

THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS

by Robert C. Walton

THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS I

Introduction

Most of the standard questions of introduction are not answered by the book of Hebrews, and thus are subject to all kinds of speculation. Though these issues may not be conclusively settled, discussion of them gives much insight into the character of the book.

I. AUTHORSHIP

A. PAUL

1. ARGUMENTS FOR

- a. Early tradition (mid second century) in Alexandria
- b. Basis for acceptance in canon
- c. Supposed allusion in II Peter 3:15 to Pauline writing to Jews
- d. Similarity of theme with other Pauline writings (e.g., preeminence of Christ in Colossians)
- e. Closing references (13:18-25)

2. ARGUMENTS AGAINST

- a. Lack of Pauline salutation
- b. Greek style totally unlike that of Pauline epistles
- c. Basing authority on what was received from others (2:3) is completely contrary to Paul's steadfast stand on direct revelation (e.g., Galatians, II Corinthians)

B. BARNABAS

1. ARGUMENTS FOR

- a. Association with Paul
- b. He was a Levite
- c. Background in Cyprus, tradition of having preached in Alexandria may explain use of the Septuagint, rhetorical style of Greek used in book
- d. Supported by Tertullian around 200 AD

2. ARGUMENTS AGAINST

- a. No positive evidence
- b. No knowledge of any writings of Barnabas (the pseudepigraphal *Epistle of Barnabas* is far too late to have been his)
- c. Hebrews 2:3 is as much an argument against Barnabas as it is against Paul
- d. If this were true, how could claim of Pauline authorship have arisen?

C. LUKE

1. ARGUMENTS FOR

- a. Similarities in vocabulary and style with Luke and Acts
- b. Connection with Paul and Timothy
- c. Suggestion in late second century that Paul had written it in Hebrew, and Luke had translated it into Greek

2. ARGUMENTS AGAINST

- a. Luke was a Gentile
- b. No positive support

- c. Tradition questioned by Origin, soon lost support
- D. SILAS
 - 1. ARGUMENTS FOR
 - a. Connection with Paul and Timothy
 - b. Hellenistic Jewish background
 - c. Stylistic similarities with I Peter, for which Silas was allegedly the amanuensis
 - 2. ARGUMENT AGAINST - no positive or traditional support
- E. APOLLOS
 - 1. ARGUMENTS FOR
 - a. Connection with Paul and Timothy
 - b. Alexandrian background
 - c. Knowledge of Old Testament from the Septuagint
 - d. Intelligence and rhetorical ability
 - 2. ARGUMENTS AGAINST
 - a. No traditional support - this idea was first proposed by Martin Luther
 - b. Early Alexandrian support for Pauline authorship
- F. CLEMENT OF ROME
 - 1. ARGUMENT FOR - Similarity of language with I Clement
 - 2. ARGUMENT AGAINST - Similarity comes from quotation of Hebrews, not authorship. He used it, but he didn't write it.
- G. PRISCILLA - Suggested by Adolf von Harnack in the early twentieth century as a way of explaining the anonymity of the book, but lacks positive or traditional support.
- H. CONCLUSION - The book is probably not Pauline, but was most likely written by an associate of Paul.

II. DATE - The fact that Clement of Rome quoted the book in the last decade of the first century requires an early date of composition, and the fact that the author speaks of the sacrificial system in the present tense points toward a date prior to 70 AD when the Temple was destroyed by the Romans (though Justin Martyr wrote in similar language in the middle of the second century). The recipients of the letter drew from long experience (5:12) and had received the Gospel secondhand (2:3). The fact that the destruction of the Temple would seem to clinch the author's argument, yet is not mentioned, places the date before 70 AD, but not much before - probably in the sixties.

III. RECIPIENTS - The title of the book is a later addition to the manuscript, and thus proves nothing. Though some favor Gentile recipients, the internal evidence overwhelmingly favors Jewish Christian recipients, both because of the heavy reliance on Old Testament allusions and the danger of a return to Judaism addressed by the author. The following specific suggestions have been made.

- A. CONVERTED PRIESTS IN JERUSALEM (cf. Acts 6:7) - These Christians had, however, "resisted unto blood" (12:4), the Jerusalem church received aid rather than giving it (6:10), and the use of the Septuagint for former priests would be highly unusual. The persecutions mentioned in the book would then be coming from the

Jewish community, or possibly be connected with the increasing pressure of the Roman presence prior to 70 AD (though this was applied to Jews more than Christians, and would not have motivated re-conversion).

- B. A CONSERVATIVE JEWISH-CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY IN ROME - Some argue that 13:24 could refer to people from Rome sending greetings back home. The persecution would then be the early stages of the outbreak under Nero (64 AD), which was the first to distinguish Christianity from Judaism. The problem with this argument is that the Neronian persecution arose suddenly following the great fire in 64, and Christians in the city found themselves “resisting unto blood” immediately. Others have suggested that the persecution during which Claudius drove the Jews from Rome in 49 AD could be in view, but this is really far too early.
- C. A JEWISH-CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY IN NORTHERN PALESTINE CONVERTED FROM OR INFLUENCED BY THE ESSENES - The Dead Sea Scrolls show that the Essenes placed a great deal of emphasis on Melchizedek, idealized Temple ritual in opposition to the corruption of the Pharisees and especially the Sadducees, and practiced strict ritual legalism in anticipation of the Last Days. In my mind, this is the best suggestion.

IV. OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

- A. BETTER THAN THE PROPHETS (1:1-3)
- B. BETTER THAN THE ANGELS (1:4-2:18)
- C. BETTER THAN MOSES (3:1-4:14)
- D. BETTER THAN AARON (4:14-10:18)
 - 1. A BETTER PRIESTHOOD (4:14-7:28)
 - 2. A BETTER COVENANT (8:1-9:10)
 - 3. A BETTER SACRIFICE (9:11-10:18)
- E. BETTER LIFE IN CHRIST (10:19-13:25)

THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS II

Hebrews 1

INTRODUCTION (1:1-3)

The author here speaks of the superiority of Christ to the prophetic revelation of the Old Testament. As we will see throughout the book, the superiority of Christ is expressed as involving both continuity and discontinuity with the old order.

Verses 1-2a - Continuity is seen in the fact that God spoke, both to the fathers and to us. The discontinuity rests in time (“in the past” vs. “these last days”), unity (“various ways” vs. one way), and authority (prophets vs. His Son).

Verses 2b-3 - These verses list seven areas of Christ’s superiority (note again the continuities and discontinuities):

- “appointed heir of all things” - only a Son can be the heir.
- “through whom He made the universe” - Creator, not created.
- “the radiance of God’s glory” - a perfect reflection, rather than “a poor reflection as in a mirror” (I Corinthians 13:12).
- “exact representation of His being” - a die or stamp or mold - the duplication is perfect and indelible.
- “sustaining all things by His powerful word” - Sustainer as well as Creator.
- “provided purification for sins” - accomplished what had been prophesied.
- “sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven” - given the ultimate position of authority.

Thus the Son is not just the Prophet who is better than the prophets, but He is also *other than* the prophets.

