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THE ADDRESSEES OF THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS

The Epistle to the Hebrews is generally acknowledged nowadays to be a real letter and not a learned treatise. As such it must have been addressed to a particular group of people. Besides, we often find the pronoun "you" in it. Who are the people thus addressed?

It is an observation which anybody can easily make that Hebrews contains a very great number of quotations from and allusions to the Old Testament. They are even more numerous here than in Revelation, which otherwise is said to be the New Testament book that has the greatest number of Old Testament references—278 in its 404 verses. It is scarcely to be expected that the common Christian was so familiar with his holy book as to be able to recognize all these Old Testament allusions. How many of us are so familiar with it? At least in my country, Sweden, the knowledge of the Bible, especially of the Old Testament, is rather scanty, I am sorry to say, particularly among the young people.

Further, some subjects are treated which will likewise give the common reader much difficulty. It was certainly so then too, when each person did not have his own copy, and when such useful works as the *Oxford Helps to the Study of the Bible* did not yet exist. We mean the chapters which deal with the law, sacrifices, priesthood, Melchizedek, etc. These chapters reflect the greatest interest in these subjects and certainly require a similar interest on the part of the reader, as well as a deep understanding of their inner meaning. Nowhere else do we find anything like this in the New Testament. In general, the teaching of the apostles did not need to go into these things, as may be seen from the epistles of St. Paul.

With regard to the contents of Hebrews, there is another observation which can be made as easily as the one mentioned above. Hebrews contains most earnest exhortations to its readers, the addressees, to keep their faith in the Lord, the faith that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ. It is very clear that this is the crucial point of the letter. Again and again the author returns to this theme, looking at it from fresh points of view and using different means to drive his arguments home. Nowhere else in the New Testament do we meet such forceful language, such earnest warnings. The authors of the other

epistles did not need to speak in that way. There are certainly warnings against backsliding and apostasy. But nowhere else do we get the impression that there was such imminent danger of this or that the temptation was so general and so strong. This suggests that Hebrews does not have in view the Christian community as a whole, but only a certain part of it, which was specially interested in, and could be specially impressed by, those features of the epistle which distinguish it from the other New Testament writings.

Further, we have some special words which certainly could not be addressed to Christians in general. We have, for example, the wish (not to say the demand) that the readers, all of them, should be teachers (Heb. v. 12). This is very exceptional—indeed, most surprising. We remember, of course, the opposite injunction in the Epistle of James; he warns his readers not to be many teachers (Jas. iii. 1). The same Greek word, διδάσκαλος, is used in both places. Do two New Testament authors really contradict each other thus? Surely Hebrews has in view a particular section of the Christian community, and it is not difficult to guess which this must be (if indeed there is any room for guessing in the exposition of Scripture). The prophet Malachi says: “the priest’s lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek the law at his mouth” (Mal. ii. 7). The writer to the Hebrews, then, refers to priests or to some people who had formerly been priests. Of them it might be said that they “ought to be teachers”. If they had been teachers before, then this would be only natural. Of Christians in general who in their pre-Christian days had been (say) farmers, artisans, possibly slaves, and still were so, it could not be said that they “ought” to be teachers. What reason could there be for such a demand?

There is another charge laid upon the addressees, which in their circumstances is as surprising as the one just mentioned: they are asked to “forget not to entertain strangers” (xiii. 2), while the author reminds them how they “took joyfully the spoiling” of their goods (x. 34). Whatever they had lost, they still had their houses. They were obviously not treated mildly; they had to endure terrible things, but their houses were not taken from them. This is rather strange, except on the supposition that they were former Jewish priests, for according to the Mosaic law priests could not be deprived of their houses. This is expressly laid down in Lev. xxv. 29 ff. The author has

very few commands to give his readers; but among these few this one about the entertaining of strangers is conspicuous. In their obvious poverty they could at any rate do this, and so it was their duty to do it.

All this seems to point in a particular direction, to indicate that the addressees were former Jewish priests. But were there so many of these who became Christians?

There is in Acts one short sentence which appears to be more or less overlooked; at least it does not receive as much attention as it deserves. We refer to the words of Acts vi. 7: "a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith"—that is to say, the faith in Jesus as the Messiah or Christ.

Professor Joachim Jeremias of Göttingen tells us in his most interesting and valuable work *Jerusalem zur Zeit Jesu* (424 pp.) that there were about 7,200 priests attached to the temple in Jerusalem. There would not, of course, be work for all of these 7,200 the whole year round. Their term of service comprised generally four, at most six to eight weeks in the year. During the remaining forty-four to forty-eight weeks they were free from temple duties. They lived in different places and earned their livelihood in different ways—as carpenters, smiths, stonecutters, fishermen, etc. They were priests and not fishermen or the like by profession, but they could and did fish, etc. (It is possible that John the son of Zebedee, together with his brother James, was not only "known unto the high priest", as John xviii. 15 tells us, but actually related to him; in that case he may have been a former priest, a man who was therefore at home in Jerusalem and certainly qualified to write such a book as the Fourth Gospel—a priest who used to fish outside the four to eight weeks in the year when he was on duty in the temple. It is to be noted that John and James are not said to be *fishermen*, as Simon and Andrew are expressly said to be in Mark i. 16; it is simply implied that they were *engaged in fishing*. If Jesus was related to James and John as their cousin, then He too would have been related to the high priest. Only, may this not sound as "fundamentalism" to those of a contrary opinion!)

If some Jewish priests (like Zacharias and his son John the Baptist) adhered to Jesus as the Messiah in the days of His flesh, then it may not be impossible that a great number of them, out of the total 7,200, embraced the same faith after His victory on the cross and the confirmation of that victory by His resur-

rection from the dead. If so, then it is only natural that the Jewish religious authorities were most anxious to win back those "apostates" from Judaism and make them renounce their new precious faith by all the means at their disposal.

If the title "To the Hebrews" is authentic and means what it appears to say, then it refers to Jewish Christians. This has recently been reaffirmed by Professor William Manson. But do we really know of any congregation exclusively consisting of Jewish Christians, especially of such Christians as ought to be teachers, one and all? And were Jewish Christians in general more liable to apostatize than other Christians? Nobody will seriously assert this; there is not the slightest sign of such a state of affairs in the New Testament, and it would be unfair to suggest it.

The address is indeed a very peculiar thing. If it is to be taken as it stands, then it seems to imply a great exaggeration and a gross injustice. And if, as we think we have shown, the Epistle is directed to former Jewish priests, the question arises whether the address is correct at all. It has been pointed out in this connection that the Greek word for "priests" (especially if written rather quickly and indistinctly) is not unlike the Greek word for "Hebrews". Could it possibly be that, very soon after the letter was written (with or without the address) and sent out into the world on its mission, a copyist mistook the correct word "priests" for the word "Hebrews" (writing ΠΡΟΣ ΕΒΡΑΙΟΥΣ instead of ΠΡΟΣ ΙΕΡΕΙΣ), and wrote accordingly what we now have in our Bibles as the first copyist in the long row of such useful members of the community? Anyhow, whoever copied this man simply wrote what he saw in his text, perhaps wondering at the curious address, perhaps not. And copyist after copyist throughout the centuries did the same, not daring to alter the sacred text. But who dare alter it now against all the manuscripts—or is there a manuscript that reads "To the priests" instead of "To the Hebrews"? I myself do not know.

It is a very insignificant matter, the reader may say. True. But the Bible is such an interesting book (to put it no higher) that even its smallest details evoke our deepest interest and concern.

For some of the arguments put forward I am deeply indebted to the late Professor Karl Bornhäuser of Marburg.

Uppsala.

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