

ance of his duty, although he respected the rights which they possessed. Paul and Luke thought and spoke of Athens and Smyrna and other free cities as cities of Achaia or Asia, and they were justified by Roman custom. Dr. Steinmann's case is valueless and founded on misconception and omission of evidence, sometimes on actual errors in facts.

W. M. RAMSAY.

*THE LITERARY RIDDLE OF THE “EPISTLE TO  
THE HEBREWS.”*

KEENLY as the questions of the authorship, destination, and purpose of the “Epistle to the Hebrews” have been debated in recent years, it can scarcely be said that there is anything like general agreement regarding any of the crucial points. This, it seems to me, is largely due to a defect of method, the failure to determine with precision what the problem is which demands a solution, to settle upon a fixed starting point, and to proceed in a reasoned orderly fashion from ascertained fact to inference, and from the better known to the less known. A brilliant lead was given by Harnack in his well-known article in the *Zeitschrift für neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*. But subsequent discussion has concentrated mainly on the merits and defects of Harnack's suggestion of Prisca and Aquila as the probable authors. As a consequence the real outstanding merit of his contribution has in great measure been lost sight of. His greatest service undoubtedly was to show that for New Testament Introduction the first problem is *how to explain the fact that a writing of such power and historical significance has come down to us without any indication of its authorship or original destination*. That there is extant no primitive Christian tradition as to the authorship is a matter of universal knowledge. But the

destination is equally undetermined. "To the Hebrews" is not the only title under which the writing anciently circulated. At an equally early date it was spoken of in certain quarters as "To the Alexandrians." If the work is a genuine letter, as we shall find reason to believe that it is, both these titles are far too vague and indeterminate for either to have been the original address. There can be no doubt that they represent two distinct, not to say conflicting, attempts on the part of early Christian literary criticism to supply a blank in the tradition, the one based upon the "Alexandrianism" of the Epistle, the other upon the way in which it attempts to show that the new revelation is superior to and supersedes the old. In all this we have the strong support of Zahn, the leader of Conservative New Testament scholarship in our day, and one of the greatest scholars and most subtle intellects ever occupied with the study of Christian antiquity.

Such is the problem Harnack sought to answer from the starting point of the authorship. How could the Church have forgotten so notable a writer? Surely there must have been something about the authorship which it was glad to forget. So he threw out the suggestion that the author may have been a woman, and that the Church forgot the fact because of the early Christian dislike to women as public teachers. He elaborates his case with great skill, and has made several eminent converts, notably Dr. Rendel Harris. But the great majority remain unconvinced. Is it really the case that there are traits in the Epistle which point to a woman as author? Does not the interchange of the singular and the plural of the first personal pronoun admit of a far simpler explanation than the hypothesis of a joint authorship? If Aquila and Prisca, with the latter as the ruling spirit, wrote the Epistle, is it not more probable that the Church would have attributed the real authorship to

Aquila, instead of forgetting the authorship and with it the destination altogether.

I think that Harnack is entirely on right lines, in holding that the first task of historical criticism with reference to the “Epistle to the Hebrews” is to explain why it comes to us without any genealogy. But his own explanation lands him in a cul-de-sac. Is it not equally probable that there may have been something in the circumstances of the original recipients of the Epistle which led the Church to forget the history of a writing addressed to them? The more adequately and naturally we can explain how this may have come about, the stronger will our case be.