BETTER THAN THE ANGELS (1:4-14)

To us, the superiority of Christ to the angels is perfectly obvious. Why does the author of Hebrews dwell on it so much? Two possibilities have been suggested:

A. INCIPIENT GNOSTICISM

The Gnostic concept of the *Pleroma* placed Christ at the bottom of a large hierarchy of angelic beings called *aeons*. The problem here is that those seduced by Gnosticism would be in no danger of falling back into Jewish ritual. Outward rites were abhorrent to the spiritually-oriented Gnostics. In addition, some Gnostic groups were blatantly anti-Jewish, arguing that the Old Testament had nothing to do with Christianity (e.g., Marcion, who compiled a canon of Scripture containing only part of Luke’s Gospel and ten Pauline epistles, having jettisoned the rest as “too Jewish”).

B. ESSENE INFLUENCES

The Dead Sea Scrolls have revealed that the Essene community at Qumran held beliefs that would readily explain the argument of this chapter. As thoroughly monotheistic Jews, they were in no danger of worshipping angels. But their concept of the Messiah (actually they expected two messiahs, a priest and a king) was fully human. In fact, the messiahs who were to come were to act under the authority of the archangel Michael.

The author supports the superiority of Christ to angels with a series of Old Testament quotations:

- He is the Son - v.5-6 (cf. Psalm 2:7; II Samuel 7:14; Deuteronomy 32:43 [Septuagint])
- He is the King - v.7-9, 13-14 (cf. Psalm 45:6-7; 104:4; 110:1)
- He is the Creator - v.10-12 (cf. Psalm 102:25-27)

Notice, too, that these quotations in general show the superiority of Christ because they identify Him with Yahweh (which makes them good verses to use in conversations with Jehovah's Witnesses, who deny that Jesus is the same as Jehovah God). These Jewish-Christian readers needed to know that monotheism did not exclude the worship of Christ as God.

THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS III

Hebrews 2

Chapter two continues and concludes the section of the book dealing with the superiority of Christ to the angels. Having stated and supported through Old Testament quotations the superiority of Christ to the angels, the author now seeks to apply that truth. The application can be divided into three sections. Note that the structure closely parallels that of chapter one. The first section deals again with revelation, the second with Christ versus angels, and the final brief section with man's greater privilege in relation to the angels. The author was quite a stylist!

EXHORTATION TO THE READERS (2:1-4)

Like many of Paul's epistles, Hebrews divides neatly into two main sections, the first theological and the second practical. But this section illustrates a significant difference between this author's style and that of Paul, for this is the first of numerous "pockets" of practical application and warning scattered through the theological section of the book. Note the following:

- The danger is that of "drifting away," not "falling away" (i.e., apostasy). A real danger for experienced believers is *gradual* movement away from Christ.
- The remedy is to "pay more careful attention" - in other words, it is the Word of God that prevents this gradual slippage. How? By providing the standard against which the Christian should measure himself.
- The warning takes the form of an *a fortiori* ("how much more") argument - an argument from lesser to greater - which was a favorite rabbinical tactic. If the wilderness generation was left to rot in the desert, think of the greater judgment that would accompany the neglect of greater revelation. The author will return to this theme in greater detail in chapters three and four.
- The authentication of this message is from God through Christ, confirmed by those who heard Him and ratified by the works of the Holy Spirit. Notice how God is seen in every step - the human instruments almost get lost in the shuffle (an attitude typical of this author, who rarely bothers to mention the human authors when quoting Scripture). [The indication that the author had received the Gospel secondhand is perhaps the strongest argument against Pauline authorship of the epistle.]

APPLICATION TO CHRIST (2:5-15)

Like the first chapter, this main central section is pumped full of Old Testament quotations (again, not characteristic of Paul's writing). This section deals with Christ's exaltation, then with His humiliation.

A. THE EXALTATION OF CHRIST (2:5-8)

For Christ, His superiority over the angels implies future exaltation. Appearances favored the Essene understanding of the Messiah - the Christ described to them was clearly inferior to the glorious angels. The author first cites Psalm 8 to show that this inferiority was *temporary*. Please note:

- The sloppy quotation - How many times have you done that?
- The assumed Christological interpretation of Psalm 8. Paul's teaching of Christ as the Prototypical Man, the Second Adam (Romans 5) is assumed here.
- The apparent contradiction with the reality of earthly conditions, which are clearly not yet subject to Christ (some commentators say that "him" in verse 8 is man, but it suits neither the author's interpretation of Psalm 8 nor his overall emphasis on the Lordship of Christ).

B. THE HUMILIATION OF CHRIST (2:9-15)

Having demonstrated that the humiliation of Christ is temporary, the author goes on to show why it is *necessary*.

- verse 9a - Christ's exaltation is in some measure a reward for His suffering.
- verse 9b - Christ's suffering was necessary for salvation to be accomplished.
- verse 10 - Christ's suffering in some sense "perfected" Him. How? Not in some abstract sense, but in preparing and suiting Him for His priestly work of intercession (cf. verse 18).
- verses 11-14a - Christ's incarnation identified Him with the race He was to save. To be a representative, He had to become Man.
- verses 14b-15 - Christ's death defeated the enemy of those He came to save. To be a Savior, He had to die in the place of those He represented.

ENCOURAGEMENT TO THE READERS (2:16-18)

- verse 16 - It is Christ's redeeming work that places believers above the angels, those who are "sent to serve those who will inherit salvation."
- verse 17 - Christ's death provides *propitiation* - the removal of God's wrath (this is the meaning of the Greek word translated *atonement* in the NIV).
- verse 18 - Christ's death also provides help to those who are facing temptation.

THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS IV

Hebrews 3

Chapter three begins the section (which extends to 4:13) that expounds the superiority of Christ to Moses. As we shall see, this is largely a device to drive home a comparison (already espoused by the Essenes) between the recipients of the letter and the wilderness generation. The chapter can be divided into two parts, the first contrasting Christ and Moses and the second contrasting Christ's "house" and Moses' "house."

CHRIST AND MOSES (3:1-6a)

- verse 1 - Given the previous chapter's discussion of Christ's incarnation and atoning work, the recipients are told to "fix their thoughts on Jesus." The theme of the high priest is discussed in great detail later, but why "apostle"? See John 20:21, noting that *apostle* means "one who is sent."
- verses 2-6b - The passage now goes on to compare Christ and Moses, and does so through the use, again, of continuity and discontinuity. Moses is like Christ because of his faithfulness, but is unlike Christ because the latter was worthy of greater honor, was the Son and builder of the house in which Moses was merely a servant, and introduced the reality to which the shadow of Moses' house testified.

CHRIST'S HOUSE AND MOSES' HOUSE (3:6b-19)

Verse 6b speaks of believers as the house over which Christ has been set (cf. Ephesians 2:19-22; I Peter 2:4-8). The Qumran sect anticipated a period of forty years of testing prior to the establishment of God's Kingdom, analogous to the years of wilderness wandering. They saw their wilderness existence as a measure of purification in preparation for the coming of the Kingdom. It is thus appropriate that the author warns his readers to beware of the pitfalls of the wilderness generation.

