

*THE ROMAN DESTINATION OF THE EPISTLE
TO THE HEBREWS.*¹

IN supporting elsewhere the Roman Address of the Epistle to the Hebrews, I ventured to suggest that, for reasons inherent in the Epistle itself, we must think not of the great Roman Church as it meets us, for example, in St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans, but of a smaller Jewish Christian community with an older origin still, and which had continued to maintain an independent existence.² At the time when this was written I had not realized how closely this position corresponded with that advocated by Dr. Theodor Zahn, but now that I have had the advantage of examining his arguments at length in the second volume of the *Einleitung*,³ and the support which more recently has been given to them in the main by Dr. Harnack in the first number of the new *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*,⁴ I desire to restate my argument in the light of their investigations, which, I venture to think, have gone far to settle for good this much-vexed question.

1. In doing so, it is hardly necessary to begin by pointing out that it is upon the internal evidence afforded by the Epistle itself that we have mainly, if not wholly, to rely. The familiar title "To the Hebrews," or, as it was later enlarged, "The Epistle to the Hebrews," formed, as is well known, no part of the original document; and even if it had done so, would in itself tell us very little. All that we can gather from it is that, according to the universal judgment of antiquity—for there is no evidence that the Epistle was ever known by any other name—its first

¹ A paper read before the Society of Historical Theology in Oxford.

² *The Theology of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (T. & T. Clark, 1899), pp. 34-50.

³ *Einleitung in das Neue Testament* (Leipzig, 1899), ii. pp. 110-158.

⁴ Giessen, J. Ricker'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1900.

readers were believed to have been of Jewish descent, a presumption which, as we shall see afterwards, is borne out by the contents of the Epistle itself.

2. Nor can there be any reasonable doubt that these readers, wherever situated, formed at least a special Church or community, and that this writing was not addressed, in the first instance at any rate, to Jewish Christians in general (as Reuss), still less to all wavering and dispirited believers (as Biesenthal). For though the want of the customary epistolary introduction (and there is absolutely no evidence that the Epistle once had one which has since been lost) lends a certain amount of support to the latter idea, the writer's own definitely expressed hope in the closing verses that he will see his readers again (chap. xiii. 19-23), and the intimate acquaintance which he shows with their past and present states (chaps. v. 11, 12; vi. 9, 10; x. 32 ff.; xii. 4) go to establish conclusively that he had a definite body of readers in view. No words indeed could better describe the whole character of his book than his own: "*I exhort you, brethren, bear with the word of exhortation (παρακλήσεως): for I have written (ἔπέστειλα) unto you in few words*" (chap. xiii. 22).

3. The fact too that this "*word of exhortation*" is evidently regarded as equally suitable for all the readers, and that nowhere throughout the Epistle is there any trace of differences of circumstances or opinions amongst them, points in the direction of the Hebrews having formed, in all probability, a comparatively small body of believers. And the same considerations make it very unlikely that they composed the whole Church in any important sphere of Christian influence. Had they done so, we would surely have had some evidence of such varieties in character and standing amongst them as we find clearly existing amongst the readers of St. Paul's Epistles. Nor is this all, but, as both Zahn (p. 147) and Harnack (p. 16 f.) have well pointed

out, according to all the analogies, both of New Testament and post-apostolic times, our Epistle could hardly have failed to possess a distinctive title and introduction if those to whom it was addressed were the only or main body of Christians in any particular place. Whereas, in writing to a small circle of believers in a town where there were many other such, the writer might quite naturally confine the address to some accompanying private letter, or entrust it verbally to the bearer.

