

THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS

From the title, it is clear this letter was written to readers of Jewish origin. They were also believers. The writer calls them brothers and sisters, they have been given the power of the Holy Spirit, and they are suffering persecution for their faith. That the writer is probably Paul is supported by the fact he sends greetings from the brothers from Italy, and he also asks them to pray that he may be restored to them soon, which would match his being in prison as he writes. The logical and scriptural arguments are also typical of the great lawyer. We know from 2 Peter 3:15 that Paul wrote a letter to Hebrews, in fact to the same readership as Peter, who sent his letters to “*the exiles of the dispersion*” (1 Peter 1:1). Still, it is unusual that Paul did not sign off this epistle with his name.

This letter calls on Jewish Christians to make a clean break with the Temple and Judaism, because, he says, the end of the Jewish State is at hand. If they continue to cling to their traditions and the false security of the Law of Moses, they will be caught up in the overthrow of Jerusalem. They must go outside the camp, as Jesus did when he was crucified. On the same lines as the letter to the Romans, the apostle presents logical arguments to show the Law was redundant. Jesus, he says, has offered the perfect sacrifice to which the lambs and bulls of the Law pointed forward. The priesthood has been changed. And a New Covenant has replaced the Old.

We will quickly review his powerful presentation, which is backed up at every turn by quotations from the Old Testament to show that the new regime was the will of God.

He begins by proving that Jesus was not just another prophet. He was the son of God – greater even than the angels, and centre of God’s great plan. God had spoken down the

centuries through the mouths of the prophets, but in Jesus he had shown his character in living flesh.

For a while, as Psalm 8 foretold, Jesus had lived lower than the angels. This was so that by suffering death he could share to the full the condition of the men and women he came to save. But now Jesus was exalted to be superior to the angels, and one day would have the world at his feet. His sacrificial death had by an irony brought death in turn to the Devil (Sin in human hearts), and set his brothers and sisters free from the grip of the grave. And his experiences as a man like us had prepared him for his present role as High Priest to his followers.

The third and fourth chapters are a phrase by phrase exposition of Psalm 95. Here, David the Psalmist tells the people of his day not to miss out on the Sabbath rest which God has promised to his people. The original generation of Israelites that left Egypt failed to enter the Promised Land, because they had hard hearts. They could not bring themselves to believe God could do what he said. David warns his readers not to make the same mistake. Now, argues the apostle, since David wrote 500 years after the Exodus, there must still have been a ‘rest’ for people to enter into in the time of David. And if it was awaiting David’s people, then it must be awaiting us too. The original inheritance under Joshua was therefore only a pattern or type for the future ‘rest’ which Jesus (same name as Joshua in Hebrew) will bring to those who follow him. So the Law and its priesthood was not the final state of God’s plan. It pointed forward to a better inheritance, the Kingdom of God.

The lawyer now turns his attention to the work of Jesus as our High Priest. The Law of Moses had priests, who were descendants of Aaron in the tribe of Levi. Priests have to help mortals to survive their problems and

sufferings and failures, and bring their case to God in prayer. Jesus is uniquely placed, says the apostle, to do this. He was a man like us, and knows our temptations and weakness. And when we admit we have sinned against God, he has the perfect sacrifice to take sins away – the sacrifice of himself.

He digresses for a chapter, to warn us we must use our brains to progress beyond the elementary truths about salvation, and see the deeper principles that lie hidden in God's word. We are heirs of the promises God made to Abraham, he says, which lie in the future, not the present. They are like an anchor in the storms of life, something to cling to, sure and steady because they are guaranteed by God himself. The rope that links us to the anchor passes, in a figure, through the veil of the Tabernacle (the tent in which God was worshipped in the wilderness journey had an inner compartment, the Most Holy, representing the presence of God). Jesus, our High Priest, has already passed through the veil of mortality, and sits as our dependable anchor man at the right hand of God.

