ANTI-SEMITISM IN HEBREWS?

J. C. McCullough

In Memory of Rev. Professor E.A.Russell, born 29th November 1916, died 20th March 1997, who gave so much of his life to the building of relationships between Jews and Christians.

The Epistle to the Hebrews offers a sustained *critique* of the Judaism of his day. It is, however, a *critique* from within and is given to protect his Christian community from the dangers of assimilation back into Judaism. While Hebrews can be and has been used in anti-Jewish polemic, it would be unfair to describe it as anti-Jewish.

The purpose of this article is to examine the question of anti-Semitism in Hebrews.[1] Before tackling the question directly, however, some attempt must be made at a definition of the term and assessment of the appropriateness of its use in this essay. The term 'anti-Semitism', if considered strictly from an etymological point of view is clearly inappropriate as it should refer to hatred of all Semite people, of whom Jews are one example. It is a term to describe race and, according to S. Sandmel, it emerged towards the end of the 19th Century in the writings of William Marr as a result of a mingling of notions about race and nationalism.[2] As such it has, in recent years, taken on a more specialized, almost technical meaning as it is used to denote that particular form of anti-Judaism which was so obvious in, but not limited to National Socialism in the Third Reich. This anti-Semitism was described by Mr. Alex Jaffe in a lecture to the CCJ Branch in Belfast as having its purpose to 'degrade Jews by removing their civil, political, social, economic and religious rights.' It is a particularly vicious form of racism or

---

[1] One of the enduring passions of Professor Russell's life was his deep concern to foster good relations between Jews and Christians. He did this both at a personal level through various local dialogue groups and at an academic level through public lectures and the publications of articles, including one article entitled 'Anti Semitism in Matthew'.

[2] Cf. S. Sandmel, *Anti-Semitism in the New Testament?* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978) p. xx.

group prejudice which has been especially rampant amidst the insecurities of the twentieth century.[3] It is clear that this more specialized use of the term is not appropriate for the first century C.E., though some scholars, while acknowledging this fact, still use the term because other terms 'simply have not caught on'.[4]

The term Anti-Judaism, or anti-Jewish polemic, on the other hand, is more appropriate as it refers to attempts to denigrate Judaism and present an unfair and wholly erroneous caricature of it. It is similar on an interfaith level to sectarianism on an inner Christian level. It does not rule out serious engagement and even disagreement with Judaism, without which knowledge could never advance but rather the hatred and vilification of Jews as Jews. As such it blurs the distinction between Christian criticism of Judaism and Christian bitterness against Jews,[5] and refuses to take seriously the other's position or to gain 'an understanding of the depth and sensitivities of religious commitment' of Judaism.[6] To assess the anti-Judaism of the Epistle would be to ask the question: is the author attacking Judaism in such a way that he is denying the religious and theological legitimacy of Judaism and thus questioning the right of Jews to exist ... a position which was taken

---

[3] There have been many important studies of this phenomenon particularly since the Second World War. One of the earliest was the work of an American Symposium entitled *The Jew in the Gentile World* ed. Isacque Graeber. Cf. James Parkes, *Antisemitism,* (London: Valentine, 1963).

[4] Sandmel, p. xxl. '.. the nineteenth and twentieth-century word *anti-Semitism* is a completely wrong term when transferred to the first and second centuries. Yet wrong as it is, it has been and continues to be used in connection with Christian hostility to Jews. Scholars have proposed other terms: *Anti-Jewish* or *Anti-Judaism.* These terms are better because they are correct; they simply have not caught on. In this book we use 'anti-Semitism' consciously, aware of how wrong the term is'.

[5] cf. Sandmel, p. xix. 'Granted that Jews and Judaism are intertwined, we shall go astray if we are not alert to the valid distinction between Christian criticism of Judaism and Christian bitterness against Jews'.

[6] cf. Code of Practice of the Council of Christians and Jews, paragraph 2 (August 1996).

up with devastating effect by the Third Reich, or is he conducting a theological *critique* of Judaism and if so, is it a fair *critique*?