4. On the other hand, there are grave difficulties in the way of thinking of the Hebrews as forming simply a section or party, in the usual sense of these words, inside a larger Church. Had this been the case, the relation in which they stood to the mother Church would surely have been indicated. And we seem, therefore, shut up to the thought of a small independent community or congregation—what Zahn calls a "*Hausgemeinde*," in a place where there were various other "*Hausgemeinden*" (p. 147), with all of whom it stood in friendly relationship, while retaining at the same time a corporate life of its own, with its own leaders and its own place of meeting. The existence of such communities in the early Church is at least a well-authenticated fact:¹ and not only do the circumstances we have been describing fall in best with the general tone and character of the Epistle, but they throw a new light upon some of its more personal touches. When, for example, in chap. x. 25, the writer calls upon his readers "*Not to forsake the assembling of themselves together*," the context shows that the reference is not, as is generally thought, to the danger of the abandonment of Christian worship in general, but rather to a growing tendency on the Hebrews' part to forsake their own particular assembly, with the consequent duties to the brethren who gathered there, in

¹ See e.g. Bartlet, *The Apostolic Age*, p. 467.

order possibly to attend other assemblies of believers.¹ And, again, this same thought of other communities and other leaders undoubtedly lends fresh significance to the emphatically repeated "*all . . . all*" of chap. xiii. 24, "*Salute ALL them that have the rule over you, and ALL the saints.*"

5. Whatever too may have been the case with regard to some of these communities, everything in our opinion goes to confirm the for long almost universally accepted belief that this special community was composed mainly, if not wholly, of men of Jewish descent. In supporting this belief hitherto, too much stress may perhaps sometimes have been laid on such expressions as "*the fathers,*" "*the seed of Abraham,*" in the opening chapters, or the constant description of the readers as "*the people,*" or "*the people of God,*" for undoubtedly we find these and similar expressions applied elsewhere to Gentile converts (1 Cor. x. 1; Gal. iii. 7-29, iv. 21-31; Rom. iv. 11-18). At the same time, as bearing out our contention, it is noteworthy that there is no trace in this Epistle of how and when the Hebrews became heirs of the promises made to Abraham, such as we find in the case of the Gentile readers of the Pauline Epistles (Eph. i. 13, ii. 1-iii. 12; Col. i. 21 f., etc.; Zahn, p. 130). Everywhere rather the Hebrews are treated as the direct descendants of those to whom God first spoke in the Old Covenant in a way which, to say the least, naturally suggests oneness of nationality. So exclusively, indeed, does the writer adopt the standpoint of the pre-Christian congregation, that, though he unquestionably regards the work of salvation as extending to all men (chap. ii. 9, 15; cf. v. 9, ix. 26-28), he sometimes speaks as if the death of Jesus only atoned for the sins of Israel (chap. ix. 15, xiii. 12), and as if the New Covenant was

¹ This appears to be the meaning of *ἐγκαταλείπειν* in distinction to *καταλείπειν*: see 2 Tim. iv. 10, 16; 2 Cor. iv. 9; Heb. xiii. 5 (Zahn, p. 140 f.).

only intended for members of the Old (chaps. viii. 6-13, x. 16 f.).

Apart, too, from such special indications as these, it seems to us undeniable that only to Jewish readers would an argument based throughout on a comparison between the Old Covenant and the New come home with living force. It may be quite true, as Harnack (p. 18 f.), who here separates from Zahn (p. 129 ff.), has pointed out, that the Gentile, on becoming a Christian, took his stand on the ground of the Old Testament, and that we have no right to set any limit to the extent to which he would work himself into its history. But if so, what special need would he have to be taught that Christianity was better than Judaism? It would be only through his Christianity that he had reached the full meaning underlying Judaism. Whereas the whole argument of our Epistle is plainly directed to show to men, already fully convinced of the Divine purposes of Judaism, how much better is the Christianity which as yet they have only imperfectly apprehended. Probably no one questions the Jewish nationality of the writer (whatever may have been his Hellenistic or Alexandrian training), or the closeness of the relation in which he had formerly stood to his readers, and it seems impossible not to regard his Epistle as the direct personal appeal of one who had himself proved the superiority of Christianity to Judaism, to his believing Jewish fellow-countrymen to rise with him to the full sense of their new privileges.

