduces to serve the interests of the gospel means that the work of Christ is viewed as being accomplished not only on the frontier of this age and the age to come but also on the frontier of the visible world and the invisible. The tension between 'already' and 'not yet' is maintained; the saints' everlasting rest is already their heritage but it remains to be possessed. C. F. D. Moule ('Sanctuary and Sacrifice in the Church of the New Testament', *JTS* N.S. i, 1950, pp. 29 ff.) deals with the central theme of the Epistle; one important passage in the article interprets Heb. 13:10 ('we have an altar. . .') as part of a Christian apologetic answering the charge that Christians had neither priesthood nor altar, neither sanctuary nor sacrifice.

Most recently William Barclay (*The Epistle to the Hebrews*, London: Lutterworth, 1965) sums up the seven dangers against which the recipients are warned as drift instead of decision, weariness instead of endurance, stagnation instead of progress, comfort instead of discipline, isolation instead of fellowship, apostasy instead of loyalty, and looking backward instead of forward and upward; and states the two great positive emphases of the Epistle in these terms: 'Religion is basically man entering into friendship with God on the initiative of God, and that friendship is only possible through the work and person of Jesus Christ' (p. 95).