Before considering this question, several preliminary question must be faced. The first concerns the nature of Christianity which according to some scholars is fundamentally and structurally anti-Semitic.[7] Rosemary Ruether, for example, would argue that anti-Judaism is the left hand of Christology and raises the question 'is it possible to say "Jesus is Messiah" without implicitly or explicitly saying at the same time "and the Jews be damned"'.[8] If Ruether is correct, then, of course, all the New Testament which is concerned with Christology is anti-Semitic and must be 'ent-antijudaisiert'[9]. If anti-Judaism is defined as the holding of Christological beliefs then naturally Hebrews is guilty on that count and the answer to the title of the essays is an unequivocal 'yes'. However, it is our assumption that while Christological claims may be expressed in an anti-Jewish or anti-

---

[7] Part of the basic structure of Christianity cf. Stegemann, E, 'Der Jude Paulus und seine antijüdische Auslegung' in *Auschwitz -- Krise der christlichen Theologie* (ACJD 10, München 1980) 117-139 esp. P. 117 and Osten-Sacken, P, 'Vom Nutzen des Judentums für die Kirche' in *Anstösse aus der Schrift* (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1981) 142.

[8] R.Ruether, 'Anti-Semitism and Christian theology' in *Auschwitz -- Beginning of a New Era? Reflections on the Holocaust* (New York, 1977) 79-92 (79); cf. too her *Faith and Fratricide: The theological roots of Anti-Semitism* (New York: Seabury, 1974) p. 246 and Eckhardt, A.Roy, *Jews and Christians; The Contemporary Meeting* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986). For a discussion of Ruether cf. Thomas A. Indinopulos and Roy Bowen Ward 'Is Christianity inherently Anti-Semitic?' *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 45 (June 1977) 193-214 who argue that anti-Judaism was not an element in earliest Christianity but the result of a **development** in New Testament Theology.

[9] Stegemann, E, 'Der Holocaust als Krise christlicher Theologie' in *Auschwitz -- Krise der christlichen Theologie*, Stegemann, E & R.Rendtorff (editors),(ACJD 10, München 1980) 1409-158 154f. Cp. Klein, G., 'Christlicher Antijudaismus: Bemerkungen zu einem semantischen Einschüchterungsversuch', *ZTHK* 79 (1982) 411-450 who speaks of 'semantic intimidation'.

Semitic way and may be used in anti-Jewish or anti-Semitic propaganda, nevertheless they are not in themselves necessarily either racist or sectarian. In other words, we must examine, not whether the author expresses a Christology, but rather how he expresses that Christology.

A second preliminary point which must be addressed is the question of the influence of the book throughout Christian history. Is the author of the epistle guilty of anti-Semitism if his readers have used his book for their anti-Jewish propaganda? This is a particularly important topic and one that has been dealt with in connection with all of the New Testament by many scholars.[10] ~clearly a writer must take some responsibility for his writings but can she or he be held responsible for every distorted interpretation or misuse of it? There has been massive anti-Jewish use made of Hebrews in Christian history, but the question of this essay is: does Hebrews itself contain such vicious anti-Judaism that it makes such use of it inevitable.

What then is the attitude to Judaism which comes through in the Epistle? Sandmel argues that the author betrays no interest in or antagonism towards living Judaism, arguing that he 'seems not concerned with a relationship to the Judaism or the Jews of the age when it was written (as are the Gospels), but with the ancient

---

[10] cf. Wrege, H, -Th, *Wirkungsgeschichte des Evangeliums. Erfahrungen, Perspektiven und Möglichkeiten* (Göttingen, 1981); Gnilka, J, 'Die Bedeutung der Wirkungsgeschichte für das Verständnis und die Vermittlung biblischer Texte' in *Dynamik im Wort* (Stuttgart, 1983); Luz, U, 'Wirkungsgeschichtliche Exegese' *TThZ* 2 (1985) 18-32. E. A. Russell writing of anti semitism in Matthew argues that one must not judge Matthew on the effect his Gospel has had on generations almost two thousand years later ...'if the gospel has been misused or misrepresented in church history, this does not imply or suggest necessarily that it is Anti-Semitic'; rather Matthew must be studied in his own context and by his own purpose which was to cater for catechetical and pastoral needs. His polemic against the Pharisees must be considered in that context, 'as a safeguard for the faithful over against what would distort the way of Jesus and obscure the real Christ.'