In these circumstances it is hardly necessary to examine in detail the arguments which within recent years have been put forward on behalf of Gentile readers.¹ They consist for the most part of isolated phrases or expressions in the Epistle, to which we cannot but think a strained interpretation has often been given, and in which even Harnack

¹ They are conveniently summarized by McGiffert, *The Apostolic Age*, p. 467 f.

admits "no absolutely certain proof" of the Gentile nationality of the readers can be found (p. 19). Any proof indeed they do contain as to the readers' nationality seems to us rather to confirm the conclusion at which we have already arrived. For, to mention only one passage on which the upholders of the Gentile address lay great stress, in chap. vi. 1, 2 not only are the "*first principles*" there enumerated equally applicable to Jews as well as to Gentiles, but the plural "*baptisms*" seems expressly used so as to include the various washings which were customary among the Jews along with Christian baptism; and Ménégoz has further pointed out that the striking expression "*faith upon God*" (*πίστεως ἐπὶ θεόν*) implies more readily the idea of continued trust in a God whose existence is beyond dispute, and in whom Jewish Christians had always believed, than the belief in the existence of the true God in opposition to Gentile or heathen idols.¹

On every ground, then, we may take it as practically certain that in this particular the traditional view is correct, and that the first readers of our Epistle were Jews by birth and upbringing.

6. More important, however, than the question of nationality in order to arrive at a correct view of the Epistle's destination is the question of the special circumstances, spiritual and otherwise, of the Hebrews at the time when this Epistle was written. Thus it is not without significance that they owed their conversion not to the Lord Himself, nor apparently directly to His apostles, but to teachers who are described generally as "*those who had heard*" (*ὑπὸ τῶν ἀκουσάντων*, chap. ii. 3), that is ear-witnesses of the Lord or His immediate followers, and the truth and accuracy of whose message God had confirmed by signs and wonders. Nor had the Hebrews' conversion been a half-hearted one. On the contrary, their Christian

¹ *La Théologie de l'Épître aux Hébreux*, p. 25.

faith had proved itself from the first in a spirit of sympathy and liberality towards their suffering brethren, a spirit which still continued to distinguish them (chap. vi. 10). And when, apparently not long after their conversion, they had been called upon to face “*a great conflict of sufferings,*” they had stood firm amidst reproaches and afflictions, and had taken joyfully even the spoiling of their goods, knowing that they had their own selves for a better possession (chap. x. 32 ff.).

But now in these later days—and the expressions used would seem to imply that some little time had elapsed since their conversion (cf. τὰς πρότερον ἡμέρας, x. 32), though Zahn thinks not so long as to bring us down to a second generation (p. 127)—other and less promising signs had begun to show themselves. Not only had the Hebrews not made the progress that in the time might have been expected of them, but they were actually showing signs of a slackening in their religious zeal, which, if not guarded against, might lead to their falling away from the faith altogether.¹

The Hebrews' danger indeed is often represented in another way, and B. Weiss, for example, still lends his strong support to the view formerly so widely held, that it was apostasy to Judaism with which they were threatened, or, as he expresses it, the finding “their exclusive satisfaction in the Old Testament cultus, which formerly they had regarded as quite reconcilable with their Christianity.”² But of this, plausible though at first sight it appears, we can find no definite trace in the Epistle itself.³

¹ “Der Grund christlicher Erkenntniss war richtig bei ihnen gelegt (6, 1 f.); es gilt nur die anfängliche Glaubenszuversicht festzuhalten. . . . Alles was der Vf. an ihnen zu beklagen und für sie zu fürchten hat, ist Zeichen einer Erschlaffung der religiösen Energie, welche ihnen früher und anfänglich eigen war (cf. besonders 12, 12).” Zahn, p. 125.

² *Der Hebräer-Brief*, p. 24 f.

³ “Von einem geschehenen oder drohenden Rückfall der Leser in die Be-

The warnings are all of a more general kind. Not "Misglaube" but "Unglaube" is the threatened peril (Zahn, p. 134); and the writer's whole argument is directed, according to Harnack, "to strengthen Christians who are becoming indolent and languid, and stand in danger through faint-heartedness and lukewarmness of losing all" (p. 17).

