

THE MASTER-IDEA OF THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS

THE Epistle to the Hebrews is the most elusive of the writings of the New Testament, disguising as it does under a magnificent array of scriptural arguments and rhetorical devices its real object and purpose. Interpreters of all ages have been misled by the fallacious appearances and have consequently misrepresented the writer's mind and the logical nexus and development of his ideas. Even those who came nearer to the writer's mind have left some points in complete darkness. It is universally agreed that the most salient doctrine of the Epistle is the doctrine of the priesthood of Christ, hence this is considered to be the object of the Epistle. But before bringing out the master-idea of the writer of the Epistle, it will be worth while to trace the tendencies and main lines of argument followed by modern interpreters.

St. Thomas, though he is not one of the moderns, after having said in the Prologue that the writer's aim is to demonstrate Christ's pre-eminence, begins to explain the first chapter by stating that the writer intends to demonstrate the superiority of the N. over the O.T. by means of the pre-eminence of Christ in relation to the angels, to Moses and to Aaron as representing the O.T. priesthood. But St. Thomas fails to explain the reason why the doctrine of Christ as the high priest of the N.T. occupies such a prominent place in the Epistle nor does he bring out the historical relation between the dogmatic and the practical or parenetical element of the Epistle. In the second part 10, 19-13, 17 the writer, according to St. Thomas, exhorts the Christians to keep themselves united to Christ's priesthood. The 'verbum solatii' in 13, 22 is, according to all Latin interpreters, a word of consolation, the Letter being intended as a consolation rather than as a reproach to those Judaeo-Christians who were in danger of relapsing into Judaism.

This is also the teaching of Estius, St. Thomas's follower and the greatest of Paul's interpreters. The writer of this Letter, he says, intends partly to expound the dignity of Christ's priesthood in relation to that of the O.T. and partly to exhort the Christians to hold fast to Christ, their high priest, if they wish to avoid the danger of eternal punishment.

Among more recent interpreters R. Cornely (*Historica et Critica Introductio in U.T. Libros Sacros*, Vol. III, 1897, pp. 544-6) investigates the historical background of the Letter. Times were not very encouraging and the Judaeo-Christians were in great danger of falling back to their

former religion. Paul writes to them this Letter not so much to console them as to exhort them to hold fast by their Christian faith by demonstrating to them the superiority of their Christian religion to their former Jewish religion. But Cornely follows the ordinary way of dividing the Letter into two parts, a dogmatic part, 1, 10-10, 18 and a parenetic part 10, 19-13, 21, although he recognizes parenetic elements in the dogmatic section.

H. Höpfl, both in the earlier editions (1926) and in the latest edition (1949) of his *Manual* believes that the writer of the Letter intends to show the superiority of the N. over the O.T. and for this reason he considers the person of the founder of the N.T. religion, his dignity and his priesthood. But, again, the historical relation between faith and exhortation is not clearly brought out.

One of the best analyses of the Epistle to the Hebrews is that carried out by F. Thien ('Analyse de l'Épître aux Hébreux' in *Revue biblique* 1902, 74-86). Thien begins by rejecting the usual division of the Letter into a dogmatic (1, 1-10, 18) and a parenetic part (10, 19-13, 17). The Letter, he says, is an hortatory discourse meant to encourage the Judaeo-Christians amidst their persecutions and to exhort them to hold fast by their religion.

L. Vaganay ('Le plan de l'Épître aux Hébreux' in *Mémorial Lagrange*, 1940, pp. 269-77) believes the Epistle to be made up of themes divided into sections connected by means of certain words or expressions which he calls 'mots-crochet', occurring at the end of a section and at the beginning of the next one. He analyses the whole Epistle according to this plan and sets forth his conclusions very moderately. But his main interest is the plan of the Letter rather than its subject-matter and purpose.

W. Leonard in his commentary on Hebrews in *A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture* (1953) holds the superiority of the N. over the O.T. to be really the lesson taught by the author's insistence on the super-excellence of Christ from every point of view. In a previous work on the same Letter *The Authorship of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, (Rome, 1939) he regards the argument of the Letter as 'a great dogmatic theme in the function not of intellectual instruction only but of the encouragement which the theme is calculated to inspire in the face of a crisis' (p. 24). But the relation between doctrine and exhortation is obscured by the analysis of the several sections.

