GS 01196 (Elder/Preacher Symposium) 08/27/2001
THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS Decatur, IL

I. **CANONICITY.**
All the results of critical and historical research to which this epistle has been specially subjected abundantly vindicate its right to a place in the NT canon among the other inspired books.

II. **LITERARY FORM.**

A. **The Author's Culture and Style**.
The writer was evidently a man of culture, who had a masterly command of the Greek language. It is written in pure idiomatic Greek. The writer had an intimate knowledge of the Septuagint, and was familiar with Jewish life. His argument proceeds continuously and methodically, in general, though not strict, accord with the rules of Greek rhetoric, and without the interruptions and digressions which render Paul's arguments so hard to follow. He has been classed with Luke as the most "cultured" of the early Christian writers.

B. **Letter, Epistle or Treatise**?
It has been questioned whether Hebrews is rightly called a letter at all. Unlike all Paul's letters, it opens without any personal note of address or salutation; and at the outset it sets forth, in rounded periods and in philosophical language, the central theme which is developed throughout. Hebrews begins like an essay, proceeds like a sermon, and ends as a letter.

There is no reason, but the unwarrantable assumption that an ancient writer must have conformed with a certain convention of letter-writing, to forbid the acceptance of Hebrews for what it appears to be--a defense of Christianity written for the benefit of definite readers, growing more intimate and personal as the writer gathers his argument into a practical appeal to the hearts and consciences of his readers.

C. **The Main Theme**.
The theme of the epistle is the absoluteness of the Christian religion, as based-upon the preeminence of JC, the one and only mediator of salvation. The essence of Christ's preeminence is that He fully realizes in His own person the principles of revelation and reconciliation. It is made manifest in His superiority over the Jewish system of salvation, which He therefore at once supersedes and fulfils. As Logos, Christ excels the prophets as revealer of God, is superior to the angels who were the mediators of the old Covenant, and is more glorious than Moses as the builder of God's true tabernacle, His eternal house; He is a greater Savior than Joshua, for He brings his own to final rest; and He supersedes the Aaronic priesthood, for while they ministered in a "holy place made with hands, like in pattern to the true," under a "law having a shadow of the good things to come, not the very image of the things" (9:24; 10:1), He "having come a high priest of the good things to come, through the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands nor yet through the blood of goats and calves, but through his own blood, entered in once for all into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption" (9:l1f).

D. **The Christian Factor**.
Christ is the eternal reality behind all shadows, and the very image of God's essence, is also our brother who lived and suffered on earth, the author of our salvation, our "fore-runner within the veil," who "is able to save to the uttermost them that draw near unto God through him, seeing he ever lives to make intercession for them" (1:1-4; 2:14ff; 2:10; 5:7-9; 4:14-15; 6:20; 7:25). As in Paul and John, so in Hebrews, the historical and ever-living Christ comes in as an original and creative element, which transforms the abstract philosophy of Hellenistic thought into a living system of salvation. Because of His essential and personal preeminence over the institutions and personalities of the old Covenant, Christ has founded a new Covenant, given a new revelation and proclaimed a new gospel. The writer never loses sight of the present bearing of these eternal realities on the lives of his readers. They are for their warning against apostasy, for their encouragement in the face of persecution, and for their

undying hope while they 'run the race that is set before (them), looking unto Jesus the author and perfecter of... faith (2:3; 3:12ff; 4:1ff; 10:28ff; 12:1f, 22f).