Of course our argument is entirely futile unless the “Epistle to the Hebrews” is a genuine letter addressed to a definite church-community. If it is a treatise, or even what Deissmann calls a purely literary epistle, it may have circulated from the very outset without any address or author’s name. The opinion has also been advanced that it is really a published sermon; and of course a sermon may be published anonymously and with nothing to indicate who its original hearers were. But while this latter view agrees far better with the intimate personal character of the writing than the other that it is a treatise meant for Christendom or some large section of it quite generally, there are certain features in the work itself which are utterly incompatible with it. (See, for example, ch. xiii. vers. 22 to 24 compared with verse 19.) It is impossible to hold that the whole writing as we now have it was delivered as a sermon, and the theory that what was originally a sermon was afterwards, with the addition of a sort of epistolary epilogue, sent as a letter to some particular congregation in which the preacher was specially interested, is open to many serious objections, of which perhaps, from our point of view, the most serious is that it explains nothing. It leaves the problem just where

it found it. Nor is it consistent with what we know of the spontaneous and occasional character of early Christian literature generally. Those who hold so far-fetched and artificial a view of the origin of the "Epistle to the Hebrews" have to do more than point to certain phrases and modes of thought suggestive of the speaker rather than the writer. They have to account for his having made in this particular instance such a use of his sermon. Any one who is by profession more of a speaker than an author tends naturally to fall into a style which suggests an imaginary audience. Besides, our Epistle, if not a treatise or a purely literary production, was doubtless written with a view to its being read aloud to an assembled congregation.

Everything about the writing seems to me to point to its being a *genuine letter, addressed to a specific group of believers* by some one who knew them well and was keenly interested in them. If the Epistle was merely a literary form, it is all the more difficult to account for the absence of a definite epistolary opening. For in that case the epistolary opening is an essential part of the body of the writing, whereas in the case of a real letter, the address and the author's name are more of the nature of externals. They are not organically related to the contents or the purpose of the letter, and may quite well belong to a separate sheet which might easily be lost. Still more cogent arguments in favour of our position are furnished by the writing itself. The writer identifies himself in the fullest possible way with those he addresses (ii. 1). He is afraid of their drifting away (ii. 1), being disloyal, like the Israelites in the wilderness (iv. 11), not keeping a firm hold of their profession (iv. 14), and to being backward in coming to the throne of grace (iv. 16). He warns them to take heed, lest there be in any of them an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God (iii. 12). He knows their past history as well as their present spiritual

pulse. They have been and are liberal with their substance in ministering to “the saints” (not improbably the members of the mother Church at Jerusalem (vi. 10). There is persecution ahead of them, and he is not sure whether they will have the constancy to endure (11 and 12). There seems to be some difficulty between the office-bearers and the unofficial Church-members (xiii. 7, 24). Indeed it seems to me that the Epistle must be addressed not only to a definite Church-community, but to one in great measure homogeneous—more homogeneous in fact than any large mixed Christian congregation could have been. Everything speaks, I think, for the view of Zahn (and Harnack) that it was sent to a “House-Church” in Rome. I would be inclined to add that this particular “House-Church” had a well-marked distinctive character of its own, and that the writer, whether or not a man of note in wider Christian circles, was probably one of themselves.

In favour of the “House-Church” theory may be urged not only ch. x. 25 according to Zahn’s acute interpretation of it (“not deserting your own special meeting”), but the whole general trend of the letter. The arguments for a Roman destination are common property, and there is no need that I should elaborate them further. We proceed now to ask what else can be determined regarding the recipients. We have seen that there is no genuine primitive tradition on the point. But till recent years it was never doubted that the letter was meant for “Hebrews,” that is persons who had passed over to Christianity from Judaism. This is still the opinion of an overwhelming majority of scholars of all schools. But a convinced and thoroughly competent minority hold that there is nothing distinctively Jewish Christian about it, and that it was addressed to Gentiles. I need not recapitulate the grounds upon which these conflicting opinions are respectively based. They

can be found in any good Introduction. Suffice it to say that on both sides there are arguments which the other cannot afford to neglect. On the one hand the Epistle certainly aims at justifying the new faith to minds accustomed to regard the old as a perfect revelation of the divine mind and will. Author and readers seem alike steeped in Jewish presuppositions. On the other hand I find no sign of any tendency to relapse into Judaism. The dangers of which the author is afraid and against which he warns his readers so insistently are of quite another order. His fear is *lest they drift away from all vital religion altogether*.

