

## Great Texts Reconsidered.

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'We have an altar, whereof they have no right to eat which serve the tabernacle.'—He 13<sup>10</sup>.

THE sacrificial slaughtering of animals, almost universal in the religious practice of the ancient world and specifically prescribed for Israel in the Mosaic Law, has provided language and imagery to most of the writers of the primitive Christian literature; but the writer to the Hebrews stands alone in that for him, as for no other New Testament writer, sacrifice provides the controlling thought in all his teaching. Others on occasion use sacrificial language of the work of Christ, but he and he alone speaks directly of Jesus Christ as 'Priest' or 'High-priest' (*ιερεύς* or *ἀρχιερεύς*), and, with the single exception of the seer of the Apocalypse, he alone uses the word 'altar' (*θυσιαστήριον*) in a specifically Christian context. 'We'—Christian believers—'have an altar.'

It need scarcely be said that when the writer speaks thus of a Christian altar he does not refer to any actual concrete object. The Temple at Jerusalem was provided with material altars which of course were indispensable for the cultus as prescribed by the Law, but the Church of apostolic and of sub-apostolic times knew of no visible Christian counterpart to the *θυσιαστήρια* of Leviticus and of the Temple. It is not until a much later date—once possibly in Irenæus (*Adv. Hæres.* iv. xxxi. 5 Harvey), once certainly in Tertullian (*De Orat.* xix.), but first regularly and normally in the writings of Cyprian—that the Holy Table of the Eucharist is spoken of as an 'altar.' In the earlier Fathers *θυσιαστήριον* is only used figuratively. Ignatius (*ad Rom.*, 2) uses it very naturally of the Colosseum at Rome where he himself expected to be 'poured out in libation.' Elsewhere (*ad Magn.*, 7) he speaks of Christ as the *θυσιαστήριον* or 'altar court' while the Father Himself is the 'sanctuary' or *ναός*.<sup>1</sup> More commonly *θυσιαστήριον* is used as a symbolic description of the assembly or place of assembly of the whole Church (Ignat., *ad Ephes.*, 5, *ad Trall.*, 7, and especially Clement Alex., *Strom.* vii. 6, p. 848. Cf. also Polyc., *ad Philip.*, 4). The precise meaning intended by the writer to the Hebrews in the passage which we are here considering is not clear, and possibly the writer did not intend to be precise. But his general inten-

<sup>1</sup> Accepting Lightfoot's very probable conjecture of *ὄν* for *θεῶν*.

tion is not doubtful when we have regard to his argument as a whole. Christ the High Priest, so he teaches, has offered once for all the one true perfect sacrifice—the sacrifice of Himself—and, having offered the sacrifice, He has carried the sacrificial blood into the inner sanctuary of God's presence, where He remains 'to make intercession for us.' In virtue of this priestly entrance, God's people have now the right of direct approach to the very throne of grace, and through Christ they too may offer the sacrifices of praise to God and beneficence to man. 'With such sacrifices God is well pleased.'

The Christian 'altar' of our text must be understood in the general context of these leading thoughts, but it must be confessed that it is extremely difficult to determine the exact meaning of the verse. A typological technique such as that of this Epistle is necessarily conditioned by a double interest: first, to establish a general parallel between type and antitype; and secondly, to prove the inherent weakness and inefficacy of the type as against the reality typified. This double interest is felt throughout the Epistle. 'Without shedding blood there is no remission.' This principle is shown to have been honoured alike in the Levitical law of sacrifice and in the sacrifice of the Son of God, and it enables the writer to find a meaning in the ritual use of the blood recorded and prescribed in Exodus and Leviticus. At the same time 'the blood of bulls and goats can never take away sin,' for this blood, unlike the pure—yet bloody—offering of the sinless Christ, can never touch the defilements of the conscience. Thus while he maintains the principle of typology, the writer enters upon a definite polemic against the belief that the type is permanently valid.

The question arises whether in our text the writer is concerned to emphasize the parallelism between the Christian sacrifice and the Jewish, or whether, while assuming the parallelism, he is concerned to underline the difference between shadow and substance, type and reality. Both views have found advocates.

