



UNIT 3 NEW TESTAMENT

LESSON 9

HEBREWS

Bishop Westcott wrote in the preface of his 'Commentary on Hebrews', "No work in which I have ever been allowed to spend many years of continuous labour had had for me the same intense human interest as the study of the Epistle to the Hebrews".

Author

The official title in the King James Version of our English Bible is 'The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews'. This title is, of course, not original and there is no indication as to the author within the letter itself. It seems to have been gradually attributed to St. Paul more for lack of a better known author than for any other reason.

Many 'scientific' guesses have been made concerning the identity of the writer of this Epistle, but none of them have gained anything like a majority of agreement. One thing most writers are agreed upon, however, is that the writer was not the Apostle Paul.

John Calvin, the great Reformer, gave a number of reasons which would seem to disqualify Paul as the writer of Hebrews. "The manner of teaching and the style sufficiently show that Paul was not the author, and the writer himself confesses in the second chapter that he was one of the disciples of the Apostles, which is wholly different from the way in which Paul spoke of himself (cf. Galatians)". The language is not Paul's and the technique of Old Testament quotation is not Paul's.

Even now, we can say little more than what Origen said seventeen hundred years ago when he confessed 'Only God knows who wrote the letter to the Hebrews'.

Readers

There are certain things we can be sure of:

The letter was to a long established church (5:12). The readers appear to have been a group of Jewish Christians who had never seen or heard Jesus in person, but learned of Him from some who had themselves listened to Him (2:3f). They had, at some time in the past, suffered persecution (10:32ff) - but while they had to endure public abuse, imprisonment and the looting of their property, they had not yet been called upon to die for their faith (12:4). Their Christian development had been arrested; instead of pressing ahead, they were inclined to come to a full stop in their spiritual progress; if not indeed to slip back into a stage which they had left (5:11ff).

Precisely where the readers were located is another of the unanswerable questions that surround the Epistle. Many prefer a Roman destination (cf. 13:24); however, it appears that the readers may have formed a 'house church' within the wider fellowship of a city church, and were tending to neglect the bonds of fellowship that bound them to other Christians outside their own inner circle (10:25).



Occasion and Purpose

There is almost as much difference of opinion about the writer's aims as about his own identity and that of his readers. This problem is nevertheless of greater importance, since it affects the interpretation of the Epistle. The writer describes his writing as 'a word of exhortation' (13:22) and full attention must be given to this. A burning issue of practical importance is at stake. But what was this issue?

The most widely held view is that the Epistle was addressed to Jewish Christians to warn them of the grave danger of relapsing, under the stress of persecution, into Judaism. This is based on the serious exhortations in chapters 6 and 10, which presuppose that there is danger of a definite falling away which would amount to crucifying the Son of God afresh (6:6) and treating as cheap the blood of the covenant (10:29).

Since the argument of the epistle is designed to show Christ's superiority over the old order (superiority to old revelation 1:1-3; to angels 1:4-2:18; to Moses 3:1-19; to Joshua 4:1-13; to priests and priestly work under the old covenant 4:14-10:18), it is assumed by many that the apostasy in question must involve a return to Judaism. In 13:13 the readers are exhorted to make a clear break and come 'outside the camp', which may reasonably be interpreted as the camp of Israel.

Message

Christianity is the perfect revelation of God. It not only superseded all other faiths, including Judaism, (in speaking of a new covenant he treats the first as obsolete - ready to vanish away 8:13) but it could not itself be superseded. Its salvation is eternal (5:9) so is its redemption, inheritance and covenant (9:12, 15; 13:20), while Christ's offering is described as being 'through the eternal Spirit' (:14). This idea of the perfection and abiding character of Christianity pervades the whole Epistle and furnishes the key for the understanding of all its major themes.

In bringing together the above major theme of the superiority and finality of Christ and Christianity, together with the recurring theme of access ('getting through') to God, Hunter says, "Christianity is the perfect and final religion because through Christ's sacrifice, it secures that 'access to God' which all the religious apparatus of Judaism could only at best shadow forth and symbolise."

With Christianity we pass, 'out of the shadow into the truth'.