E. **Its Design**.

1. Its design was to show the true end and meaning of the Mosaic system, and its symbolical and transient character. It proves that the Levitical priesthood was a "shadow" of that of Christ, and that the legal sacrifices prefigured the great and all-perfect sacrifice He offered for us.
2. It explains that the gospel was designed, not to modify the Law of Moses, but to supersede and abolish it. Its teaching was fitted, as it was designed, to check that tendency to apostatize from Christianity and to return to Judaism which now showed itself among certain Jewish Christians. The supreme authority and the transcendent glory of the gospel are clearly set forth, and in such a way as to strengthen and confirm their allegiance to Christ.
3. It consists of two parts:
   a. Doctrinal (1-10:18).
   b. Practical (10:19-13:25).
4. There are found in it many references to portions of the OT. It may be regarded as a treatise supplementary to the Epistles to the Romans and Galatians, and as an inspired commentary on the book of Leviticus

III. **THE AUTHOR.**

A. **Is it Possible to Name an Author**?

1. We are therefore thrown back, in our search for the author, on such evidence as the epistle itself affords, and that is wholly inferential. It seems probable that the author was:
   a. A Hellenist.
   b. A Greek-speaking Jew.
   c. He was familiar with the Scriptures of the OT and with the religious ideas and worship of the Jews.
   d. He claims the inheritance of their sacred history, traditions and institutions (1:1).
   e. He dwells on them with an intimate knowledge and enthusiasm that would be improbable, though not impossible, in a proselyte, and still more in a Christian convert from heathenism.
   f. He writes Greek with a purity of style and vocabulary to which the writings of Luke alone in the NT can be compared.
   g. His mind is imbued with that combination of Hebrew and Greek thought which is best known in the writings of Philo.
   h. His general typological mode of thinking, his use of the allegorical method, as well as the adoption of many terms that are most familiar in Alexandrian thought, all reveal the Hellenistic mind.
   i. Yet his fundamental conceptions are in full accord with the teaching of Paul and of the Johannine writings.
2. The author and his readers alike were not personal disciples of Jesus, but had received the gospel from those who had heard the Lord (2:3) and who were no longer living (13:7). He had lived among his readers, and had probably been their teacher and leader; he is now separated from them but he hopes soon to return to them again (13:18f).
3. Is it possible to give a name to this person?

B. **Tradition**.

When the book emerges into the clear light of history toward the end of the 2nd century, the tradition as to its authorship is seen to divide into three different streams.

C. **The Alexandrian tradition: Paul**.

1. In Alexandria, it was regarded as in some sense the work of Paul. Clement tells how his teacher, apparently Pantaenus, explained why Paul does not in this letter, as in others, address his readers under his name. Out of reverence for the Lord and to avoid suspicion and prejudice, he

as apostle of the Gentiles refrains from addressing himself to the Hebrews as their apostle. Clement accepts this explanation, and adds to it that the original Hebrew of Paul's epistle had been translated into Greek by Luke.

2. Origen starts with the same tradition. He feels, more than Clement, that not only the language, but the forms of thought are different from those of Paul's epistles. This he tries to explain by the hypothesis that while the ideas were Paul's, they had been formulated and written down by some other disciple. He found traditions that named Luke and Clement of Rome, but who the actual writer was, Origen declares that "God alone knows."
3. Paul was probably not the author.
   a. Although the Pauline tradition itself proves nothing, the internal evidence is conclusive against it. We know enough about Paul to be certain that he could not have written Hebrews, and that is all that can be said with confidence on the question of authorship. The style and language, the categories of thought and the method of argument, all differ widely from those of any writings ascribed to Paul.
   b. Paul's formula of quotation is, "It is written" or "The scripture says"; that of Hebrews, "God," or "The Holy Spirit," or "One somewhere says." For Paul the OT is law, and stands in antithesis to the NT, but in Hebrews the OT is covenant, and is the "shadow" of the New Covenant. Paul's characteristic terms, "Christ Jesus," and "Our Lord Jesus Christ," are never found in Hebrews; and "Jesus Christ" only 3 times (10:10; 13:8), and "the Lord" (for Christ) only twice (2:3; 7:14)--these phrases used by Paul over 600 times.
   c. Paul could not have written Heb. 2:3, for he emphatically declares that he did not receive his gospel from the older disciples (Gal. 1:12; 2:6).