J. Bonsirven in his excellent commentary on Hebrews ('Épître aux Hébreux' in *Verbum Salutis*, 1943) considers the Epistle as an hortatory discourse with doctrinal and practical elements intermixed. This is quite correct. But what is the dogmatic element which serves as a basis for the practical exhortations? Bonsirven thinks it to be Jesus Christ as the

high priest of the New Covenant. No, it is rather the superiority of the Christian religion demonstrated by the superiority of Christ, the mediator of the N.T. religion.

A. Wikenhauser (*Einleitung in das Neue Testament*, Freiburg i. B., 1956, p. 325) enounces the main theme of the Epistle thus: Christ is the high priest of the New Covenant. Here again we have the same confusion between the main doctrine of the Epistle and the purpose of the Epistle which are quite different.

But the best exposition of the purpose of the Epistle is that given by C. Spicq (*L'Épître aux Hébreux*, Paris, 1952, I, 4ff). The writer of the Letter, says Spicq, intended to ward off the danger of apostasy by showing to the Judaeo-Christians that Christ was greater than the angels, than Moses and greater than the Aaronitic high priest. This is well said, but it would have been better said if Spicq had based the admonition of the writer of the Letter not upon the superiority of Christ, but upon the superiority of the Christian religion as demonstrated by the superiority of Christ.

From this brief survey of modern opinions about the main argument and purpose of the Epistle to the Hebrews it appears quite clearly that there is no general agreement between interpreters about the main argument and purpose of the Epistle to the Hebrews. While the majority agree in holding the superiority of the N. over the O.T. or the superiority of Christ's priesthood over the Aaronitic priesthood to be the main argument, they fail to go deep into the mind of the writer and try to discover the nexus of ideas and the logical development of his thought. It is the purpose of this paper to try to determine the master-idea of the Epistle by the exclusive means of a careful analysis of the Epistle itself.

The Epistle is called by its writer λόγος παραωλήσεως 'a word of exhortation' (13, 22), not 'a word of consolation' as the Vulgate translates. Therefore the general character of the Letter is hortatory. And in fact exhortation holds an important place in the whole Letter. Not only is the latter part of the Letter (10, 19-13, 17) an exhortation throughout, but even the first part (1, 1-10, 18), which is mainly dogmatic, is all interspersed with exhortations closely connected with the doctrine. The object of all these exhortations is the perseverance in the Christian faith. This is apparent from the very beginning. Thus the Christians are exhorted to hold fast by the faith taught by Christ more earnestly than the Jews held fast by the Law of Moses, because Christ, through whom we received the faith, is above the angels through whose agency the Law was given to the Israelites (2, 1-4). They are again exhorted to give heed to Christ, the Apostle and High Priest of our Christian religion, who is as much above Moses as a son is above a servant (3, 1-6). And

still in the same context the writer exhorts the Christians: 'Since we have such a great high priest, let us hold fast by the faith we profess' (4, 14). Eternal salvation will be the reward of those who remain faithful to their Christian religion, and eternal damnation will be the just punishment of the apostates. This hortatory note rings through the whole Letter and fully justifies its appellation as a word of exhortation.

The hortatory tone of the Letter will be more clearly perceived if we can set the Letter in its real historical background. It appears that the Christians, to whom the Letter is addressed, were having hard times. They were Jews who had passed from Judaism to Christianity, who had changed the temple with its gorgeous ceremonies for the simple and unimpressive meetings of the Christians. They felt isolated from the other Jews and suffered of a state of inferiority. They were persecuted; they had been held up to public derision, accused of crime, suspected and denounced. They had their property confiscated or plundered; some were even imprisoned. Although at first they bravely stood all these trials, later they became disheartened and discouraged and were in great danger of reverting to their former faith. They needed further instruction and encouragement; their failing faith had to be supported by a clear exposition of its excellence as well as by the promise of reward for those who profess it and the threat of punishment for those who desert it.