Plan

Every analysis given is different. It should, however, be noted that the Epistle is first divided into two parts. In the first, the doctrinal half (1:1-10:18), we have the glory of the Person and Work of Christ set forth. In the second, or practical half (10:10-13:25), the life is described which the knowledge of Christ and His salvation will enable us to live.

Scattered through the Epistle are a number of stern warnings (2:1-4; 3:7-4:13; 5:11-6:21; 10:26-39; 12:15-29).



Guthrie gives the following analysis:

1. Superiority of Christianity 1:1 - 10:18
 - a) Superiority to Old Revelation 1:1-3
 - b) Superiority to Angels 1:4-2:18
 - c) Superiority to Moses 3:1-19
 - d) Superiority to Joshua 4:1-13
 - e) Superior to Priesthood of Christ 4:14-7:28
 - f) Superiority of the Priestly Work of Christ 9:1-10:18
2. Exhortations based on the Preceding Arguments 10:19-13:17
 - a) The superior method of approach should be used 10:19-25
 - b) The dangers of apostasy must be noted 10:26-31
 - c) Yet memory of past days is cause for encouragement 10:32-39
 - d) Examples of historic endeavours are cited to illustrate the triumph of faith 11:1-40
 - e) But the greatest example of all is Jesus Christ 12:1-11
 - f) Moral inconsistencies must be avoided 12:12-17
 - g) The superiority of the new covenant is again maintained 12:18-29
 - h) Practical results may follow from these considerations 13:1-17
3. Conclusion 13:18-25



JAMES

James is the first of the Catholic Epistles. The Greek adjective 'Katholikos', when referred to these Epistles (James, 1 & 2 Peter, 1, 2, & 3 John and Jude) carries the meaning of 'general' as opposed to 'particular'. The term was used of the seven above-mentioned Epistles to differentiate them as 'epistles' addressed to Christians in general, from the Pauline Epistles which for the most part were addressed to individuals or to individual churches.

Luther discouraged use of this Epistle, as he thought the passage about faith and works contrary to the doctrine set forth by Paul. He termed it 'a downright strawy Epistle which lacks all evangelical character'. Luther's condemnation of the epistle arose from his not possessing the right clue to its comprehension. We must remember also that Luther was in the vanguard of the battle against the Church's 'theology' of legalism (justification on the basis of merit - cf. the similar Jewish error, Romans 9:30-10:4) and did not always recognise the positive emphasis the Apostle Paul placed on the law and works (cf. Romans 3:31; 7:12-16).

Nevertheless, Protestants have tended to be unduly influenced by Luther's devaluation of James and to regard it as somewhat sub-Christian. But there are signs that modern Evangelicals no longer under-emphasise the place which good works should occupy in the Christian life.

Whenever faith does not issue in love and dogma, however orthodox, is unrelated to life; whenever Christians are tempted to settle down to a self-centred religion, and become oblivious of the social and material needs of others; or whenever they deny by their manner of living the creed they profess, and seem more anxious to be friends of the world than friends of God, then the Epistle of James has something to say to them which they reject at their peril.

Author

Since early in the third century the Church has traditionally held that the "James" named here (1:1) was the brother of Jesus (Mark 6:3). He was for many years the head of the Church at Jerusalem (Acts 15:13-21) and should not be confused with the son of Zebedee who was put to death under Herod Agrippa I about AD 46 (Acts 12:1, 2). The name, however, was a common one and it is notable that the author merely describes himself as "a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ" (1:1).

Readers and Purpose

The address 'to the twelve dispersed tribes' (Phillips) is probably a symbolic expression of Christian people dispersed throughout the world; the Christian Church as a whole, regarded as the new Israel and the inheritor in Jesus the Messiah of the promises made to God's ancient people (cf. Galatians 3:29; 6:16).

It seems most likely that the writer had Jewish Christians particularly in mind when he wrote the epistle. The readers were probably poor and of weak faith, in need of strong exhortations to more consistent Christian living, which accounts for the ethical content of the Epistle.