Judaism of Scripture'[11] and so by and large exonerates the author from the charge of anti-Judaism. This view would be shared by some scholars who argue that the author is not dealing with the challenge of contemporary Judaism, but rather dealing with a general 'faith crisis', as Laub puts it,[12] usually associated with a delay in the Parousia and the general lassitude which is characteristic of second and third generation Christians who face a tension between eschatological hope and the actual course of history with its pressures for the faithful.[13]. William Lane, for example, argued that the recipients had already suffered under Claudius in Rome and were now facing danger again, with the result that they were tempted to grow lax in their commitment to the Christian message.[14]

On the other hand, the view that the author was in some manner engaging with the Judaism of his day would be held by the majority of scholars.[15] Hunt, for example, argued that the title

---

[11] Sandmel, *Antisemitism* p. 120

[12] Franz Laub, *Bekenntnis und Auslegune. Die paränetische Funktion der Christologie im* Hebräerbrief, (Regensburg: Verlag Pustet, 1988) p. 3f.

[13] Weiss Comm, 1991 p 73. 'In diesem Sinne ist auch der Hebr Dokument für das Problem der ''Parusieverzögerung'' im Sinne des Problems der ''sich dehnenden Zeit''''; cf. too A. Strobel *Comm*, 1991 who thought that the crisis lay in the delay of the Parousia. The author does not give a new meaning to it (like Paul and the Synoptics), but 'mit lebhafter Naherwartung reagiert und der angeschriebenen Gemeinde die Notwendigkeit der Ausdauer einschärft'. p. 15.

[14] Lane, *Comm*, 1991 vol. 1. p. lvi. cp Kistemaker, *Comm* p. 16 who thought that they were in a time of sustained peace and had relaxed spiritually.

[15] Cf. Hagner, *Comm,* 1990, Kistemaker, *Comm,* 1984 p. 17, Casey, *Comm,* 1980, p. xii, Morris, *Comm,* 1983 p. 12, Mathias Rissi, *Die Theologie des Hebräerbriefes: ihre Verankerung in der Situation des Verfassers und seiner Leser,* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1987) (on p. 11 he suggested they may previously have been priests or Essenes), Bénétreau, *Comm,* 1989 p. 19, Toussaint, S. D. 'The Eschatology of the Warning Passages in the Book of Hebrews.' *Grace TheolJourn.* 3 (1982), 67-80,

McCullough, **Anti Semitism in Hebrews.** *IBS* 20 Jan 1998 'To the Hebrews' should be translated 'Against the Hebrews' because the Epistle was recognized to be an anti-Jewish polemical treatise, which had been chosen and sent (by Paul?) to a congregation which he thought needed to hear its message.[16] He, therefore, sees the book as being written very much in the midst of a dialogue, perhaps *contre-temps* with contemporary Judaism. Horbury[17] too, followed by A. N. Chester,[18] has developed a very interesting theory that the author was a Jew who was in touch with **living** issues of Judaism particularly in relation to the priesthood in first century Judaism. Horbury suggested that 'the antecedents of the priestly thought characteristic of Hebrews should be sought neither in Christianity, nor in sectarian or visionary Judaism, but in the pervasive influence upon Jewry of the Pentateuchal theocracy.'[19] for them, therefore, the Epistle belongs to the cut and thrust of inner Jewish debate of the first century. [20]

It would be impossible to enter into this debate in detail, but it does seem very improbable that an author who discusses Jewish institutions and figures in every page and who establishes positions which are very relevant to questions being debated in the

---

Bruce, *Comm*, 1990, Ellingworth, *Comm,* 1993 p. 27 among many authors.