Now the apostle is back on track with his theme of Jesus as priest. Jesus did not inherit the office of priesthood from his forefathers, like the priests of the Law of Moses. He was sworn into office by God himself, as we read in Psalm 110. Here David's Lord (Jesus) is declared to be a priest *'after the order of Melchizedek'*. Melchizedek lived in the time of Abraham. He was both a king and a priest, and Abraham offered tithes to him. Therefore, reasons the apostle, Melchizedek was superior to Aaron, head of the Levites, who was Abraham's descendant. And in the Psalm, the Lord Jesus is made a king priest *'forever'*. This sets him above the Levites, who only ministered for a human lifetime. Finally, if God appointed Jesus as High Priest centuries after the giving of the Law, this means the priests of the Law of Moses were inevitably destined to give place to a

better system of reconciliation to God, through a priest who lives forever.

We can go further, he continues. Not only the priesthood, but the covenant on which the inheritance of the Promised Land was based is also due for renewal. He quotes from Jeremiah 31, a chapter which begins with the restoration of God's people from their dispersion. The Old Covenant made at Sinai was in tatters, because God's people failed to keep their promise to obey the Lord's commands. But God being merciful, he has promised in Jeremiah 31:31-34 to start again with a new and better covenant. This one would not just spotlight sins, but take them away.

"Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt. For they did not continue in my covenant, and so I showed no concern for them, declares the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people" (Hebrews 8:8-10).

So, concludes the writer, if God has spoken of a New Covenant, he obviously intends to replace the Old Covenant. That time has already come for the Christians, he implies. They have been inducted into the New Covenant, based not on animal blood, but the sacrifice of Jesus himself. Therefore it is high time to abandon the Law, which has become obsolete.

The ninth chapter follows up this train of thought. The beautiful Tabernacle with its two compartments and its lampstand, bread, and golden ark was designed as a visual aid. The outer section represents our mortal pilgrimage, lit by God's word and fed by the bread God provides each day. The inner

room stands for the Kingdom to which we are travelling. The Levitical High Priest was allowed into this room only once a year, on the Day of Atonement, when he took in the blood of a goat for the sins of the people. He then came out to bless the worshippers. So Jesus has gone to heaven, but will return to bring eternal life to those who are waiting for him.

He now draws the threads of the argument together. If God has replaced the Law of Moses with a new and better way, based on the sacrifice of Jesus, the Jewish Christians must now give up their allegiance to the State of Israel and the Temple services. There was coming a time of trouble (foretold by Jesus) when Jerusalem would be destroyed and the Temple burned with fire. They must separate themselves, or they would be caught up in that dreadful overthrow. It would take faith to turn their backs on their fellow countrymen and go out. But faith is what we need, if we are to please God. So in the magnificent eleventh chapter, the apostle skims the lives of many great characters from the Old Testament who did just this. Noah built an ark because he believed God meant what he said when he warned him of a coming judgment – the Flood. Abraham ‘went out’ from the apparent security of Ur of the Chaldees, and spent the rest of his days in a tent, waiting for God to give him the land he had promised. Moses, stepson of Pharaoh’s daughter, turned his back on the attractions of Egypt, because he saw a better future in the rewards God offers. Jesus, too, endured the agony of the cross because he was able to look ahead to the joy of the Kingdom. So, he exhorts, we Jewish Christians are going to have to make a clean break. God is about to shake the heavens and the earth of the Jewish state, as Haggai the prophet foretold. We must go out, believing God will take care of us. Jesus himself suffered outside the city walls.

“Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. For

here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come” (Hebrews 13:13, 14).

Although these exhortations, dear reader, had a poignant message for the First Century believers, we can take them to heart, too. God has warned a similar Day of Judgement is to fall on our dissolute Gentile world. We must be ready to go out to meet the Master, who will return from the right hand of God, as Psalm 110 promised, to make his enemies his footstool.

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