All the conditions of the problem, it seems to me, are satisfied by the hypothesis of a small "House-Church" of *Latitudinarian Jewish Christians with an interest both in Judaism and in Christianity largely speculative and sentimental*. There is certainly a strong background of Jewish interests and sympathies. Just as certainly the general outlook is not Jewish, but universalistic; and the affinities are closest with that semi-speculative reconstruction of Jewish thought and religion which we call "Alexandrianism." A writer so skilful and so well acquainted with his readers as our author is scarcely likely to have used such a method of argumentation unless he believed that it would serve his purpose with them. If the Epistle is a real letter, we must suppose that the recipients had at least a tinge of "Alexandrianism." Again our Church was liberal with its money, though the author is afraid that they will be found wanting in the day of persecution—a combination which we have no difficulty in understanding in the case of a group of rather well-do-to Latitudinarians. Further, it is those of this religious type who are specially tempted to forsake their own particular assembly, and to roam about in quest of new sensations. Perhaps also they are peculiarly difficult to please in the matter of office-bearers. (The office-bearers

in question may well be those of the Roman Church generally and not of the sectional group.) But the strongest point in our case is that more than any others they are in danger of "falling away from the living God," that is, according to what seems to me both the most natural and the most serious interpretation which the phrase can bear, *losing their grip upon vital personal religion.*

Our hypothesis explains, I think, those phenomena of the Epistle which have made some postulate a Jewish Christian, and others a purely Gentile, destination. It finds a place for, and a measure of truth in, both the titles under which it was anciently known "To the Hebrews" and "To the Alexandrians." It conflicts with no genuine tradition, while, finally, I believe that in the light of it we can see how the Epistle may have come to us without any genealogy. Our Jewish-Christian House-Church, I take it, ceased to exist as a separate organisation. Perhaps the writer's fears were only too well grounded, and in the days of fiery trial, it proved faithless. Or it may simply have become merged in the General or Catholic Church of Rome. In either event a letter addressed to it would lose all official character, and there would be neither community nor individual specially interested in keeping alive its traditions. The less creditable its end, the more would this be the case. The faithful remnant who had joined the main stream of Christian faith and practice would have no desire to remember, still less to remind their fellow-Christians, that once they had belonged to a sectional group which had ceased to exist because it lacked some essential Christian grace. The letter itself would become the property of some private individual—a representative direct or indirect of its former official custodian, or of the Church member who at the dissolution of the House-Church treasured its history and possessions sufficiently to preserve it. For years it may

have lain unnoticed, emerging at a later date when nothing was remembered of its original history. Afterwards it won its way slowly to canonical recognition, because of its inherent excellence, its "Catholic" and Apostolical doctrine, its venerable antiquity, and perhaps not least because it was quoted by Clement of Rome. Indeed Clement, who was probably a Jewish Christian, may have been a member of the original "House-group," and even the preserver of the letter. If so, we can well understand why in certain quarters he was regarded as its author. I throw out this tentative solution of the "literary riddle of the Epistle to the Hebrews," thinking that at all events it is worth discussion, and hoping that the discussion will increase our understanding of one of the most entrancing of the New Testament documents.

JOHN DICKIE.

*PLEA FOR FULLER CRITICISM OF THE MASSORETIC TEXT, WITH ILLUSTRATIONS FROM THE FIRST PSALM.*

THE study of the Old Testament has fascinated multitudes, in the Christian Church as well as in the Church which first received and has preserved the sacred oracles. Ardent scholars have applied themselves to the investigation of the language used by the Prophets and the Psalmists, and have given to others the results of their labours, that the meaning of the Prophecies and the Psalms might be better understood. As these researches, however, have been deepened and extended, especially within the past century, it has come to be recognised that the received Hebrew text, in spite of the immense labour and care bestowed on it by the Massoretes in early mediaeval times, is not a perfect work. Though this has naturally formed the foundation on which learned and skilful commentators have—often unsuspectingly—based their expositions, this