[16] Hunt, B.P.W.S., 'The Epistle to the Hebrews: an anti-Judaic treatise?' *Studia Evangelica,* 2 (1964) p. 409: 'I suggest, therefore, that this so called Epistle is really an anti-Judaic apologetic based upon and enlarging the original arguments by which the devout and orthodox Jew had been persfuaded to become a Christian.'

[17] Horbury, W.'The Aaronic Priesthood in the Epistle to the Hebrews', *Journ StudNewTest.* 19 (1983), 43-71.

[18] Chester, A N, 'Hebrews: the final sacrifice' *Sacrifice and Redemption Durham Essays in theology* ed. S. Sykes (Cambridge: CUP, 1990) pp. 57-72.

[19] Horbury, op. cit. p. 68.

[20] Many other scholars would see the Epistle's context in first century Jewish debate. Cf. J. C. McCullough, 'Hebrews in Recent Scholarships' *Irish Biblical Studies* 16 (1994) p. 78ff).

Judaism of the first century, was not aware of that Judaism and that all references to contemporary debates are coincidental.[21]

Granted, however, that the author was dialoguing with contemporary Judaism, what was his attitude to it? Was he anti-Semitic / anti-Jewish in his views? On the one hand there is evidence in the Epistle that the author had a very positive attitude towards Judaism. He assumes that the revelation in the past to the Jewish people was God's revelation. The opening verses say that God has spoken in many and various ways to the Fathers by the prophets. There is a general consensus among the commentators that the 'our' added to 'the fathers' found in P^{12}, 46^{c} and a few miniscules and versions is a later addition which breaks the alliterative effect[22] and that 'the fathers' refers to a larger group of people than the patriarchs ... a group which is partly listed in Hebrews 11. Many scholars are also unhappy about using this phrase 'the fathers' to show that the author and his readers came from a Jewish background[23]. Nevertheless vv. 1-2 do state that the message given by the prophets to the Fathers was from God, the same God who is speaking today[24] and does, therefore, assume a high view of Judaism (at least that found in the Hebrew Scriptures) both on the author's and the readers' part.

In later sections of the book he demonstrates how seriously he takes this message of God. In 2:1ff he says: 'For if the message declared by angels was valid and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution ...' The 'message declared

---

[21] The debate on the Land, the Temple, the Priesthood and, to judge by Qumran literature, were all issues which were very much alive in the first century CE, particularly after the Destruction of the Temple.

[22] cf. Braun, *Comm,* p. 19, Weiss, *Comm,* p. 133. Attridge, *Comm,* p.38, Ellingworth, *Comm,* p. 92, Grässer, *Comm,* p. 47; Lane *Comm,* p. 4; Buchanan *Comm,* p. 3; against this Kistemaker *Comm,* p. 25ff constantly refers both in his translation and text to 'our fathers' but does not discuss the fact that 'our' is attested in so few manuscripts. Similarly Sandmel op. cit. p. 121 translates 'our fathers' without further discussion.

[23] cf. Attridge, *Comm,* p. 38; Grässer, *Comm,* p. 57

[24] cf. Weiss, *Comm,* p. 135 ' Der Gott des Alten Testaments is mit dem des Neuen Testaments identisch'.

by angels' is clearly the Torah (Galatians 3:19 and Acts 7:53[25] It is described as 'βέβαιος'. In passages such as Hebrews 3:14; 6:19; 13:9 the word is used in its everyday sense of 'dependable, firm, solid, steadfast' but in view of the other juridical expressions (transgression, disobedience, just retribution) in the sentence and the use of the term in 6:16 and 9:17, most commentators assume that it is being used here in a juridical sense[26] meaning 'valid, 'in force'. This validity is then demonstrated by the fact that 'every transgression or disobedience receives a just retribution'. Braun[27] draws attention to the aorist tenses of 'ἐγένετο' and 'ἔλαβον' and argues that the author by using this tense is showing that 'das Gesetz gilt nicht mehr'. To draw the conclusion that the author is deliberately using past tenses to show that the law is now no longer valid is to read too much into the text[28].