The Epistle is essentially practical and would appear to be designed to correct certain known tendencies in behaviour. Such problems as the true attitude to wealth, the control of the tongue, the approach to oaths, Christian prayer, the question of a confessed faith which is lacking in the evidence of a changed life (cf. Matthew 7:15-23) and other practical themes are discussed.

Message

The outstanding message of the Epistle is undoubtedly to 'be doers of the word' and not hearers only (1:22). James points out the danger of unfruitful theoretical belief taking the place of activity in good works.

Justification by faith (and not works of merit) does not mean a moral/standstill. Faith and works are inextricably bound together and certainly are not contrary to one another.

This can be compared with Paul's great treatise on the doctrine of 'justification by faith' (Romans) where Paul also stresses a positive attitude towards the law and works; Romans 1:5; 15:18; 16:26; 'the obedience of faith' 2:6ff.; 13ff; 26f; 3:8, 31; 6:1, 15; 7:12, 14, 16, 22, 25; 8:4, 7 etc. The same emphasis, of course, is found throughout the entire New Testament. Christian works (as opposed to legalism, i.e. the erroneous doctrine of 'justification by works) is but the 'flip-side' of faith and vice-versa.

Plan

"The Epistle has been called 'an ethical scrap-book' and truly, it is so disconnected, as it stands, that it is the despair of the analyst." (Hunter). One of its characteristics is the extreme abruptness with which the writer plunges into each new subject, following no other order than that suggested by mental associations which he has not explained.

FIRST PETER

"When scientific achievement, the welfare state, and dialectical materialism combine to make our century too worldly-minded, I Peter recalls us to the heavenly and eternal outlook, and reminds Christians that they are but strangers and pilgrims here. Similarly, when relief from physical disease, and the provision for physical comfort tend to be treated by some as the primary Christian objective, we need the reminder of I Peter that holiness matters more, and that all who would follow Christ must, in a selfish and sinful world, be prepared to suffer for righteousness' sake; and to recognise that God uses suffering for the highest good. And also, when moral standards in so-called Christian countries tend seriously to decline and when genuine young converts to Christ are tempted to spend their enthusiasm more in words than in deeds, we need the challenge of I Peter to express our response to Christ and the Gospel in transformed behaviour in relation to our fellow-man." (A M Stibbs)



Author

A good many have questioned the claims of the epistle to be the work of the Apostle Peter, but most do accept Peter's authorship.

Readers

The readers are termed "exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia" (1:1cf James 1:1). The phrase 'exiles of the Dispersion' probably relates to Christians generally, both Jewish and Gentile. The Roman provinces named include practically the whole of Asia Minor, in any case, the whole of the region lying north and west of the Taurus Mountains.

Occasion and Purpose

The author has given greetings from the church at 'Babylon' (5:13). Most scholars favour Rome as the place of writing, taking 'Babylon' as symbolic, in the same sense as in Revelation 14:8; 17:5 etc. The Roman martyrdom of Peter is fairly well attested and it is probably that the term 'Babylon' was used as a security measure. At the time of writing (probably about AD 62), Rome was the centre of vicious action against Christianity and avoidance of any mention of the Roman Church would be a wise move if the letter fell into official hands. The writer evidently assumed that the leaders would have understood the symbolism.

If the above assumptions be correct, Peter wrote the Epistle shortly before Nero's blood bath in Rome (AD 63 or 64). James, the Lord's brother, had been martyred in Jerusalem in AD 62. It was the turning point in the relations of the Church with the Roman Empire. The imperial authorities, previously a source of protection from Jewish animosity, now were realising that the Church was not a sect of Judaism but rather the Church and Synagogue were two distinct things.

The leaders of the Church must have realised that a storm was gathering. That popular hostility was already strong is indicated by Nero's choice of the Christians as a scapegoat in AD 64.

In this situation, when for the Christian community in Rome the air must surely have been heavy with forebodings of the approaching storm, Peter, who himself as an acknowledged leader of the Church could expect to be one of the first victims when the storm should break, decided, it would seem, that a message of encouragement must be sent to certain churches in Asia Minor, for which he apparently felt a special responsibility. Their position, like that of Christians in other parts of the Empire, was one of continual insecurity.