- verses 7-11 - The quotation, typically prefaced by "the Holy Spirit says," is taken from Psalm 95:7-11. The psalm is a hymn of worship and has been used in synagogues and church liturgies for thousands of years. As the people of God are called to worship, they are reminded of the need to come in faith.
- verse 8 - Probably refers to the incident at Rephidim, where the people grumbled and God sent water when Moses struck the rock (Exodus 17).
- verse 9 - The forty years was relevant here since it had been almost forty years since the death of Christ - they were anticipating the imminent establishment of the Kingdom.
- verse 11 - The "rest," of course, was the Promised Land.
- verses 12-15 - A series of exhortations. The term *apostasy* is used in verse 12 - the wilderness generation had fallen quite literally. "Today" is a period of God's gracious work. Turning away from that grace through deceit - in this case, seeking a holiness that was quite

contrary to God's revelation in Christ - would be disastrous. Notice also the gradual hardening effects of sin.

- verses 16-18 - Since those who had experienced great privilege had taken a great fall, the readers needed to take heed, especially since God's judgment was irremediable. Unbelief leads to disobedience, resulting in failure to reach the final rest.
- verse 19 - The key to this and all other warnings in the book is that the root of the temptations faced by the recipients was *unbelief*. Christians never cease to be tempted to rely on their own wisdom and to turn from Christ. This is why perseverance is so important, both for the recipients of this letter and for us today.

THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS V

Hebrews 4

This chapter concludes the discussion of the superiority of Christ to Moses, which, as we noted last week, is really a vehicle for a challenge stemming from a comparison of the recipients of the letter to the wilderness generation. It then ends with a passage that serves as a transition into the main body of the book, the discussion of the high priesthood of Christ.

THE REST OF GOD, THE BELIEVER'S HOPE (4:1-11)

A. THE WARNING (4:1-2)

- verse 1 - Those who profess must always continue to examine themselves, with fear. If the wilderness generation “fell short,” so may we.
- verse 2 - Both groups were “evangelized,” but they gained nothing because of unbelief. Does this imply that salvation involves the efforts of both God and man? Hardly - see Ephesians 2:8-9; Matthew 13:1-23.

B. THE REST IS GOD'S REST (4:3-5)

Believers partake of the sabbath rest of God (note again the careless quotation formula).

C. THE DAY OF GRACE (4:6-11)

- verses 6-9 - These verses indicate that God's rest is something in the future for believers, since the Canaan rest was only typical (David lived after Joshua), and the day of grace is still open. That final rest will be enjoyed in heaven.
- verse 10 - What does this say about the nature of the believer's heavenly rest? It is no more a cessation of activity than God's creation rest. Rather, it is cessation of a certain *kind* of activity. What kind for God? For us?
- verse 11 - Fear (verse 1) should not produce paralysis, but rather diligent effort.

THE WORD OF GOD, THE BELIEVER'S STANDARD (4:12-13)

The thrust here is that self-examination is essential because hypocrisy is futile. God sees all and knows all, and nothing can be hidden from Him.

- verse 12 - The Word is the agent of self-examination. It leaves nothing undiscovered, whether material or immaterial. No crevice is too small for its penetrating power.
- verse 13 - Be sure that God will find everything. Human pride is left with no ground on which to stand.

THE SON OF GOD, THE BELIEVER'S PRIEST (4:14-16)

Having stripped his readers naked, the author now covers them. Comfort means more when it comes in relief of pain.

- verse 14 - Encouragement because of the transcendence of Christ.
- verse 15 - Every temptation we face was experienced and overcome by Christ, including the temptation to turn aside before His work was finished. If He could do it under the worst possible conditions - in the wilderness with Satan and on the cross - He certainly can give us the strength to resist. Christ is not simply pictured here as an example to follow, but also as the source of power to succeed.
- verse 16 - Confidence in Christ for both forgiveness of past sin and help in future temptation should be the result.

THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS VI

Hebrews 5

This chapter begins the discussion of Christ's superiority to Aaron - the most detailed presentation of the priestly work of Christ anywhere in Scripture. The chapter may be divided into two segments. The first relates the priesthood of Christ to previous teaching regarding the incarnation, while the second begins a parenthetical exhortation designed to assure that the teaching is not an exercise in futility.

THE INCARNATE HIGH PRIEST (5:1-10)

The first part of this section deals with the essential humanity and characteristics of the high priesthood; the second with the ways in which Christ fits and does not fit the pattern.

A. HUMAN PRIESTHOOD (5:1-4)

- verse 1 - The high priest is a mediator, bringing before God on behalf of men "gifts and sacrifices" - what is presented represents both thanksgiving and atonement. In order to do this, he must be chosen "from among men" - the author now reveals the purpose for the lengthy discourse on the incarnation of Christ in chapter two.
- verse 2 - The priest is able to mediate with compassion because he shares the weaknesses of those for whom he speaks. He deals gently with the ignorant and wayward - types of sins into which all fall - but he is not to deal with the presumptuous sinner, the unrepentant, the apostate, against which types of sin the readers have been warned and will be warned again.
- verse 3 - The weakness of the Old Testament priesthood is that while the mediatorial role was adequately carried out on the human end, it was not on the divine end. The Old Testament priesthood could never link God and man.
- verse 4 - Priests are chosen by God, not for glory, but for service (unlike the high priests in Jerusalem, high-living politicians who owed their office to the Herod family and the Romans).

B. CHRIST'S PRIESTHOOD (5:5-10)

- verses 5-6 - As with human high priests, Christ was *chosen*, as indicated in Psalm 2:7, which had been quoted previously, and Psalm 110:4. This is the author's first mention of Melchizedek, and gives the key to the significance of this obscure figure in the author's argument. The two quotations link Christ's kingship with His priesthood. The recipients of the letter, if indeed they were formerly Essenes, had looked for two messiahs, a king and a priest. The Old Testament functions of the messiahs could not be united in one person, since the divinely ordained kings came from the line of David, while the priests were designated as from the family of Aaron. The writer of Hebrews is preparing to argue that a higher-order, universal priesthood belongs to the Messiah, one that lacks the flaws of the Aaronic priesthood.

- verses 7-8 - Christ's ability to identify with His people is seen clearly in His experience in Gethsemane. Christ "learned obedience," not by correction, but by experience.
- verse 9 - Only those who persevere in obedience find Christ the source of eternal salvation.

THE CHILDISH CHRISTIANS (5:11-14)

- verse 11 - The vital subject of Melchizedek is postponed because of the author's fear that the readers are not in any position to profit from it. A stern warning must be given first, which extends into the next chapter. The difficulty of explanation does not come from the esoteric nature of the material (though it certainly isn't easy), or from the incompetence of the readers, but from their blindness (deafness, actually).
- verses 12-13 - Their inability to cope comes from an immature preoccupation with idle speculation (much of Essene theology was highly speculative), which blinded them to the basics of the faith and left them both immature and in danger of defection.
- verse 14 - Maturity is Christlikeness (cf. verse 9), and involves the discernment that the readers lack and must gain through practice in the basic truths of the faith rather than idle speculation.

THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS VII

Hebrews 6:1-8

This passage continues the warning begun in Hebrews 5:11, and is by far the most controversial section of this difficult book. These verses can be divided into two parts, verses 1-3 dealing with the path to be followed, and verses 4-8 indicating the consequences of not following it.

