

THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS

Introduction

This letter appears as the last Pauline collection and usually bears the title, 'Letter to the Hebrews.' A reading of this manuscript reveals its unique form and content. It sounds more like a sermon to a live audience, a message of encouragement in the author's words (13:22) in which explanations and exhortations alternate. Only at the end of the manuscript do we get an idea that it is a letter when the author concludes with a request for prayers, benediction, exhortation, travel plans, final greetings and farewell wish (13:18-25).

Author

This is one of the books in the New Testament whose author is not definitively known. He never mentions his name in the letter. He makes no claim to be Paul, even when he mentions Paul's collaborator, Timothy (13:23). Some of the Greek speaking church fathers observed that this letter lacked Pauline style and doctrine. Paul hardly speaks of the Old Testament Priesthood or of the Jewish sacrificial system; and these are topics that are central to this letter. The difference of vocabulary and style, the alternation of doctrinal teaching with moral exhortation, the different manner of citing the Old Testament and the resemblance between the thought of Hebrews and that of the Alexandrian Judaism, makes it hard to claim Paul as the author. This did not however, prevent the church of Alexandria in the second century to accept Hebrews as a letter of Paul, view which became commonly held in the east. In the sixteenth century, there was growing consensus that Paul was not the author but there was no agreement on an alternative author.

Because of the beautiful mastery and usage of Greek in this letter, many thought it was written by Apollos who had received his education in Alexandria, others believed it could be Barnabas or Silvanus or even Priscilla. But it is safe to stick with Origen when he said: "As for who has written it, only God knows." All these explain why there was some hesitation to include it in the canon of scriptures until the 4th century.

When it was written, is not made explicit in the text. But we can infer from when it was used in the church. In AD 96, Clement of Rome cites the Hebrews when writing to the Corinthians. This means it cannot be dated later than the year 96 AD. But it is not known exactly when it was written.

Content of the Letter

The author addresses this letter to a group of Jewish Christians who had gone through hardships caused by a hostile society (6:9-12; 10:32-34). At present their hands are roping (12:12); some have become lax (5:11), others prone to apostasy in the face of the new troubles (2:1-4, 3:12, 4:11, 6:4-6); others less zealous in community solidarity (10:24;13:1-3). To strengthen them in the face of all these difficulties, the author sends them exhortations based on a deepened understanding of Jesus' death and exaltation. They are encouraged to look at the forerunner and intercessor, Jesus Christ (6:18); the leader and perfecter of the faith (12:2),; he who has been tested in every way (4:15); victorious through his obedience (5:8), and he is now seated at God's right hand (1:13, 8:1, 10:12); he now offers his life as an ever-effective sacrifice for our sins (7:27, 9:26; 10:12); thus he has become a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.

Message of Hebrews

The superiority and excellence of Christ: This book served as a reminder to the Jews that Christ is superior by comparing him and his self-offering for our sins with figures and institutions of the Old Testament. He professes that Jesus Christ is the son of God from eternity, he has been instrumental in God's creation and as a true brother to man, he has died for our purification and sanctification. He actually intercedes as high priest and he will come for final salvation as foretold

by the prophets. Therefore, we see the priesthood of Christ as everlasting (7:1-28), fulfilling the Old Testament (8:1-13). It points out the unique sacrifice of Christ, which alone obtains forgiveness of sins (10:1-18). Thus, their own trials should be resolved by consideration of Christ's ministry in the heavenly sanctuary on their behalf, intercession (7:25, 8:1-13).

Hebrews shows how Jesus Christ is superior to the angels, prophets, Abraham, Moses, Joshua, Levi and his descendants, particularly Aaron. The institutions and the covenant of the Old Testament were mere shadows and signs of things to come (8:5, 10:1).

Jesus as Mediator and Guarantor of a new and eternal covenant: this book stresses the uniqueness and exclusivity of Christ's mediation for our sins (7:22, 8:6, 9:15). As a heavenly high priest, he has opened up a way to God (10:20), he intercedes for us and our needs (2:18, 4:16). There has never been and never will be (10:18, 26) any other sacrifice capable of cleansing our conscience from the stains of sin except Christ's sacrifice, offered "once for all" (7:27;9:12). (Fr Denis Tameh)