It is against this historical background that the Epistle to the Hebrews must be read. Paul says: Do not revert to your former religion, because the Christian religion is by far superior to the Jewish religion, and a severe punishment is meted out on those who, after having believed, reject their faith. Paul bases his exhortation upon the dogmatic truth of the superiority of the Christian religion and on the certainty of punishment. This he does by showing that Christ, the mediator of the N.T. religion, is by far superior to the angels through whose ministry the Law or the O.T. religion was believed to have come into the world (Acts 7, 53). This is a dogmatic truth which is followed up by its appropriate exhortation. Therefore, he says, more firmly must we hold by the truths which we have learnt. For if the Old Law, which had been given to us through the angels, was none the less valid, and every transgression of it, every refusal to listen to it, incurred just retribution, what excuse shall we have, if we pay no heed to such a message of salvation as has been given to us? Here Paul anticipates an objection: Christ appeared as a man, and man is lower than angels. But Christ, answers Paul, took the form of man in order to be able to sympathize with man's weaknesses, to suffer and atone for his sins and to help him in all his painful experiences in life, especially in the hardships through which the Christian

has to go in order to persevere in his faith. Naturally the idea of atonement calls up that of high priest whose duty it was to atone for man's sins by sacrifice. And this idea of Christ as the true high priest serves as a transition to another section, which begins with these words: 'Think of Jesus as the apostle and the high priest of the faith which we profess' (3, 1). And he goes on: 'who was loyal to God who had so appointed him'. Now every Jew could retort: 'But Moses too was loyal to God. Therefore Moses is as great as Christ, and there is no reason why we should not obey him and keep his law'. Paul is far from denying Moses's loyalty to God, but, he adds, Moses's loyalty was that of a servant in his master's house, while Christ's loyalty was that of a son in his father's house. Christ is the founder of God's household, Moses was only a servant or a part of it. Christ's household are the Christians if they firmly keep their confidence and their hope.

Once more the dogmatic truth of Christ's superiority over Moses is followed up by an hortatory appeal. As the Israelites in the wilderness refused to obey God's word and were punished by being excluded from the Promised Land, so must the Christian beware lest he should be excluded from the eternal rest in heaven by his disobedience. The Christians must not walk into the footsteps of the Israelites' unbelief; on the contrary they must strive with all their power to enter into that rest in order to avoid any possible danger of apostasizing from God. The conclusion reverts to the introduction where Christ is called the high priest of our religion, and the necessity of holding fast to him is strongly emphasized. 'Think of Jesus, the high priest of our Christian faith' he had said in the opening verses of this section, which he now closes with the same warning: 'Having such a great high priest, let us hold fast by the faith we profess'.

This appeal to fidelity to Christ, our high priest, who, having passed through all sort of painful experiences with the exception of sin, is ever ready to sympathize with our human weaknesses and to help us in all our needs, besides binding up the whole section into a compact unit, prepares the way for the next section which deals with Christ's pre-eminence as high priest.

Christ was really high priest because he was called to this dignity by God himself by the words: 'Thou art a priest for ever according to the order of Melchisedek' (Ps. 110, 4). But before developing the theme of Christ's priesthood, which forms the central part of the Letter, Paul calls the attention of the readers to the difficulty of the subject and warns them reproachfully of their immaturity and backwardness. Instead of advancing in knowledge they had become like children needing the most elementary instruction. Paul however is not willing to impart this rudimentary

mentary instruction. In spite of their unpreparedness and immaturity, he intends to pursue his subject further and feels confident that they will listen to his instruction. Here Paul introduces a new element in his teaching. In order to strengthen his exhortations, he now warns them that the sin of apostasy will never be forgiven. 'Those who will fall away from the Christian faith cannot attain repentance through a second renewal' (6, 6). But those who hold fast by their faith will attain the reward promised by God to Abraham and to all those who, like him, believe in God's promises. He concludes this introductory exhortation by a reference to Christ's entrance into heaven where we shall follow him as our high priest according to the order of Melchisedek.