THE PATH TO BE FOLLOWED (6:1-3)

The author immediately catches us off guard here. He has just finished saying that his readers were immature, capable only of digesting milk. Therefore, we would expect, he will somewhat reluctantly give them the milk suitable to their status. Instead, he insists they move ahead. For what reasons?

First of all, he insists they move ahead because there is no such thing for the Christian as maintaining the spiritual status quo. He is either advancing or regressing. For the readers to review again the basics of the faith would be detrimental to their spiritual condition. Note that the phrase “let us . . . go on to maturity” is really a passive, “let us be carried forward to perfection,” i.e., by the Holy Spirit. One who is not being carried forward in his Christian life needs to heed the warning coming up.

Secondly, the “elementary teachings” listed here could serve as a compendium of fundamental ideas shared by Judaism and Christianity. Since these people faced the danger of relapse into Judaism, concentration on these areas would be disastrous. As the “bridge” between Judaism and Christianity, these teachings bear striking resemblance to the contents of Peter’s sermon in Acts 2 and probably summarize the pattern of first-century pre-baptismal catechism. A few comments:

- verse 1 - Repentance and faith are two sides of the same coin. One cannot truly exist without the other. “Works that lead to death” could be a reference to Jewish ceremonial practices, but also include all acts of unrighteousness. As far as faith is concerned, this is a theme to which the author will return at great length in chapter eleven.
- verse 2 - The word translated “baptisms” is literally *washings*, a word never used for Christian baptism. Judaism involved many kinds of ceremonial washings, and the instruction to which the author refers presumably differentiated Christian baptism from these aspects of Jewish ritual.
- verse 3 - “God permitting” is no empty cliché - the author has genuine concern that his readers may *not* be able to move on to maturity. Perseverance is not assumed, but is entrusted to the grace of God.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF NOT FOLLOWING THE PATH (6:4-8)

Again, these verses emphasize that standing still is not possible - one who is not “carried forward” will be in danger of “falling away.” Three primary interpretations have been given to this controversial passage over the years.

A. HYPOTHETICAL

This interpretation concludes that the author is saying, “This can’t happen, but if it could . . .” Those who take this interpretation believe that the author is speaking about a Christian here, but also believe that a Christian cannot lose his salvation. They thus are forced to assert that the author is describing something that is impossible. This would not be a very sound basis for a warning, however.

B. CHRISTIAN

According to this interpretation, the author is describing a genuine Christian here. The passage thus becomes a major proof text for those who claim that a Christian can lose his salvation. Several variations on this position exist:

- Two heretical groups in the Ancient Church, the Montanists and the Donatists, taught that blatant sin after one’s baptism caused a person to lose his salvation and that such a person could never be readmitted into the church. This caused some in the Ancient Church to postpone getting baptized until their deathbeds (the emperor Constantine, who first made Christianity a legal religion in the Roman Empire, did this).
- The Catholic Church teaches that one who sins after baptism may not have his sins washed away by another baptism, but must have them cleansed in Purgatory.
- Arminians are the ones today who most frequently use this passage to argue that a person can lose his salvation, but for them the passage proves too much. It clearly says that one who behaves in the way described can never be brought back to repentance, yet Arminians believe that one who loses his salvation can gain it back again through repentance and recommitment.

Obviously, a major problem with all versions of this position is that they imply that a person must sustain his right standing before God through his own works. Salvation thus ceases to be by grace through faith, but becomes “saved by faith, kept by works.” This is not biblical teaching (John 10:27-30; Philippians 1:6).

C. FALSE PROFESSOR

The standard Reformed interpretation is that verses 4-5 describe, not a saving experience, but the height of common grace. This interpretation may be supported both by the context and by the teaching and example found elsewhere in Scripture.

Contextual support comes both from what precedes the passage and from what follows. The example of the wilderness generation in chapters 3-4 shows that false professions are in the author's mind, since the Israelites in Egypt and after the Exodus had experienced God's grace in incredible ways and yet fell short because of the absence of true faith in their hearts. In addition, the verses that follow (6:7-8) allude both to the narrative of Creation and Fall in Genesis 2-3 and Jesus' Parable of the Sower (Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23), both of which speak of those who experienced the grace of God, yet remained unregenerate.

Other Scripture illustrations of the principle enunciated in this passage include Judas, Simon Magus, the Pharisees of Jesus' day (Matthew 12:30-32), those spoken of in Matthew 7:21-23, and Demas (II Timothy 4:10). These, like the crowd in Jerusalem at the time of Christ's death, at one time cried "Hosanna," but wound up shouting "Crucify Him, crucify Him!"

THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS VIII

Hebrews 6:9-20

The author has just temporarily departed from his theme in this section, the high priesthood of Christ, to issue the strongest warning in the book, if not in all of Scripture. The remainder of the chapter serves as a transition to return the readers to his theme. The transitional passage may be divided into two sections. The first gives encouragement to the readers (verses 9-12), while the second sets forth the example of Abraham (verse 13-20), in which both the perseverance of Abraham and the faithfulness of God are emphasized.

ENCOURAGEMENT TO THE READERS (6:9-12)

After the chastisement, exhortation, and warning of 5:11-6:8, the author now turns to encouragement. As before, we see the balance between diligence in exposing false profession of faith and tenderness in sustaining weak but genuine faith. Presumption and despair are both evils to be avoided.

- verse 9 - The encouragement given here is based on the evidence of a genuine work of God in the lives of the readers - “things that accompany salvation.”
- verse 10 - Does this mean that works performed after salvation are meritorious in maintaining salvation? No, the encouragement of the genuine work of the Spirit lies in the fact that the evidence of salvation is *present*, not just *past*.
- verse 11 - Though the writer has confidence in the readers in general, it is essential that each one persevere *individually* - “each of you.”
- verse 12 - This can be done by following examples of those who have persevered in the past, such as Abraham.

THE EXAMPLE OF ABRAHAM (6:13-20)

Actually, this section says more about God than it does about Abraham, which is as it should be, since perseverance is of grace. Abraham’s perseverance is cited in verse 15; the rest of the section deals with the faithfulness of God.

- verses 13-14 - Note the following:
 - An oath, by nature, must be sworn by something greater, thus for God is superfluous, done out of kindness to reassure His servant.
 - The structure of verse 14 is interesting. Literally, it reads, “Blessing I will bless you.” Repetition of the verb in this way signals an intensive force in Hebrew grammar, which the author duplicates in the Greek in which Hebrews is written. The NIV and ESV give the correct sense of the construction.
 - Note the context of the verse quoted by the writer. He is quoting Genesis 22:16, which describes what happened immediately *after* the greatest trial of Abraham’s life - the sacrifice

of Isaac. The faithfulness of God is held before those who *are persevering*, not those whose status is uncertain.

- verse 18 - The “two unchangeable things” are God’s word and God’s oath.
- verses 18b-20 - Encouragement is found in the very presence of God, which Christ has entered, not just as a representative, but also as a *forerunner*.

THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS IX

Hebrews 7

The author now continues with his main theme, the high priesthood of Christ. The fundamental logic of the author's argument is developed in this chapter. It consists of a very simple syllogism:

- Melchizedek is superior to the Levitical priests (7:1-10)
- Christ is like Melchizedek (7:11-17)
- Therefore, Christ is superior to the Levitical priests (7:18-28)

MELCHIZEDEK IS SUPERIOR TO THE LEVITICAL PRIESTS (7:1-10)

Though the author doesn't bring them out explicitly, this section is full of analogies to Christ as well as superiorities to Levi.