D. **The African tradition: Barnabas**.

In the West, the Pauline tradition failed to assert itself till the 4th century, and was not generally accepted till the 5th century. In Africa, another tradition prevailed, namely, that Barnabas was the author. A Council of Hippo in 393 reckons "thirteen epistles of the apostle Paul, and one by the same to the Hebrews." A council of Carthage in 419 reckons "fourteen epistles of the apostle Paul." By such gradual stages did the Pauline tradition establish itself.

E. **Roman and the Western traditions: Anonymous**.

Evidence shows that in Rome and in the churches of the West, the epistle was originally anonymous. No tradition of authorship appears before the 4th century. Stephen Gobarus, writing in 600, says that both Irenaeus and Hippolytus denied the Pauline authorship. The western churches had no reason for refusing to admit Hebrews into the Pauline canon, except only that they did not believe it to be the work of Paul, or of any other apostle.

F. **Other Theories**.

The most conclusive passage against Pauline authorship (2:3) is equally conclusive against any other apostle being the author. Otherwise Luke, Clement of Rome, Barnabas, Silas, Apollos, Priscilla and Aquila, Philip the Deacon, and Aristion have all had their champions. Of all the other persons suggested, so little is known that it is impossible to establish, with any convincing force, an argument for or against their authorship.

1. <u>Luke and Clement</u>.
   These two were brought in through their connection with Paul. If a direct Pauline authorship could not be maintained, the Pauline tradition might still be retained, if the epistle could be assigned to one of the apostle's disciples.
2. <u>Barnabas, a Levite of Cyprus (Ac. 4:36)</u>.
   He was once a companion of Paul (Ac. 13:2ft). Another ancient writing is called "the Epistle of Barnabas," but it has no affinity with Hebrews. The coincidence of the occurrence of the word "consolation" in Barnabas' name (Ac. 4:36) and in the writer's description of Hebrews 13:22 is quite irrelevant. Tertullian's tradition is the only positive argument in favor of the Barnabas theory.

3. Priscilla and Aquila.
   The interchange of "I" and "we" he explains as due to a dual authorship by persons intimately related, but such an interchange of the personal "I" and the epistolary "we" can be paralleled in the Epistles of Paul (e.g. Romans) where no question of joint authorship arises. Acts 18:26 does not prove that they were expert and cultured teachers, but only that they knew and could repeat the salient points of Paul's early preaching.
4. Philip the Deacon and Aristion.
   Ariston, "a disciple of the Lord" mentioned by Papias, are little more than just names. No positive knowledge of either survives on which any theory can be built. It is probable that both were personal disciples of the Lord, and they could not therefore have written Heb 2:3.
5. Apollos.
   Apollos has found favor with many scholars from Luther downward.
   a. No ancient tradition supports this theory, a fact which tells heavily against it, but not conclusively. All that is known of Apollos, suits the author of Hebrews. He may have learned the gospel from "them that heard" (2:3); he was a Jew, "an Alexandrian by race, a learned (or eloquent) man," "mighty in the Scriptures," "he powerfully confuted the Jews" (Ac. 18:24ff), and he belonged to the same Pauline circle as Timothy and Titus (1Cor 16:10-12; Ti. 3:13; compare Heb. 13:23). The Alexandrian type of thought, the affinities with Philo, the arguments from Jewish tradition and ceremonial, the fluent style, may all have issued from "an eloquent Jew of Alexandria."
   b. But it does not follow that Apollos was the only person of this type. All that can be said is that the author of Hebrews was someone generally like what is known of Apollos, but who he actually was, we must confess with Origen, "God alone knows."

IV. DESTINATION.

A. To Christians of Jewish Origin.

The identity of the first readers of Hebrews is, if possible, more obscure than that of the author. It was written to Christians, and to a specific body or group of Christians. The title "to Hebrews" might mean properly Palestinian Jews who spoke the Hebrew language, but the fact that the epistle was written in Greek excludes that supposition. It therefore meant Christians of Jewish origin, and gives no indication of their place of residence.