This verse shows how seriously the author takes the law. It is the first part of an *a fortiore* comparison, a favourite rhetorical device of the author[29]. In such comparisons the whole point would be invalidated if the initial statement were not assumed to be correct both by the author and his readers. Hence Ellingworth is understating the author's position when he describes him as being merely 'cautious about questioning the continuing validity of the old covenant .... and its accompanying law'. The author, far from being cautious about rejecting the old law is constructing an argument which is based entirely on the validity of the old law.[30]

---

[25] Grässer, *Comm,* p. 102 n. 23 & 24. It was a common belief among first century Jews that the law was given through angels though there was discussion as to why it was given in such a way. Cf. Attridge, *Comm,* 65 notes 28 and 29. Ellingworth, *Comm,* p. 138. Lane, *Comm,* 37f.

[26] Lane, *Comm,* p.37; Attridge, *Comm,* p. 65.N.30; Grässer, *Comm,* p. 103 n.27.

[27] *Comm,* p.48

[28] So Grässer, *Comm,* p. 103 n.28.

[29] cf. 8:6; 9:13f; 10:28f 12:9, 25

[30] cp.,. Paul's attitude to the law in Galatians! Cf. Weiss, *Comm,* p. 185 'eine Abwertung des Gesetzes ist mit solchem Verweis auf die Vermittlerfunktion der Engel weder im Judentum noch im Urchristentum

> In Hebrews 4: 12-13 the word is described in Hebrews 4:12-13 as : 'living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.'

There has been some discussion concerning the reference of the 'Word of God'. While the overwhelming Patristic and Medieval view[31] would be that the word here refers to the incarnate Logos, Jesus Christ, and though some present day scholars would argue accordingly,[32] nevertheless the context of the passage[33] seems to make it clear that the reference is to God's warnings to his people, warnings given mainly through the Scriptures and also given 'in these last days'.[34].. In the immediate context here the Scripture passages are Num 14: 43 (For there the Amal'ekites and the Canaanites are before you, and you shall fall by the sword; because you have turned back from following the LORD, the LORD will not be with you.") and Psalm 95: 7-11 which refer to God's threat to those who disobey. As Lane points out: 'the reference is to Psalm 95: 7b-11 in which the living, piercing word of God addresses this generation in a critical fashion and poses as the only alternative to faithfulness the option of death (3:17; 4:11).[35] The author then describes the Word of God in terms which are found

---

verbunden; vielmehr wird hier gerade auf diese Weise die Herkunft des Gesetzes von Gott betont'

[31] cf. Ellingworth, *Comm* p. 261; Clavier, Ο ΛΟΓΟΣ ΤΟΥ ΘΕΟΥ, *New Testament essays in honour of T. W Manson*, ed. A. J. B., Higgins, (Manchester, 1959), 81-93.

[32] cf. R. Williamson, *Philo and the Epistle to the Hebrews*. (Leiden: Brill, 1970) 390, 398; J. Swetnam, 'Jesus as Logos in Hebrews 4: 12-13' *Bib* 61 (1981) 214-24

[33] We are assuming with most modern scholars (including even older ones such as Delitzsch, *Comm,* p. 147) that the passage belongs to the previous section with its exposition of Psalm 95, rather than beginning a new section, as is suggested, for example in the RSV translation.

[34] cf. Weiss, *Comm,* p. 285.

[35] Lane, *Comm,* p. 103.

frequently in Jewish tradition to refer to God. It is living and active, as God is living and active,[36] it is like a two edged sword or knife, [37] which is used for the purposes of probing and judgments, as God is the one who examines our hearts and judges.

But it is in his actual use of Scripture that the author shows his great interest in and respect for the Jewish Scriptures.[38] There

---

[36] The word group ενεργεια is in the New Testament almost always used with reference to divine or demonic powers. Bertram *THWNT* Ii 649f. Quoted Grässer, *Comm,* p. 230. n. 37.

[37] cf. Ellingworth, *Comm, p.* 262. There is no reference here to circumcision as Hunt, op. cit. p. 410 suggests.