Now Paul enters into the heart of his subject, the superiority of Christ's priesthood. The position of the priesthood in religion, though not expressly stated, is implied. The function and purpose of priesthood is to bring man nearer to God; therefore the higher is a priesthood, the nearer it brings man to God; and the nearer does a priesthood bring men to God, the more perfect is the religion in which that priesthood functions. Now it clearly emerges from all the discussion of Christ's priesthood that there is no other priesthood and there can be no other priesthood that so brings man near to God as Christ's priesthood, which is still exercised in heaven and perpetuated on earth through his ministers. This Paul does not explicitly say, but he proves his thesis of the superiority of Christ's priesthood by a series of contrasts between Christ's priesthood and the Aaronitic priesthood. We need not go through the whole demonstration which, I suppose, is well known to all. I only wish to repeat Paul's concluding words on the efficacy of Christ's sacrifice: 'Christ sits for ever at the right hand of God, offering for our sins a sacrifice that is never repeated, waiting for the rest, until his enemies have been made a footstool under his feet. For by a single offering he has completed for ever his work in those whom he sanctifies. The Holy Spirit also testifies. For after having said: This is the covenant which I will set up with them after those days, the Lord says, I will put my laws upon their hearts and I will write them upon their mind and I will remember no more their sins and their transgressions. Now where there is remission of sins, there is no longer any room for a sin-offering' (10, 12-8).

This doctrinal section is again followed up by its appropriate exhortation. Since Christ, our high priest, has opened to us a way to the heavenly sanctuary, let us turn to God full of faith, hope and charity. But if one sins wilfully, that is, if one apostasizes from God after having been granted the full knowledge of the truth, one has no further sacrifice for sin to look forward to; nothing but a terrible expectation of judgement, a fire that will eagerly consume the rebellious. And Paul bases this terrible

threat on the law of Moses itself. If a man is convicted of a breach of certain prescriptions of the Mosaic law, he is mercilessly put to death. What of the man who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has reckoned the blood of the covenant, that blood which sanctified him, as a thing unclean, mocked at the Spirit that brought him grace? Will not he incur a punishment much more severe? It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God (10, 26-31). From this austere warning Paul turns to encouragement. He reminds his readers of their past hardships and trials and of the way they have endured them. Do not lose courage. The reward will soon come. Eternal salvation will bring an end to your sufferings. So we see that Paul has always in mind the same object: necessity of holding fast by the Christian faith, assurance of reward and threat of punishment.

So far the writer has demonstrated the necessity of persevering in the Christian faith by showing the superiority of Christ, the mediator of the Christian religion, over all the other mediators of the O.T. religion. He now goes on to illustrate and to corroborate his thesis by a series of historical examples of O.T. heroes of faith from Abel to the Maccabean martyrs. All these, Paul says, have firmly believed in God's promises, although they did not live to see those promises fulfilled. It was reserved to us, according to the plans of God's providence, to see the fulfilment of those promises and to share in the Messianic blessings provided we have the same heroic faith which they had.

The writer concludes with a vibrating appeal to the Christians to persevere in their faith by following in the footsteps of those heroes of faith and, above all, by fixing their eyes on Jesus Christ, the author of their faith, who remained true to his mission and suffered worse than anything they had suffered before being raised to sit at the right hand of his Father. If those of earlier generations and Christ himself have suffered so much in loyalty to their faith, why should the Christians of today be so faint-hearted as to lose courage and give way under a lesser strain than theirs? God has not yet asked from them the supreme sacrifice of their lives; He is simply training them by means of temporary sufferings as a loving father trains his sons. No father loves his son unless he punishes him, and God punishes us, not out of vindictiveness, but out of his tender love for us. Let us therefore endure courageously all trials and hardships and hold out in the midst of temptations and persecutions and walk straight to our ultimate destination.

The writer closes up his Letter by a few practical exhortations on the sanctity of Christian life. 'Your aim' he writes 'must be peace with all men, and that holiness without which no one will ever see God. Beware of excusing yourselves from listening to him who is speaking to you.

There was no escape for those others who tried to excuse themselves when God uttered his warnings on earth; still less for us, if we turn away when he speaks from heaven' (12, 1-14).

From this brief analysis it appears clearly that the master-idea of the Epistle is perseverance in faith. All sections are subordinated to this end. The exhortation is based on the dogmatic fact of the pre-eminence of the Christian religion over the Jewish religion and corroborated by the promise of reward to those who remain loyal to their Christian faith and by the threat of punishment to the apostates.

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