On a first reading it is natural to suppose that the second interest is dominant. The author, it seems, is contrasting Christians, who have the right to eat of their altar (whatever 'altar' may here stand for), with Jews (or Jewish priests), 'the servants of the tabernacle,' who have no such right. This

line of interpretation has weighty support from St. Chrysostom to Bishop Westcott. 'Our rites,' exclaims St. Chrysostom, in commenting upon these words (*In Epist. ad Hebr.*, Hom. xxxiii, 304A), 'are not as the Jewish rites whereof it is not lawful even for a High Priest to partake.' On this the most obvious exegesis of the verse it is implied that Christian believers *do* eat at a sacrificial feast, and if we adopt this interpretation we cannot doubt that the author has in mind the Christian Eucharist. The thought is thus paraphrased by Westcott:

'We Christians *have* an altar, from which we draw the material for our feast. In respect of this, our privilege is greater than that of priest or high-priest under the Levitical system. Our great sin-offering, consumed in one sense outside the gate, is given to us as our food. The Christian, therefore, who can partake of Christ, offered for his sins, is admitted to a privilege unknown under the old Covenant' (*Epistle to the Hebrews*, 1889, p. 439).

So long as we take the text by itself, this interpretation seems satisfactory, but a close attention to the context raises doubts. The difficulty was already observed by Chrysostom. Verses 8 and 9 set forth the abiding and unchanging Christ in contrast with strange and varying doctrines which imperil faith. Among these doctrines was a dangerous scrupulosity with regard to foods—probably akin to the tendencies with which St. Paul deals in Ro 14. 'Be not carried away,' says the writer, 'by varied and strange doctrines, for it is good that the heart be established by grace—not by foods; for they that occupied themselves with foods were not profited thereby.' This negative attitude towards 'foods' reappears in the verse immediately following our text, where the author takes up again the parallel between the death of Jesus and the consuming of the victims on the Day of Atonement. 'The bodies of those victims, whose blood is carried through the High Priest into the sanctuary, are [not eaten but] consumed by fire without the camp.' Now, on Westcott's interpretation of our text, we must assume that the author in v.<sup>10</sup> is contrasting the Christians who do eat sacrificial food with Jews who do not, and that he is thus qualifying the repudiation of 'foods' in v.<sup>9</sup>—turning it round the other way,' as Chrysostom puts it. But it must be admitted that the author gives no direct indication that he intends to qualify what he has already asserted; on the contrary the connexion of the sentences suggests rather that he is developing a single line of thought in an even style. This consideration has led some modern commentators,

Windisch and Moffatt among others, to adopt an entirely different interpretation of v.<sup>10</sup> which brings that verse into line with what precedes and with what follows, eliminating the contrast between the Old Covenant and the New, and making the author assert a parallelism instead of a contrast between Jewish type and Christian substance. Westcott and those who think with him made the natural assumption that the *σκηνή* of v.<sup>10</sup> is the Tabernacle of the Pentateuch: on this other interpretation *σκηνή*, like *θυσιαστήριον*, is figurative not literal, *οἱ λατρεύοντες τῇ σκηνῇ* meaning simply 'the worshippers' and referring to the same persons as the subject of the verb *ἔχομεν*, but viewed under a special aspect. With this exegesis the negative attitude towards 'foods' runs continuously from v.<sup>9</sup> to v.<sup>12</sup>, and the passage may almost be said to transpose into the idiom of Hebrews St. Paul's words on the same topic: 'For the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit' (Ro 14<sup>17</sup>). We may then paraphrase He 13<sup>8-14</sup> somewhat as follows: 'Jesus Christ remains for ever, in past, present and future, the same. We must then beware of the perils of diverse and foreign teachings. We should look to God's grace and not to regulations about food to establish our hearts—regulations which have always proved inefficacious for those who have tried to make of them a rule of life. The altar of Christian worship is not an altar from which the worshippers of the sanctuary have a right to eat [but an altar which provides cleansing for the heart and conscience]. [This is shown in the sacrifices of the old law which typify the sacrifice of Christ], for the victims of the Day of Atonement, whose blood the High Priest bears within the veil of the sanctuary are [not eaten but] burnt without the camp. Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people by His own blood, suffered without the city gate, and thither we must follow Him, bearing His reproach. Our home is not here in this world: the abiding city for which we look is yet to come.' This yields one consecutive line of thought and, on the whole, in spite of some hesitation over *τῇ σκηνῇ* in v.<sup>10</sup>, I am disposed to accept it.