[38] Interest in the author's use of the Old Testament is intense and it would be impossible to list every reference to it. The following may be consulted: Clements, R. E., 'The Use of the Old Testament in Hebrews'. *SWJournTheol* 28 (1985), 36-45; Flusser, David, 'Today if you will listen to this voice: creative exegesis in Hebrews 3-4', *Creative Biblical Exegesis: Christian and Jewish Hermeneutics through the centuries* ed. B. Uffenheimer and H. Reventlow. (Sheffield: JSOT, 1988) pp. 55-62.; Grässer, E, *Der alte Bund im Neuen,* (Tübingen: 1985); Kaiser, Walter, 'The abolition of the old order and the establishment of the new: a study of Psalm 40: 6-8 and Hebrews 10: 5-10', in *Tradition and Testament* ed. J. Feinberg (Chicago: Moody Press, c1981) 19-37; Loane, Marcus, 'The Unity of the Old and New Testaments as illustrated in the Epistle to the Hebrews', in *God who is rich in mercy: essays presented to D. B. Knox.* ed. P. O'Brien & D. Peterson (Homebush West NSW: Anzea Publishers) pp.255-264; McCullough, J. C., 'The Old Testament Quotations in Hebrews. *NTStud* 26 (1980) 363-379; McCullough, J. C., *The Epistle to the Hebrews* Unpublished Dissertation, QUB, 1971; Meier, J. P., 'Symmetry and Theology in the Old Testament Citations of Heb 1: 5-14.' *Biblica* 66 (1985), 504-533.; Mende, T., 'Wen der Herr liebhat, den züchtet er. Hebr 12:6. Der alttestamentliche Hintergrund von Hebr 12, 1-11; 1, 1-4; 2, 6-10.' *Trierer Theologische Zeitschrift* 100 (1991), 23-38.; Michaud, J., 'Le passage de l'ancien au nouveau, selon l'Epître aux Hébreux'. *SciEsp* 35 (1983) 33-52; Müller, Paul-Gerhard, 'Die Funktion der Psalmzitate im Hebräerbrief', *Freude an der Weisung des Herren: Beiträge zur Theologie der Psalmen; Festgabe zum 70. Geburtstag von Heinrich Gross* ed. E. Haag & F-L Hossfeld, (Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk) pp. 223-242; F. J Schierse, *Verheissung und Heilsvollendung. Zur theologischen Grundfrage des Hebräerbriefes*

are at least 30 direct quotations from the Old Testament and more than 35 allusions to it. More importantly, however, the whole book is impregnated by the Old Testament. It has been argued that the book is a Homily on Psalm 110,[39] or that its structure is an exposition of 4 Old Testament texts (Psalm 110: 1-4; Psalm 8: 4-6;Psalm 95: 7-11; Jeremiah 31: 31-34).[40]) Even if the structure is more complicated than Buchanan or Caird have suggested[41] it is clear that the author bases his conviction about the superiority and finality of his faith on his understanding of the Hebrew Scriptures. Again and again he introduces the text of the Hebrew Scriptures by words such as 'God says'.[42] This understanding that God has spoken authoritatively governs his convictions about Moses, God's Rest, priesthood and high priesthood, the sacrificial system and the covenant. Even where the author diverges from the local text he had before him, he does so in order to clarify the understanding he already had of the passage, an understanding gained through accepted exegetical methods of his day, not to read a new meaning into the text.[43]

Finally the author shows his respect for the Jewish Scrptures and tradition by quoting ancient Jewish figures as examples of faithfulness in chapter 11. Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, the People of Israel who crossed the Red Sea, Rahab the harlot, together with Gideon,

---

(München, 1955); Smothers, T.G., `A superior model: Hebrews 1:1 - 4:13.' *Review and Expositor (Louisville)*, 82 (1985), 333-343.

[39] G.W.Buchanan, *Comm* 'the Document entitled "To the Hebrews" is a homiletical midrash based on Ps 110'.

[40] Carid, G. B. 'the Exegetical Method of the Epistle to the Hebrews' *CJT* 5 (1959) 44-51.

[41] cf. G.F. Guthrie, *The Structure of Hebrews. A Text-Linguistic Analysis*, (Leiden: Brill, 1994)

[42] 1:5, 6, 7, 13,; 2:12: 4:3, 4; 5:6; 6:14, 7:15, 8:5; 10:30; 12: 26; 13:5.