B. General Character of the Readers.

1. The readers, like the writer, received the gospel first from "them that heard" (2:3), from the personal disciples of the Lord, but they were not of their number.
2. They had witnessed "signs and wonders," "manifold powers," and "gifts of the Holy Spirit" (2:4).
3. Their conversion had been thorough, and their faith and Christian life had been of a high order.
4. They had a sound knowledge of the first principles of Christ (6:1ff).
5. They had become "partakers of Christ," and only needed to "hold fast the beginning of (their) confidence firm unto the end" (3:14).
6. They had been fruitful in good works, ministering unto the saints (6:10), enduring suffering and persecution, and sympathizing with those who were imprisoned (10:32-34).
7. While they should have been teachers, they have become dull of hearing, and have need again to be taught the rudiments of the first principles of the gospel (5:12), and they are in danger of a great apostasy from the faith.
8. They need warning against "an evil heart of unbelief, in falling away from the living God" (3:12).
9. They are become sluggish (6:12), profane like Esau (12:16), worldly-minded (13:5).
10. Perhaps their religion was tending "toward a false asceticism and outward works (13:4, 9). And now that this moral dullness and spiritual indifference had fallen upon them, they are being subjected to a new test by persecution from outside (10:36; 12:4), which renders the danger of their falling away from the faith all the more imminent.

C. **Jews or Gentiles**?

1. The old tradition that the readers were Jews claims some more definite support from the epistle itself. The writer assumes an intimate knowledge of the OT and of Jewish ceremonial on their part. The fathers of the Hebrew race are also their fathers (1:1; 3:9).
2. It is the whole argument of the epistle, rather than any special references, that produced the tradition, and supports the view, that the readers were Jews. The entire message of the epistle, the dominant claims of Christ and of the Christian faith, rests upon the supposition that the readers held Moses, Aaron, the Jewish priesthood, the old Covenant and the Levitical ritual, in the highest esteem.
3. The author's argument is: You will grant the Divine authority and greatness of Moses, Aaron and the Jewish institutions: Christ is greater than they; therefore you ought to be faithful to Him. He assumes an exclusively Jewish point of view in the minds of his readers as his major premise.

D. **The Locality of the Readers**.

1. The question of the locality of these "Hebrews" remains a matter for mere conjecture. Jerusalem, Alexandria, Rome, Antioch, Colosse, Ephesus, Berea, Ravemia and other places have been suggested.
2. Tradition, since Clement of Alexandria, fixed on Jerusalem, but on the untenable ground that the letter was written to Aramaic-speaking Jews. Jerusalem received rather than gave alms. Nor is it likely that all the personal disciples of the Lord would have died out in Jerusalem (2:3). And it could not be charged against the mother church that it had produced no teachers (5:12). These points also tell with almost equal force against any Palestinian locality.
3. Alexandria was suggested as an alternative to Jerusalem, on the supposition that those references to Jewish ritual which did not correspond with the Jerusalem ritual (7:27; 9:4; 10:11) might refer to the temple at Leontopolis. But the ritual system of the epistle is that of the tabernacle and of tradition, and not of any temple.
4. Rome has lately found much favor. We first learn of the existence of the letter at Rome. The phrase "they of Italy salute you" (13:24) implies that either the writer or his readers were in Italy. It may be more natural to think of the writer, with a small group of Italian friends away from home, sending greetings to Italy, than to suppose that a greeting from Italy generally was sent to a church at a distance. The slender arguments in favor of Rome find favor chiefly because no arguments can be adduced in favor of any other place.

V. **DATE.**

A. **Terminal Dates**.

The latest date for the composition of Hebrews is clearly fixed as earlier than 96AD by reason of its use by Clement of Rome about that time. There is no justification for the view that Hebrews shows dependence on Josephus. The earliest date cannot be so definitely fixed.