It seems, probably, that news of some significant deterioration in their situation had recently reached Peter and made him decide to send them a message of encouragement.

Message

The outstanding message of the Epistle is 'Hope'. (See 1:3, 13, 21; 3:15 also instances where 'salvation' is thought of in terms of the future - 1:5, 9, 13; 4:18; 5:4, 6cf.; 3:14; 4:13).



By recalling the fact of the resurrection of Christ, and by an appeal to the example of His sufferings, the epistle seeks to awaken faith and hope in God. The 'text' of the epistle is 1:13, "Therefore gird up your minds, be sober, set your hope fully upon the grace that is coming to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ". The hope that is set before Peter's readers is intended to encourage them to stand fast in the midst of sufferings for the Gospel and to triumph (cf. Paul's words, Romans 8:18).

Plan

1.	Address and Greetings	1:1, 2
2.	Thanksgiving	1:3-12
3.	Implications of Salvation	1:13-2:10
4.	Christian Relationships	2:11-3:12
5.	Suffering and Will of God	3:13-22
6.	Holy Living	4:1-11
7.	The Fiery Trial	4:12-19
8.	Address to Elders	5:1-4
9.	General Address and Benediction	5:5-11
10.	Personalia and Greetings	5:12-14

SECOND PETER

As a literary form, second Peter approaches Hebrews and Ephesians more than any other writings of the New Testament. All are essentially 'essays' or 'sermons'.

Relationship to Jude: Authorship etc

A comparison of 2 Peter and Jude reveals a striking resemblance in matter, order and language (cf. 2 Peter 2:1-3:3 and Jude 4-18).

Was the Apostle Peter the author of 2 Peter? Many have doubted this to be so, from the second century AD down to the present day. But there can be no doubt that the author intends his readers to understand that he is the Apostle Peter (1:1, 14, 16-18; 3:1, 15), and we should accept this.

Occasion, Purpose and Message

The recipients are not defined, though their having 'a faith of equal standing with ours' (1:1) and the author's prayer that they 'may escape from the corruption that is in this world' (1:4) suggests a predominantly Gentile audience. The writer has had a long and intimate acquaintance with them (1:13, 13; 3:1).



The danger was that the readers were being brought under the influence of "false teachers" (2:1) who were delivering themselves of "destructive heresies" and whose lives are characterised by 'licentiousness' (2:2, 13-16).

The author's purpose is clear enough. Being passionately concerned that his readers should not lose their promised entry into the eternal kingdom of Jesus Christ (1:11), he wrote to save them now from:

1. Antinomians (i.e. those who misuse the grace of God by rejecting the idea of any continuing demand of the law of God upon their lives - i.e. do what you like; live as you please.)
2. Deriders of the hope of Christ's coming.

The attack on the antinomians is mostly concentrated in chapter 2, that on the scoffing of the expectation of Christ's coming occupies chapters 1 and 3. These two errors may have arisen from one and the same group of reprobates (cf. 3:3). The author writes to warn the church members of their moral and intellectual danger, to assure them of the basis for the belief, to explain their main problem - the coming of our Lord - and to encourage holy living and growth in grace.

Plan

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| 1. | Salutation | 1:1, 2 |
| 2. | God's gifts and promises call for strenuous effort on your part | 1:3-11 |
| 3. | Certainty of our Christian hope | 1:12-21 |
| 4. | Denunciation of false teachers | 2:1-22 |
| 5. | The certainty of Christ's coming vindicated against scoffers | 3:1-13 |
| 6. | Final exhortation | 3:14-18 |



Question 1

What do we know about the readers of Hebrews?

Question 2.

What was the problem addressed in Hebrews? (see chapters 6 & 10)

Question 3

Who was the author of "James" and what do we know about him?

Question 4

What is the message of the Book of James and what examples does he give in James 1:19-26?

Question 5

What is the message of "Hope" given in 1 Peter? (see 1:3, 13, 21; 3:15).

QUESTION FOR GROUP STUDY

What stern warnings are given in Hebrews 3:7-12; 4:13; 5:11-6:3; 10:26-31?

What word of encouragement is given in Hebrews 10:32-39?