[43] cf. McCullough, J. C., `The Old Testament Quotations in Hebrews. *NTStud* 26 (1980) 363-379; cp. F. J Schierse, *Verheissung und Heilsvollendung. Zur theologischen Grundfrage des Hebräerbriefes* (München, 1955).

Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets – 'who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, received promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight' not to mention the unnamed women who received their dead by resurrection and those who were tortured, refusing to accept release, that they might rise again to a better life, who suffered mocking and scourging, and even chains and imprisonment, who were stoned, were sawn in two, were killed with the sword; who went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, ill-treated --of whom the world was not worthy -- wandering over deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. It would be difficult to find a more stirring account of Jewish heroism than that found here. The author may have been using a source,[44] but this does not detract from the fact that when he is looking for heroes of the faith he turns to Jewish history.

But the author displays alongside this very positive attitude to Judaism a more negative, critical attitude. What Boyarin says about Paul could also be said about the author of Hebrews:

> Paul lived and died convinced that he was a Jew living out Judaism. He represents, then, one option which Judaism could take in the first century. Paul presents a challenge to Jews in the first century ..... *I read him as a Jewish cultural critic* and I ask what it was in Jewish culture that led him to produce a discourse of radical reform of that culture .....' (Italics mine)

In carrying out this cultural critique the author of Hebrews uses 'sustained *synkrisis* (comparison) to demonstrate the superiority of Jesus over' figures and institutions of Judaism.[45] He argues that the message delivered 'in these last days' is superior to

---

[44] There has been much discussion about the source, if any, of this list. Cf. Lane, *Comm*, p. 322; Schille,G., 'Katechese und Taufliturgie. Erwägungen zu Hebr. 11.' *ZNW* 51 (1960), 112; Attridge, *Comm*, p. 306f; Windisch, *Comm*, p. 98-99; Michel, *Comm*, p. 368-72; Weiss, *Comm*, p. 554ff.

[45] W. Lane, *Comm*, p. cxxv.

that delivered 'by the prophets to the fathers'; that Jesus Christ as the Son is superior to Moses who is the servant in God's household, ...'Jesus has been counted worthy of as much more glory than Moses as the builder of a house has more honour than the house' (Hebrews 3:3); he picks up a Biblical theme from Psalm 95 that the people of Israel who were in the desert did not enter the Promised Rest because God was angry with them and said: 'As I swore in my wrath, They shall never enter my rest' and uses this theme to show that the promise of rest still remains to the people of his generation because it was not enjoyed by the previous wilderness and all subsequent generations. He compares Jesus Christ with the Jewish highpriesthood, much to the disadvantage of that group. This comparison is then carried on with the introduction of the theme of highpriesthood after the order of Melchizedek. He then compares the 'old covenant' which he argues has been made obsolete by the new one (Hebrews 8:13) and finally clinches the argument by showing that the sacrifice of the new covenant, that of Jesus Christ, is far superior to those of the old.

In assessing this negative critique of Judaism, several factors must be borne in mind. Firstly, in critiquing Judaism, the author saw himself as part of that faith. He did not consider that he belonged to a separate and rival faith which had to destroy another faith. Rather he was carrying on a debate 'intra muros', for the defense of his own followers and the persuasion of his fellow Jews. He, therefore, did not look on Judaism as a convenient foil against which he could easily portray the superiority of Christianity.[46] As a result, in most of his comparisons between his new faith and Judaism, he does not reject Judaism, but rather, as Clarence Tucker Craig, quoted in Sandmel, says, he argues that 'Christianity is the perfect religion because it is even better than the second best, Judaism'.[47]

The aspect of Judaism which he does reject and declare obsolete is the sacrifical system, arguing that it had been replaced

---

[46] As happened in much New Testament scholarship in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

[47] S. Sandmel, op. cit. p. 120.