A. ANALOGIES TO CHRIST (7:1-3)

- verse 2 - Melchizedek's name means *king of righteousness*, and as king of Salem (i.e., Jerusalem), he was *king of peace* (Salem means *peace*, cf. Hebrew greeting *Shalom*). Both of these titles fittingly describe Jesus.
- verse 3 - The fact that Melchizedek's genealogy is not *given*, nor is any sign of priestly succession, makes this comparison possible. Some have actually argued from this passage, though not too convincingly, that Melchizedek was actually immortal, and therefore a *Christophany* - an Old Testament appearance of the Second Person of the Trinity. Old Testament theophanies however, unlike the incarnation, did not extend over years (as must have been the case with the King of Jerusalem), but were very brief in duration.

B. SUPERIORITIES TO LEVI (7:4-10)

The two main points here are the reception of tithes and the giving of a blessing. The author argues that, since the lesser pays tithes to the greater, and since Abraham paid a tithe to Melchizedek, and Levi was the great-grandson of Abraham (and therefore lesser than Abraham), therefore Melchizedek was greater than Levi. Similarly, the lesser person is blessed by the greater.

CHRIST IS LIKE MELCHIZEDEK (7:11-17)

The emphasis here is on the Messianic prophecy of Psalm 110:4.

- verse 11 - A new priesthood was *needed*.
- verse 12 - A new priesthood comes from a new law.
- verses 13-14 - Thus Jesus' lack of Levitical ancestry should not be a disqualification.

- verses 15-17 - He qualifies on the basis of His perfect life. That His life is “indestructible” is essential for a perpetual priesthood.

CHRIST IS SUPERIOR TO THE LEVITICAL PRIESTS (7:18-28)

- verses 18-19 - The law connected with the Levitical priesthood could not save, since it was incapable of making those who sought to follow it perfect (since no one could keep it perfectly).
- verses 20-21 - The oath of God makes Christ’s priesthood superior.
- verse 22 - Jesus therefore guarantees a better covenant, because it will never change and has power to save.
- verses 23-25 - The permanence of Christ’s priesthood implies the permanence of the salvation of those for whom He intercedes.
- verses 26-28 - Christ does not need to offer sacrifices for Himself, nor does He need to offer repeated sacrifices for others - He is perfect, and His offering of Himself was perfect and complete for all time.

THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS X

Hebrews 8

In the continuing contrast between Christ and the Levitical priesthood, the author sets forth two basic ideas - the typical nature of the Old Testament ceremonial law (8:1-5) and the necessity and superiority of the New Covenant (8:6-13).

THE TYPE AND ITS FULFILLMENT (8:1-5)

- verse 1 - Chapter seven has not been pointless theory - this Melchizedek priest is our Mediator and Savior.
- verse 2 - What is the “true tabernacle”? There have been three classical interpretations here:
 - The “true tabernacle” is Christ’s human body - this is in line with the imagery of John 2:19, I Corinthians 6:19, etc.
 - The “true tabernacle” is the Church - an extension of the first position using I Corinthians 12.
 - The “true tabernacle” is heaven, the presence of God symbolized by the Holy of Holies in the Old Testament tabernacle.

Though the first two are in no way theologically objectionable (though the second requires some real hermeneutical stretching), the contextual weight must be placed firmly behind the third. The first two relate in no way to the contrast being established by the author.

- verse 3 - What Christ has to offer is not specified here, though it will be later (note use of singular “something” in contrast to “gifts and sacrifices”).
- verse 4 - A strong argument for a pre-70 AD date for the book; the author here refers back to 7:14.
- verse 5 - Here the author makes his point that the Old Testament worship pattern was only types and shadows, basing his argument on Exodus 25:40. What is the connection? The explicit details of Old Testament worship were specified *because* they were symbols (New Testament worship has no such specifications, because God is to be worshiped “in spirit and in truth”). To what extent does this suggest that the Regulative Principle ought to be applied differently to New Testament worship than it was to the worship under the Old Covenant?

THE OLD COVENANT AND THE NEW (8:6-13)

The New Covenant was a key concept in the Qumran community, who referred to themselves as the Community of the Covenant. Thus the author needed to stress that the New Covenant is not merely an ideal realization of the Old, but a vastly superior antitype.

- verses 6-7 - The superiority of the New Covenant to the Old is asserted by the same logic earlier used to affirm the superiority of Christ's priesthood - the Old was flawed, thus by nature temporary.
- verses 8-12 - As with other sections of the book (section on angels; Psalm 95; Psalm 110:4), the author roots his argument in an Old Testament quotation, in this case Jeremiah 31:31-34. What characteristics of the New Covenant are given here, and what do these imply about the deficiencies of the Old?
- verse 13 - A warning that the sacrificial system of the Temple was on the verge of passing away.

THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS XI

Hebrews 9

In continuing the discussion of Christ's high priesthood, the author expounds further on the issue raised at the end of chapter eight - the New Covenant and its superiority to the Old. The New Covenant is displayed as superior in two ways - the sanctuary to which it gives access (9:1-12) and the blood by which it is put in force (9:13-28).

THE SANCTUARY OF THE NEW COVENANT (9:1-12)

A. THE FURNITURE OF THE SANCTUARY (9:1-5)

- verses 1-4 - The altar of incense was actually in the Holy Place, not the Holy of Holies, but was associated with the worship of the Holy of Holies (the high priest carried incense with him when entering), and is thus spoken of by some first-century Jewish scholars as part of the furniture of the Holy of Holies. The Ark of the Covenant was lost at the time of the Babylonian Captivity. Note that the Holy Place, even in the time of Solomon, was more complex than is described here (ten menorahs and ten tables, for instance), thus the author must be referring to the wilderness tabernacle.
- verse 5 - The author's reticence is quite in contrast to those who would allegorize every detail of tabernacle construction and worship.

B. ENTERING THE SANCTUARY (9:6-12)

- verse 7 - Note the emphasis on limited access, the sinfulness of the priest, and the sacrifice for sins of ignorance (cf. 5:2).
- verses 8-10 - Why do these things demonstrate the symbolic nature of the Temple worship? In addition to those things mentioned above, note verse ten's emphasis on externalism in Old Testament worship.
- verses 11-12 - Christ entered a better sanctuary (a heavenly one), taking a better sacrifice - His own shed blood, which leads us into the next section.

THE BLOOD OF THE NEW COVENANT (9:13-28)

The imagery now switches from that of the Day of Atonement, when the high priest entered the Holy of Holies, to the sacrifices offered upon the initiation of a covenant. But this is preceded by an unusual insertion aimed directly at his readers.

A. THE SUPERIORITY OF CHRIST'S SACRIFICE (9:13-14)

The unusual twist here is the mention of the rite of the ashes of the red heifer (cf. Numbers 19), a ritual of cleansing for those who had come in contact with a dead body (cf. verse 11). According to their *Manual of Discipline*, this ritual was still practiced by the Qumran sect because

it was not a Temple ritual, but was to be carried out outside the camp. The writer of Hebrews indicates that this is not to be done in perpetuity, but has been superseded by Christ.

