

THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS

THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS

AN HISTORICAL AND THEOLOGICAL RECONSIDERATION

THE BAIRD LECTURE, 1949

BY

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PREFACE

THE present volume incorporates a series of lectures undertaken at the invitation of the Baird Lectureship Trustees, and delivered in the Martin Hall, New College, Edinburgh, in February 1950. I desire cordially to thank the Trustees for the honour conferred on me by the invitation and for their consent to my request under stress of other duties to defer the delivery of the lectures from the autumn of 1949 to the following spring. I wish also to acknowledge the kindness of the Principal and Senate of New College in making the Martin Hall available at the time.

The reasons which have led me to undertake a re-consideration of the purpose of the Epistle are stated in some detail in the opening chapter of the book. As a New Testament teacher I have for long been dissatisfied with the direction which critical thought, principally associated for us in this country and the English-speaking world with the names of two distinguished scholars, Professor James Moffatt and Professor E. F. Scott, has taken with regard to Hebrews during the last half-century. Whereas the older criticism understood the Epistle to reflect a phase or crisis in the evolution of Jewish Christianity in the apostolic period, the modern theory has unhitched the Epistle from these moorings and floated it out into the mid-stream of the general life of the first-century Church, so taking it out of a supposed backwater to give it a place in the main current of Christian history. On this

interpretation the religious situation of the community addressed in Hebrews had nothing specifically to do with any attraction exercised by Judaism but was determined by some form of secular drift to irreligion or to paganism.

I cannot conceal the conviction that this right-about-face in critical opinion has involved a turning of the back on some of the most salient features of the Epistle, and has therefore brought about a clouding of the issues. The new theory starts not from the central substance of Hebrews but, as it seems to me, from peripheral features and from a number of *a priori* and not sufficiently examined assumptions regarding both Judaism and Christianity in the apostolic age. I cannot therefore think that it makes real contact with history. Indeed neither the older nor the more recent approach to the problem of Hebrews has sufficiently integrated the Epistle into the historical development of the world-mission of Christianity or brought the situation behind the letter into clear and adequate focus.

In this opinion I have become confirmed by considerations based on a fresh study of the Stephen-records in the book of the Acts of the Apostles. I am convinced that a straight line runs from the teaching and apologia of the proto-martyr to the Epistle to the Hebrews, and I believe it is to be regarded as a central line in the development of the Christian world-mission. In the present book, therefore, I have sought an approach to Hebrews which will (1) integrate the Epistle afresh into the history of the world-mission from its inception in Stephen, (2) re-evaluate the potentialities of the religious situation in such a centre of world-mission Christianity as Rome, (3) trace the connection between the doctrine of Hebrews and the

theology of the world-mission as a whole, and (4) from careful study of the argument of the Epistle establish conclusions as to the situation and character of the community addressed and so recover for the Epistle its organic position in relation to first-century evangelism and life.

It is not necessary here to set out in detail the positions to which I have been led. They are indicated in outline in the closing section of Chapter I, in the summaries which conclude Chapters III and V, and in Chapter VI. The historical ground of the approach is set out in Chapter II, which deals with Stephen and his eschatology; here is indeed the pivot on which my whole argument turns. I have come to see that distinctions of a very important order have to be made within the field of the Early Christian eschatology, and that the stand taken by Stephen has been determinative of Christian theology to its furthest bounds. I have not, however, in the exposition of the relevant material of Hebrews which is undertaken in Chapters III-V attempted anything like a full commentary on the Epistle, but have confined myself to the points which bear on the above critical issues. There is, therefore, no wealth of side-reference to learned works on the more general aspects of the teaching. For myself the results of the particular inquiry on which I have concentrated attention have been to broaden the outlook both on the history—Hebrews is no mere academic treatise—and on the theology of the world-mission of Christianity in the New Testament age. If my construction of the facts is disallowed, I shall look to see it refuted; if it is defective, I trust it will be improved; if it should be thought right, I hope that even within its limits it may help at certain important points to put

Christian doctrine more squarely on the foundation of Christian history, and to show it, as I say at the end of the book, rising phoenix-like from the embers not only of Jewish legalism but of the Jewish means of grace.

W. MANSON.

UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH,
1st September 1950.

NOTE ON TRANSLATIONS

The rendering of the Epistle is from the author's own translation, and the same holds of passages cited from the Septuagint and other ancient texts, including verse renderings from Greek poets.