Such, then, so far as we can gather them from the Epistle itself, seem to have been the general circumstances of its readers. And combining them, we find that what we are in search of is a small body of Jewish Christians, forming apparently an independent community by themselves in a place where there were various Christian communities. Their conversion, which is referred to as a distinct historical event (*φωτισθέντες*, x. 32), was due to those who had been direct hearers of the Lord or His apostles, and though it was now long past, had not been attended by the progress that might have been looked for. The consequence was that, though at first they had proved themselves steadfast under the afflictions and trials which had been a conspicuous feature of their history, they were losing their former zeal, and were in grave danger of falling away from the faith altogether.

But if this description is correct, it is obvious that many of the destinations often advocated for our Epistle are untenable, or at any rate are wanting in the support that has usually been found for them.

It was the belief, for instance, that the Hebrews must be thought of as, if not actually engaged in the practice of temple worship, at least under its direct influence, that led to the old alternative, Jerusalem or Alexandria, as being the only two places where such temple worship was possible.¹

teiligung am jüdischen Kultus, wovon im ganzen Hb. auch nicht die geringste Andeutung vorliegt . . ." Zahn, p. 136.

¹ So recent a writer as Ayles says, "Here we find the Temple and its ritual

But that, as we have just seen, is to misunderstand the whole situation. Nor must it be lost sight of in this connexion that throughout the writer goes back behind the temple and its services to the "ideal representation of the tabernacle and its worship."

Upon the positive objections to both the Jerusalem and Alexandrian addresses we cannot at present dwell, noticing only that most of the arguments that tell against them tell also against any place in their immediate neighbourhood. And we must pass on rather to point out how satisfactorily the thought of Rome as a destination satisfies the conditions of the problem before us.

Thus not only is there a general consensus of opinion that the Jewish element in the Church of Rome was always particularly strong,¹ but in addition to the Pauline Christianity represented by the recipients of St. Paul's great Epistle, there is good reason for believing, "rather on general grounds than on definite historical evidence, that Jewish types of Christianity, one or more, had likewise their representatives."² Nor is this all, but in Rome we have direct proof of the existence of such "House-Communities" as our Epistle presupposes. In the closing chapter of his Epistle to the Romans, for example, St. Paul mentions three such; and perhaps the most interesting, as it is the most novel, part of Harnack's paper already referred to is the way in which he identifies the Hebrew circle with one of these, and finds in its joint heads Prisca and Aquila the possible authors of our Epistle. This, however, is to go further than the available evidence will permit us; and all that we can safely affirm is that in Rome there

and its services overshadowing everything." *Destination, Date, and Authorship of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Lond., 1899), p. 11.

¹ See a striking quotation from Ambrosiaster in Sanday and Headlam, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. xxv. f.

² Hort, *Prolegomena to St. Paul's Epistles to the Romans and the Ephesians*, p. 18.

were such Jewish-Christian communities as the one we are in search of, and that even the strange title "To the Hebrews" receives a certain amount of confirmation, though this is not a point to be pressed, from the presence in Rome of a συναγωγή Αἰβρέων.¹

The account too of the Hebrews' conversion in chap. ii. 3 corresponds with what is generally believed to have been the method of the introduction of Christianity into Rome, namely, "a process of quiet and as it were fortuitous filtration" ² of believers from different parts, amongst whom we may perhaps reckon the "*sojourners from Rome, both Jews and proselytes,*" who owed their own conversion to St. Peter's address on the day of Pentecost (Acts ii. 10). If, indeed, we could think of these as the actual founders of the little community of which we are thinking, the imperfect acquaintance with Christianity, which alone they would be able to gather in their own hurried visit to Jerusalem,³ would go far to explain the corresponding ignorance of the deeper aspects of their new faith, which plainly existed amongst the Hebrews, and which it was the great object of this Epistle to dispel.