B. THE INITIATORY NATURE OF CHRIST'S SACRIFICE (9:15-22)

This passage gets confusing. The Greek *diatheke* can mean either “covenant” or “last will and testament.” Is the author here playing on words by using both meanings, or is he intending one or the other? If so, which one? Commentators vary widely on this issue.

While the wording in verses 16-17 in particular seems to favor understanding reference to a will, the broad context of the argument clearly speaks of a covenant. Some have suggested that the word *inheritance* at the end of verse 15 allows for the transition from one meaning to the other. But there is a way of understanding verses 16-17 as referring to a covenant. Notice that verses 18-21 speak of a sacrifice that initiates or puts into effect the covenant. The view of this as the symbolic death of the initiator of the covenant is seen much more clearly in Genesis 15, with the Abrahamic Covenant (God passing alone through the pieces of cut-up animals and birds *symbolizes* His death should He fail to fulfill the covenant). Christ's *real* death is thus seen as providing actual forgiveness in verse 22, not just symbolizing it.

C. THE FINAL NATURE OF CHRIST'S SACRIFICE (9:23-28)

- verses 23-24 - The heavenly reality is far superior to and supersedes the earthly symbol.
- verses 25-26 - Because Christ's death was real, it only needed to be done once, unlike priestly sacrifices.
- verses 27-28 - As man dies only once, so Christ, the True Man, dies only once. When He comes again, it will not be as a sacrificing priest (contra. Qumran again), but as a reigning king. Note that verse 27 provides a clear and simple biblical argument against such teachings as reincarnation, second chance after death, Purgatory, etc.

THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS XII

Hebrews 10:1-18

With this passage, the author finally draws to a conclusion his lengthy discourse on the high priesthood of Christ. The passage is more than anything else a summary of what has gone before, reiterating many points made previously in the book. The section includes three major points, all of which we have seen before - the imperfection of the law (10:1-4), the importance of the incarnation (10:5-10), and the completeness and finality of Christ's work (10:11-18).

THE IMPERFECTION OF THE LAW (10:1-4)

This section indicates the imperfection of the Law in four ways:

- verse 1a - It is shadow, not substance - a shadow is nothing, but is caused by the reality it images. In what sense was the Old Testament ritual a shadow?
- verses 1b-2 - It is repetitious, not final - if the sacrifices were really doing anything, they wouldn't have to be repeated.
- verse 3 - They cause remembrance of sins, not forgetting (contra. verse 17), thus they can never free the conscience.
- verse 4 - Animals can never effectively serve as substitutes for man. If priestly mediators are insufficient, how much more do non-human substitutes fall short? This consideration leads the author to the next section.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE INCARNATION (10:5-10)

This subject has come up previously in chapter two and now enters into the argument again. The point of departure here is a quotation from Psalm 40:6-8 (taken from the Septuagint), which again requires divine inspiration to place within the experience of Christ. The argument is essentially that a human substitute is necessary for true atonement to occur - animal sacrifices will not suffice. In His death Christ was carrying out fully the will of God for the salvation of sinners.

THE COMPLETENESS AND FINALITY OF CHRIST'S WORK (10:11-18)

- verses 11-14 - The seated Savior is contrasted with the standing priests. Note the use in verse 13 of Psalm 110:1, which had earlier been quoted to indicate Christ's superiority over the angels in 1:13.
- verses 15-18 - The perfect cleansing of the New Covenant is contrasted with the repeated reminders of sin in the Old Covenant. The author again quotes Jeremiah 31:33-34 and argues that, if repeated sacrifices imply the absence of true atonement, then the accomplishment of genuine atonement demands the cessation of any further sacrifices. Against the Essenes' concept of a perfected Temple ritual, this is Q.E.D.

THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS XIII

Hebrews 10:19-39

This passage begins the final section of the book, which seeks to give practical application to the doctrine that has gone before. The section is a sandwich, with two exhortations surrounding a solemn warning. The first exhortation is based on doctrine, the second on experience.

AN EXHORTATION FROM DOCTRINE (10:19-25)

A. THE BASIS FOR THE EXHORTATION (10:19-21)

- verse 19 - The author exhorts his readers on the basis of the access they have to the presence of God. The Holy Place is not to be seen as distinct from the Holy of Holies - after all, the veil had been torn down.
- verse 20 - Access to the presence of God is described as “a living way” because it is through a Person. The veil is seen as symbolizing Christ’s body, both because the parting of the veil is what gave access to the presence of God and because the incarnation is the interface between God and man.
- verse 21 - Because Christ intercedes for His people in the presence of God, He is a priest who allows us to enter God’s presence *confidently*.

B. THE SUBSTANCE OF THE EXHORTATION (10:22-25)

- verse 22 - The exhortation corresponds to the three great Christian virtues, the first of which is faith. The description here (“let us draw near”) alludes to the purification ritual for priests (cf. Exodus 29). Under the New Covenant, all believers are priests through the great High Priest, and the purification is real, not symbolic, and permanent rather than needing repetition.
- verse 23 - “Let us hold unswervingly” is an exhortation to hope - one these wavering professors needed to build up their confidence in the Lord they claimed to trust.
- verses 24-25 - “Let us consider” is an exhortation to love. The readers were earlier told to “consider Jesus” (3:1). That has been done in the intervening chapters, and it should lead to considering His body, the Church, both as individuals and corporately. The reference to those who would “give up meeting together” is literal, not figurative, speaking of the local church, not the Universal Church. The habit of some is forsaking the fellowship, not apostatizing from the faith, although the two are related, as the ensuing warning indicates. The phrase “the Day,” while it may have had some reference to the impending destruction of Jerusalem, more likely has the eschaton as its primary referent.

A WARNING AGAINST APOSTASY (10:26-31)

This passage is very similar to 6:4-8, and carries the same basic thrust.

- verses 26-28 - The Old Covenant provided no sacrifice for the high-handed sin. How much more is the state of him who rejects the final sacrifice disastrous?
- verse 29 - The reference to one who has “insulted the Spirit” again hearkens back to Jesus’ treatment of the subject of apostasy in Matthew 12:30-32.
- verses 30-31 - Both quotations here are taken from Deuteronomy 32:35-36, in the Song of Moses, which speaks both of the blessings promised to the faithful and the judgment guaranteed the apostate. False teaching and practice can fall into one of three categories - disagreement (uncertain matters about which Christians may legitimately differ), heresy (false teaching that is clearly unbiblical, but doesn’t bring into question a person’s fundamental devotion to Christ), and apostasy (false teaching that indicates that a person has strayed so far that to call him a Christian would be a travesty). These verses clearly place the Qumran doctrine into the third category - espousal of such teaching eliminates one from the realm of the faithful. This is why the letter before us was a matter of such urgency.

AN EXHORTATION FROM EXPERIENCE (10:32-39)

A. CONFIDENCE FROM THE PAST (10:32-34)

The words spoken here serve to encourage the readers not to despair after the warning just given, and also to remind them of the zeal from which they had fallen. The description given suits very well the treatment of Jewish converts to Christianity in Palestine, but is not at all an apt description of the Roman persecutions. The last phrase of verse 34 will appear again in 11:16.