Moffatt is right in saying that the thought of Hebrews is 'mystical' or 'idealistic,' not 'sacramental.' The types of the old law are shadows, and for Christians the shadows have been dissipated by the very image of the truth. The truth can only be appropriated by the cleansed heart which has renounced the world and which, while in the world, is content to bear the reproach of Christ. No sensuous medium is of any avail. There is a passing

glance at the external act of Baptism (10<sup>22</sup>), but the 'pure water' of Baptism washes 'the body,' and seems to be merely symbolic of the cleansing of the heart. The Pauline doctrine of a dying and rising again in the rite is not asserted. In Hebrews, as in most of the New Testament Epistles, the Eucharist is probably not alluded to at all. Of course the 'breaking of bread' will have been familiar alike to the writer and to his readers, but it fulfils no distinctive function in the doctrinal structure. Even if we follow St. Chrysostom and Bishop Westcott in their exegesis of our text, the reference remains incidental only and plays no part in the main argument.

Moffatt goes further: following O. Holtzmann he thinks that our text is a definite polemic against a rising tide of Sacramentalism, which was interpreting the Eucharist as an 'eating' of the Lord's body. (Compare the language of Jn 6 and contrast that of 1 Co 10 and 11.) It is not inconceivable, for such a polemic would not contradict the writer's positive affirmations. But it seems to me very unlikely. If the author had this definite aim in mind, I cannot think he would have expressed himself so allusively and obscurely. Moreover, there is very little reason to suppose that beliefs with regard to the Eucharistic meal were of controversial interest in the first century.

Whether the author means to say by the words of our text that Christians *do*, or that they do *not*, 'eat of the altar,' he certainly holds that the one sufficient

sacrifice, whereof the Levitical sacrifices were a shadow, has been offered by Christ once for all. Moreover, the idea of a continuing offering in heaven, which some have read into the Epistle, rests upon mistranslation and misconception of the writer's teachings. Does it, then, follow that the Christian community in its earthly pilgrimage has no right or duty to offer sacrifice to God? At the close of the Epistle the author indicates his answer to this question.

*Nil de Missa*, comments Bengel with his accustomed point and brevity on v. 15.

But if the notion of a continuing sacrifice of expiatory value is foreign to the writer's mind, sacrificial duties, so he teaches, still remain. The thankful acknowledgment in common worship of God's grace and favour springs naturally and necessarily from a proper faith and it is of the nature of sacrifice. 'Through Christ let us offer to God continually the sacrifice of praise.' With the offering of praise the writer couples those activities which reveal the true believer, and they too are sacrificial. 'Kindly service and charity forget not, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased.' Thus, while the Epistle breathes from first to last the unworldly spirit of the primitive faith which looks for an abiding city beyond the riches and grandeur of the world, yet this unworldliness is no mere fanaticism, but the mainspring of a beneficent activity which, while the world lasts, will attest the reality of the Christian faith in the world unseen.

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## Literature.

### MOFFATT'S NEW TESTAMENT.

THERE is no need to enlarge upon the popularity and solid merit of Professor James Moffatt's 'new translation.' It has been reprinted seventy-three times since its first publication twenty-five years ago. The latest 'Jubilee Edition' celebrates the silver jubilee of the New Testament Translation and appears most opportunely in this year of Bible celebration. Dr. Moffatt in the first edition modestly sets out his aim 'to produce a version which will to some degree represent the gains of recent lexical research and also prove readable.' And also prove readable. In view of chapters, such as 1 Co 13, this is a curious and pleasant under-

statement. 'Love is very patient, very kind. Love knows no jealousy; love makes no parade, gives itself no airs, is never rude, never selfish, never irritated, *never resentful*. Love is never glad when others go wrong; love is gladdened by goodness, always slow to expose, always eager to believe the best, always hopeful, always patient.'

This new edition is a beautiful one, tastefully bound in blue cloth (lettered in gold, complete with headband, coloured top, and silk marker) and set in large modern type. The double-columned pages of the earlier editions have vanished. The pages themselves as well as the print have been enlarged, so that in place of the three hundred and twenty-seven pages of the first edition (we assume that