We are not, however, left to generalities such as these in seeking to establish the Roman address of our Epistle. There are not a few particulars connected with it to which the thought of that address alone lends a full significance. They have been frequently stated, and it is not necessary to do much more than recapitulate them.⁴

1. We have unmistakable evidence from the Epistle of

¹ Schürer, *Hist. of Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ*, E. Tr., Div. II., vol. ii. p. 248; and see Note by Nestle in *The Expository Times*, x. p. 422.

² Hort, *ut sup.*, p. 9.

³ Sanday and Headlam, *ut sup.*, p. xxviii.

⁴ The Roman address was first proposed by Wetstein in 1752, and since then has gained the support in various forms of Holtzmann, Kurtz, Mangold, Sehenskel, Zahn, and Harnack in Germany, of Renan and Réville in France, and of Alford in England.

Clement that our Epistle was well known in Rome before the end of the first century.¹ And to this may be added the fact that the Roman Church preserved the correct tradition that the Epistle was not written by St. Paul.²

2. The liberality for which the Hebrews were distinguished (chap. vi. 10), and the repeated exhortations on the writer's part that this should continue (chap. xiii. 1, 2, 5), are not only very applicable to the inhabitants of a wealthy town like Rome, but correspond with what we know from other sources to have been the spirit of the early Roman Church.³

3. The "*great conflict of sufferings*" which the Hebrews had already endured (chap. x. 32 ff.), and which apparently were again impending (chap. x. 25, xii. 4 ff., 26 f., xiii. 13), point to persecutions at the hand of heathen persecutors rather than of their unbelieving fellow-countrymen, and find a full explanation in the Claudian or Neronian persecutions in Rome, according to the view taken of the date of writing.⁴

4. Several of the personal allusions and greetings—and in an Epistle where there are so few of these, each one carries weight—are best understood in the light of the Roman address. (a) The unusual title, for example, of *ἡγούμενοι* for the heads of the Church (chap. xiii. 7, 17, 24) was customary apparently in the Roman assembly, to judge from the Epistle of Clement, and from the use of *προηγούμενοι* by Hermas (Harnack, p. 20 f.). (b) The mention of Timothy in chap. xiii. 23 is at once explicable if we think of Rome where he was already well known, while we have

¹ Euseb., *H.E.*, iii. 38.

² This tradition ruled in the Roman Church for 200 or 300 years. Zahn, *Geschichte des Neutest. Kanons*, i. 965 f.

³ Harnack (p. 20) refers, e.g., to Dionysius of Corinth in the letter to Soter.

⁴ The reference to the later persecutions is generally upheld; but for considerations pointing rather to the earlier date, reference may be made to the present writer's *Theology of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, pp. 46 f., 51.

no reason to believe that the Church in Jerusalem had any special interest in him. (c) And most striking perhaps of all, the salutation in the following verse, "*They of Italy salute you*" (ἀσπάζονται ὑμᾶς οἱ ἀπὸ τῆς Ἰταλίας), now gains for the first time a full and satisfactory explanation. Grammatically, indeed, the words might mean that the writer, writing from some place in Italy, associated with him certain Italian believers in greetings to his readers. But if so, would he not then have specified the particular place from which he was writing, rather than have used such a general designation as "*They of Italy*"? While it is further noteworthy that elsewhere in the New Testament ἀπό, in similar connexions, always denotes absence at the time from the place spoken of.¹ "*They of Italy*"—would this be Italian Christians outside of Italy, who on the dispatch of a letter to Rome naturally desired to associate themselves with the writer in greetings to their fellow-countrymen there. On any other supposition it is difficult to account for their being mentioned at all.

In view, then, of these facts, and the further consideration that, so far as we are aware, no convincing objection has ever been brought against the Roman destination of our Epistle, we may at least, in the meantime, accept that destination as in itself very probable, while it is certainly illuminative in a high degree of the various problems which the Epistle presents.

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¹ See, e.g., Matt. xv. 1; John i. 45; Acts vi. 9; x 23, xxi. 27, xxiv. 18, etc.