B. CONFIDENCE FROM THE FUTURE (10:33-39)

- verse 35 - Like Esau, who sold his birthright for bean soup, or the rebellious Israelites who wanted to return to Egypt, with its leeks, onions, and garlic, one who casts aside Christ is casting aside all hope.
- verses 36-38 - The quotation from Habakkuk 2:3-4 is appropriate, emphasizing patient endurance while waiting to receive a promise whose reception at the time looked very unlikely. It also introduces the theme of chapter eleven.
- verse 39 - Again, an expression of confidence in the spiritual status of the readers.

THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS XIV

Hebrews 11:1-22

The author has long sought to establish that the visible is only the temporal symbol of the eternal reality. In this chapter, he bolsters his argument by indicating that the Old Testament saints trusted in that same unseen reality. This week we will be looking at the section of the chapter dealing with the period prior to Israel's bondage in Egypt.

INTRODUCTION (11:1-2)

The author starts out with a definition of faith, though obviously not an exhaustive one (he says nothing about trust in a Person, for example). But it is a definition directed to the specific needs of his readers, who are preoccupied with the immediate danger facing them and are taking their eyes off what is really important, though unseen.

CREATION (11:3)

The tangible world itself is not ultimate, but founded upon the eternal Word of God (cf. 1:3). Some have seen in this verse an argument against the theory of evolution (what we see not coming from other visible things), but this is really not the point of the verse, though perhaps an argument against the eternality of matter would suit the context better.

ABEL (11:4)

Was the sacrifice better in and of itself, or because it was offered in faith? In either case, Abel still speaks by his example. Faith produces obedience, not presumption.

ENOCK (11:5-6)

For Enoch, the man of faith, the presence of God was real and immediate. Without such faith, it is impossible to please God. Faith is not blind, but is rooted in an object that is knowable. The existence of God is not something to be proved, but something to be assumed - something without which nothing else makes sense.

NOAH (11:7)

Noah took heed to God's warning of judgment and obeyed without regard to scorn and ridicule. In the same way, the readers needed to stand firm in the face of the coming judgment despite the ridicule they faced.

ABRAHAM (11:8-19)

- verse 8 - The departure from Ur shows that faith lets go of earthly security to reach for an unknown but certain destination.
- verses 9-10 - Abraham's sojourn in Canaan shows that faith is not an act, but a way of life. Abraham lived his whole life as a foreigner in the land God had promised to him. His goal was not to be found on this earth (as the readers of this book thought theirs was, and as so many people do today).
- verses 11-12 - The birth of Isaac shows that faith is not restrained by human inability.
- verses 13-16 - Like the readers, the patriarchs had the opportunity to turn back. Unlike the wilderness generation (cf. Hebrews 4), the patriarchs entered into God's rest, but not in this world.
- verses 17-19 - The sacrifice of Isaac shows how faith responds to the threat that death may appear to be ready to annul God's promise. Abraham obeyed anyway, leaving the results in God's hands. Isaac is here designated as a type of Christ with regard to the resurrection.

ISAAC AND JACOB (11:20-21)

Both Isaac and Jacob showed their utter confidence in the promises of God, even on their deathbeds. Both gave blessings contrary to tradition but according to God's word when they blessed the younger son over the elder.

JOSEPH (11:22)

Joseph made concrete plans for an event that would not occur until 400 years after his death on the basis of God's promise.

THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS XV

Hebrews 11:23-40

We continue this week going through the author's catalogue of the faithful from ages past.

MOSES (11:23-29)

- verse 23 - We already saw in 3:1-6 that Moses was praised for his faithfulness to the charge with which God had entrusted him. Now he, too, is presented as an example of faith. The author begins with Moses' birth, noting that Moses' parents trusted God enough to defy the law of Egypt in order to preserve their son. Faith obeys God rather than men.
- verses 24-26 - Moses was willing to identify with enslaved Israel because faith places eternal values above temporal ones, no matter how attractive the latter may be. How easily Moses could have rationalized clinging to his position of power and privilege! After all, he could have helped Israel a lot more in Pharaoh's court than out on the backside of the desert. . . . In what sense did Moses choose "disgrace for the sake of Christ"? Because he believed the promise that ultimately would bear fruit in the coming of the Messiah.
- verse 27 - Moses left Egypt for Midian, trusting God despite the fact that going out into the middle of nowhere would seem to contradict his desire to serve God among His people. Note that some read this verse as referring to the Exodus, but Midian is more likely, especially because of the mention of perseverance - after all, he stayed in Midian for forty years before God called him to return to Egypt.
- verse 28 - The Passover was a clear act of faith, both in believing in the coming judgment and enacting the prescribed remedy (remember, at this time Israel had no well-defined sacrificial system).
- verse 29 - Crossing the Red Sea was clearly an act of faith, not only on the part of Moses, but of the entire nation as well (note the switch to a plural pronoun). What is deliverance to a man of faith is disaster for one who acts in unbelief.

JOSHUA (11:30)

Faith obeys God completely rather than relying on human wisdom or strategy, as Joshua did at Jericho.

RAHAB (11:31)

Rahab's inclusion in this passage is notable because she was a Gentile, a woman, and a prostitute. Faith breaks down all kinds of barriers and overcomes obstacles generated by a person's past and present sins (note that Rahab is commended for her faith, not her lie in protecting the spies).

FAITH IN TRIUMPH (11:32-35a)

The author now lists a sampling of judges, kings, and prophets - neither exhaustive nor chronological, but selective and representative of many who served God faithfully and trusted His word. The deeds ascribed to men and women of faith apply to many whose names are unknown, though some may be identified with specific incidents. David, for instance, “conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised.” Daniel “shut the mouths of lions,” and his friends Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego “quenched the fury of the flames.” The others could be identified with any number of saints, both in and out of Scripture.

FAITH IN SUFFERING (11:35b-38)

Not all who trusted God lived in triumph; some suffered and died horribly, but they trusted God to the end and eventually found their reward in heaven. Again, the incidents listed can be identified with specific people. Those who “were tortured and refused to be released” are thought to have been seven brothers who died as martyrs during the Maccabean revolt in the middle of the second century BC (story found in II Maccabees 7 in the Apocrypha). The jeers, flogging, and imprisonment of verse 36 were certainly the experience of Jeremiah, among many others. The priest Zechariah was stoned (II Chronicles 24:20-21), and Isaiah, according to an ancient tradition, was “sawed in two” during the reign of the wicked Manasseh. David, among many other faithful saints, “wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.”

CONCLUSION (11:39-40)

All these did not receive the promises because God wanted us to be united with them in one community of the faithful. The “something better” that God had planned, both for them and us, as the entire book of Hebrews has gone to great lengths to demonstrate, was Christ and the salvation He accomplished.

THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS XVI

Hebrews 12

The application section of the book continues with exhortation, warning, and a further contrast of old and new.

AN EXHORTATION TO PERSEVERANCE (12:1-13)

Building on the previous chapter, the author now mixes metaphors, moving back and forth between athletic and family images.