CONTENTS

| | PAGE |
|-------------------|------|
| PREFACE | v |

CHAPTER I

| | |
|--|----|
| THE PROBLEM OF THE EPISTLE AND MODERN CRITICAL THOUGHT | 1 |
| Literary, Historical, and Theological Aspects of the Problem | 3 |
| Purpose of the Present Work | 8 |
| Traditional and Older Approaches to the Subject | 10 |
| The Modern Volte-Face in Criticism | 16 |
| Criticism of the Modern Theory | 18 |
| Provisional Statement of Positions advanced in the Present Work | 23 |

CHAPTER II

| | |
|---|----|
| STEPHEN AND THE WORLD-MISSION OF CHRISTIANITY | 25 |
| Stephen | 27 |
| The Eschatology of Stephen | 30 |
| The Apologia of Stephen and the Epistle to the Hebrews | 36 |
| The Rise of the Christian World-Mission | 37 |
| Divisive Issues created by the World-Mission | 42 |

CHAPTER III

| | PAGE |
|--|------|
| THE ADMONITORY SECTIONS OF THE EPISTLE.—THE | |
| ESCHATOLOGICAL LIFE | 47 |
| The Word of Jesus and the Word of the Angels | 48 |
| The Heavenly Calling of Christians and the | |
| Eschatological Now | 52 |
| Various Warnings relating to the Crisis | 56 |
| Advancing from First Principles to the Full Know- | |
| ledge of the Christian Mystery | 59 |
| The Consecrated Way | 65 |
| A Reminiscence and an Assurance.—The Advent | |
| of Christ | 71 |
| The Nature and Function of Faith | 73 |
| The Cloud of Witnesses | 81 |
| Other Exhortations | 84 |
| Conclusions from Chapter III | 86 |

CHAPTER IV

| | |
|--|-----|
| THE THEOLOGICAL ARGUMENT OF THE EPISTLE.— | |
| I. THE PERSON AND OFFICE OF THE REDEEMER | 88 |
| The Finality of the Christian Revelation | 88 |
| The Significance of Christ.—The Wisdom Christ- | |
| ology | 90 |
| The Incarnation in Relation to Man, Suffering, | |
| and Sin | 98 |
| Jesus Hero and Priest | 102 |

CONTENTS

xi

| | PAGE |
|---|------|
| Priest by Predestination and Incarnate Qualification | 106 |
| Priest after the Order of Melchizedek.—Priest of the Resurrection | 111 |
| Psalm CX | 117 |

CHAPTER V

THE THEOLOGICAL ARGUMENT OF THE EPISTLE.—

| | |
|--|-----|
| II. THE OBLATION OF THE BODY OF CHRIST | 122 |
| Priest in the Heavenly Sanctuary | 122 |
| The New Covenant | 127 |
| The Old and the New Sanctuaries and their Atonement-Provisions | 130 |
| Priest through the Eternal Spirit | 133 |
| Mediator of the New Covenant | 138 |
| The Offering of the Body of Christ | 143 |
| The New Christian Approach to God | 147 |
| The Christian Altar | 149 |
| Note on the Holy Communion in the Church | 155 |
| Conclusions from Chapters IV and V | 156 |

CHAPTER VI

| | |
|--|-----|
| THE PLACE OF THE EPISTLE IN EARLY CHRISTIAN HISTORY AND IN THE NEW TESTAMENT | 159 |
| The Minority Group in the Church at Rome | 159 |
| Resistance unto Blood.—The Question of the Date of Hebrews | 162 |
| The Writer of the Epistle | 167 |

| | PAGE |
|--|------|
| Character of the Church at Rome.—St. Paul's | |
| Epistle to the Romans | 172 |
| The Epistle to the Hebrews and the Old Testament | 184 |
| The Epistle to the Hebrews and the Evangelical | |
| Tradition | 187 |
| The Epistle to the Hebrews and St. Paul . . . | 192 |
| Epilogue | 197 |
| INDEX | 199 |

Ancient Christian writers consider the Epistle to the Hebrews as the 14th Letter of the Pauline Corpus in the New Testament of the Bible. Hebrews 8:1 reads "Now the point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven." In Hebrews 8:2, Christ is called a minister - ἱερέως, or leitourgos. In 8:6, his ministry - ἱερατείας, or leitourgias - is more excellent, "inasmuch as He is also Mediator - μεσότητος, or mesitēs - of a better covenant, which was established on better promises." In 8:1-6 Jesus Christ's priestly ministry is clearly heavenly in setting (See Liturgy). Epistle to the Hebrews. The KJV New Testament was translated from the Textus Receptus. However, the majority of the book of Revelation seems to have been translated from the Latin Vulgate. 1 Therefore we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we should let them slip; 2 For if the word spoken by angels was steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense of reward; 3 How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation; which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard him; 4 God also bearing them witness, both with signs and wonders, and with divers miracles, and gifts of the Holy Ghost, according to his own will? Letter to the Hebrews, also called Epistle to the Hebrews, abbreviation Hebrews, anonymous New Testament letter traditionally attributed to St. Paul the Apostle but now widely believed to be the work of another Jewish Christian. Some traditions hold that the author may have been St. Barnabas or perhaps one of Paul's other associates or later disciples. The letter was composed sometime during the latter half of the 1st century and is the 19th book of the New Testament canon. To judge from its contents, the letter was addressed to a Christian community whose faith was faltering because of st