by the 'once for all' sacrifice of Jesus. This rejection of the sacrifical system with its high priests and institutions occurs from Hebrews 7 onwards and is the closest the author comes to harsh polemic. It arises from his Christology and his conviction that all that God had done through and for His people in the past, he was now doing *par excellence* through Jesus Christ. It is possible, however, that this polemic against the temple, its priests and the whole sacrificial system would not have sounded as harsh when the Epistle was written as we might postulate. If a date post 80 CE is accepted for Hebrews,[48] then for all Jews, the sacrificial system in Jerusalem was a thing in the past. The hope may have been that it would be revived or there may have been token sacrifices carried out in the ruins[49], hence the references in Hebrews to the sacrificial system in the present tense, but for most Jews, the issue of temple sacrifices would not have been a very live one. There may have been an inner Jewish debate on the need for continuing sacrifices, and hence the need to rebuild the temple as soon as possible, and if that were the case, then the author of Hebrews with his view that Jesus Christ was the once for all sacrifice would have considered himself to have been contributing to that debate. More likely, however, most Jews would have realized that the dream of a rebuilt temple and the starting of sacrifices again was not attainable in the immediate future and they had more immediate problems to deal with. In that case, the author of Hebrews was pointing out that there was no need to work for that dream as a 'better way' had been provided by God. In either case, the polemic against the temple sacrificial system may have been less offensive in his first century context than it may seem to be to our modern eyes.

By his *synkrisis*, therefore, the author is expressing, as Boyarin said of Paul, 'one option which Judaism could take in the first century'. He is declaring that this is God's next step in the

---

[48] Cf. J. C. McCullough, 'Hebrews in Recent Scholarship' *Irish Biblical Studies* 16 July (1994) p. 117ff.

[49] cf. Clark, K. W., 'Worship in the Jerusalem Temple after A.D.70'. *NTS* 6 (1969-70) 269-80 who argues that sacrifices continued until the final destruction of Jerusalem in the Revolt of Bar Kochba in 135CE.

history of His dealings with His people and uses the riches of God's past dealings, particularly as they are recorded in the Jewish Scriptures, to argue his case. Naturally many Jews of the first century disagreed with him and thought that he represented an aberration of Judaism, rather than a valid option; his own followers, as we shall see, may have had their doubts, but this does not prevent the author from putting his case as cogently and persuasively as he could. As part of an *intra-muros* debate, therefore, the Epistle can be read as a dialogue within the Judaism of that time rather than an anti-Jewish tract.

A second factor to be considered when assessing the anti-Jewish polemic in Hebrews is the situation in which his readers found themselves. He is critiquing Judaism, not as one belonging to a religion separated from it for centuries, but as one in the process of a painful and heart searching separation from it. He is writing, therefore, to and for a group which is in a weak position over against a group which is much stronger numerically and much more confident in its history and theology. It is in this context that one must read his long comparison between Christianity and Judaism, and his belief that his new faith is the next step in God's Revelation of Himself and His plan for the world. If, as many scholars believe,[50] his readers were in danger of leaving their new found faith and returning to the Judaism from which they were slowly but surely parting, then the best defense against that the greatest comfort he could afford them was a robust statement of the benefits to be gained through faith in Jesus Christ, as opposed to those to be gained through adherence to the previous sacrificial system. Read through these spectacles, the book takes on a very different hue.

Is the Epistle to the Hebrews anti-Jewish? Interpreted by Christians who have been part of a dominant culture for many hundreds of years, it can be read as anti-Jewish, bolstering Christian pride and arrogance. Taken in its first century context,

---

[50] For a fuller discussion of the question of the problems faced by the recipients, see J. C. McCullough 'Hebrews in Recent Scholarship' *Irish Biblical Studies* 16 (1994) pp. 78ff.

however, it is not. It is rather a contribution by a first century Jewish author to the debate as to which direction Judaism should take. Within Judaism, the author lost the debate, hence the parting of the ways and the development of two separate world religions. In carrying out that debate, however, the author used every weapon at this disposal, including, in our argument, the most important argument of all, that of representing as fairly as circumstances allowed the opinions and viewpoints of his opponents.

J. C. McCullough.