A. THE ATHLETE (12:1-4)

- verse 1 - The faithful from chapter eleven are pictured as spectators in an amphitheater, encouraging the readers by their example and presence. Note that Greek athletes ran naked, having removed all encumbrances, which are here seen as metaphors for sin. The race is not a sprint, but a marathon; endurance is essential.
- verse 2 - How does Jesus relate to the race? He is the goal toward which we run, the prize we strive to attain, the judge we seek to please, and the example we seek to emulate. Jesus endured more than we will ever be asked to face.
- verses 3-4 - Like out-of-shape runners, the readers are ready to quit before “Heartbreak Hill” (a famous uphill stretch at the 20-mile mark of the Boston Marathon) has even been reached.

B. THE CHILD (12:5-11)

- verses 5-8 - Beginning with a quotation from Proverbs 3:11-12, the author reorients the perspective of the readers with regard to their suffering. Far from being a sign of God’s neglect, it is a sure sign of His parental concern (cf. Psalm 73).
- verse 9 - Notice the *a fortiori* (an argument from the lesser to the greater) argument here. Note that the reference to God as “the Father of our spirits” does not mean that our spirits are directly created by God (this would pose a serious theological problem, since it would imply either that souls are not sinful or that God creates sinful souls), nor does it mean that our souls exist before we do. It is much more natural to see it in terms of the physical/spiritual contrast already introduced by mentioning biological parents (cf. Jesus’ contrast between spiritual birth and physical birth in John 3:5-6).
- verse 10 - The intent of discipline is to produce holiness, both when it comes from parents or teachers and when it comes from God.
- verse 11 - Discipline is not fun, but yields peace, like the repose of the athlete after strenuous exertion.

C. THE ATHLETE AGAIN (12:12-13)

As the author returns to the image of the athlete, his words sound like a halftime pep talk. One recovering from an injury must do everything with precise correctness, or else the injured body part will mend improperly. The readers cannot afford to stray in the least, especially in their weakened condition.

A WARNING AGAINST TURNING ASIDE (12:14-17)

Again, the warning is directed toward the congregation as a whole, encouraging care for one another and discernment regarding apostates in their midst.

- verse 14 - Harmony among themselves, and true rather than purely external holiness, are absolutely essential for the readers, as they are for us.
- verse 15 - One apostate who turns bitter in the face of suffering can pollute and ruin the whole congregation (“one rotten apple. . .”).
- verses 16-17 - Esau is here presented as a bad example - a man who was clearly absorbed with material things (soup rather than the inheritance of the promise of God), and according to Jewish tradition was immoral as well, and who turned away from an eternal and spiritual blessing for the sake of a brief moment of physical fulfillment. The readers of the letter, who were on the verge of giving up eternal blessing to avoid temporary persecution, needed this warning, as do Christians in our society, who are constantly bombarded with the lust for material goods and pleasures. Those who would consider succumbing to such temptation need to realize that such a step may well be irremediable.

THE OLD AND THE NEW - MOUNT SINAI AND MOUNT ZION (12:18-24)

- verses 18-21 - Mount Sinai was a place of terror, to which trembling could be the only suitable response.
- verses 22-24 - The description of Mount Zion, which here represents the Church, alludes to many ideas previously mentioned in the book and again indicates the heavenly nature of the looked-for city. The blood of Christ speaks of reconciliation rather than revenge, of peace rather than fear.

A FINAL WARNING (12:25-29)

- verse 25 - Again we have an *a fortiori* argument - if judgment fell upon those who refused to hear an earthly messenger, how much more will those who turn away from the heavenly messenger, Christ Himself, be subject to the condemnation of God?
- verses 26-27 - This greater shaking, far greater than the earthquake at Mount Sinai, is the final destruction of the old order at the Second Coming of Christ (cf. Haggai 2:6). Then only what is permanent will remain.
- verses 28-29 - The appropriate response is gratitude mixed with awe, since those who trust God need not fear the “consuming fire.”

THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS XVII

Hebrews 13

This chapter contains the final exhortations and closing of the book. Though it does contain many themes mentioned in the earlier parts of the book, it is largely practical in nature.

FINAL EXHORTATIONS (13:1-17)

A. LOVE OF THE BRETHREN (13:1-3)

- verse 1 - Brotherly love (*philadelphia* in Greek) is needed because persecution can easily bring dissension to a congregation.
- verse 2 - Hospitality to outsiders is not only a good testimony and a necessary means of advancing the Gospel (traveling preachers had little alternative but to stay in the homes of those among whom they preached), but can be a source of unexpected blessing (e.g., Genesis 18).
- verse 3 - There were also some in the congregation who needed a different type of hospitality. Remember that those in prison in the Roman system were responsible for their own food and clothing and depended on friends outside for their very survival.

B. PROMINENT TEMPTATIONS (13:4-6)

- verse 4 - The extremes of asceticism (failing to honor the institution of marriage) and licentiousness (failing to keep the marriage bed pure) are equally under the judgment of God.
- verses 5-6 - Avoid covetousness (with which we in this media-saturated age are constantly bombarded), because at its root is a lack of faith. One who wants what he does not have is not trusting God to give him what is best, nor is he content with God alone.

C. STEADFAST FAITH (13:7-14)

- verse 7 - Remember leaders who taught you the Word of God (not necessarily martyrs, since this congregation had not yet “resisted unto blood”), and imitate their faith, like the faith of those listed in chapter eleven. Good examples don’t only come from the distant past.
- verse 8 - All trusted the same Christ, who never changes, and is quite capable of doing today what He did many years ago for believers in the past.
- verses 9-10 - It is good not to engage in theological speculations. “Foods” here apparently refers to partaking in the sacrificial offerings - many of the Jewish sacrifices were shared by the priest and the giver after the sacrifice was made - thus the reference to the superior altar, Christ Himself. Because the book is written to Jewish Christians, the “meat offered to idols” with which Paul dealt in Romans 14 is not the issue here.
- verses 11-12 - These verses allude to the ceremony on the Day of Atonement, when the sacrifice was burned outside the camp, not eaten. But Christ, who was offered “outside the camp,” is partaken of by His people (John 6:53-58).

- verses 13-14 - The camp that must be left is the safety of the Jewish religion; real security is only found in Christ and His kingdom.

D. ACCEPTABLE WORSHIP (13:15-17)

- verses 15-16 - Praise God and love your neighbor - this is the same way Jesus summarized the duty of the believer in Matthew 22:37-40.
- verse 17 - Part of acceptable worship before God is to submit to those whom God has placed in authority over you. Leaders are shepherds, not dictators, and are accountable to God for the oversight they give. Christians should be those who make leading them a joy. Is this the way your pastors, employers, parents, and teachers feel about you?

CLOSING COMMENTS (13:18-25)

- verses 18-19 - The author here requests prayer for himself, expressing his desire to see his readers soon. The language here may suggest that the author is in prison, but this is not required by the text.
- verses 20-21 - This is the benediction, the final blessing bestowed by the author on his readers. Note the phrase “blood of the eternal covenant,” which expresses an idea central to the message of the letter.
- verses 22-25 - Closing words, in which the author pleads with his readers to accept the message of the book as it was intended, then shares the good news that Timothy has been released from prison and may visit them soon. Finally, he sends greetings from “those from Italy” - an ambiguous phrase that could mean those who are in Italy including the author, those who are in Italy excluding the author, or native Italians not now in Italy. This ambiguous phrase has generated considerable speculation about the circumstances under which Hebrews was written, but such speculation is ultimately irrelevant.