B. **Conversion and History of Readers**.

But we have data in the epistle itself which require a date considerably later. The readers had been converted by personal disciples of the Lord (2:3). They did not, therefore, belong to the earliest group of Christians. But the letter was written a considerable time after their conversion. They have had time for great development (5:12). They have forgotten the former days after their conversion (10:32). Their early leaders are now dead (13:7). Yet the majority of the church still consists of the first converts (2:3; 10:32).

C. **The Fall of Jerusalem**.

It has been argued that the letter must have been written before the fall of Jerusalem in 70AD, because in writing to a Jewish community, and especially in dealing with Jewish ritual, the writer would have referred to that event, if it had happened.

D. **Two Persecutions**.

Two incidents in the history of the readers are mentioned which afford further ground for a somewhat late date. Immediately after their conversion, they suffered persecution, "a great conflict of sufferings; partly, being made a gazing stock both by reproaches and afflictions; and partly, becoming partakers with them that were so used" (10:32f). And now again, when the letter is written, they are entering upon another time of similar trial, in which they "have need of patience" (10:36), though they "have not yet resisted unto blood" (12:4). It has been conjectured that the first persecution was that under Nero in 64AD, and the second, that in the reign of Domitian, after 81AD.

E. **Conclusion**.

It was in all probability written at Rome, near the close of Paul's two years' imprisonment (13:19, 24). It was certainly written before the destruction of Jerusalem (13:10).

VI. CONTENTS.

A. Summary of Contents.

I. The Revelation of God in His Son (Chap. 1-2).
   - A. Christ the completion of revelation (1:1-3).
   - B. Christ's superiority over the angels (1:4ff).
     - 1. Because He is a Son (1:4-6).
     - 2. Because His reign is eternal (1:7ff).
   - C. The dangers of neglecting salvation through the Son (2:1-4).
   - D. The Son and humanity (2:5ff).
     - 1. The lowliness and dignity of man (2:5-8).
     - 2. Necessity for the Incarnation (2:9ff).
       - a. To fulfill God's gracious purpose (2:9f).
       - b. That the Savior and saved might be one (2:11-15).
       - c. That the Savior may sympathize with the saved (2:16ff).

II. The Prince of Salvation (3:1-4:13).
   - A. Christ as Son superior to Moses as servant (3:1-6).
   - B. Consequences of Israel's unbelief (3:7-11).
   - C. Warning the "Hebrews" against similar unbelief (3:12ff).
   - D. Exhortations to faithfulness (4:1-13).
     - 1. Because a rest remains for the people of God (4:1-11).
     - 2. Because the omniscient God is judge (4:12f).

III. The Great High Priest (4:14-10:18).
   - A. Christ's priesthood the Christian's confidence (4:14-16).
   - B. Christ has the essential qualifications for priesthood (5:1-10).
     - 1. Sympathy with men (5:1-3).
     - 2. God's appointment (514-10).
   - C. The spiritual dullness of the Hebrews (5:11-6:12).
     - 1. Their lack of growth in knowledge (5:11ff).
     - 2. "Press on unto perfection" (6:1-3).
     - 3. The danger of falling away from Christ (6:4-8).
     - 4. Their past history ground for hoping better things (6:9-12).
   - D. God's oath the ground of Christ's priesthood and of the believer's hope (6:13ff).
   - E. Christ a priest after the order of Melchizedek (7:1ff).
     - 1. The history of Melchizedek (7:1-3).
     - 2. The superiority of his order over that of Aaron (7:4-10).
     - 3. Supersession of the Aaronic priesthood (7:11-19).
     - 4. Superiority of Christ's priesthood (7:20-24).

5. Christ a priest befitting us (7:24ff).

F. Christ the true high priest (8:1-10:18).
1. Because He entered the true sanctuary (8:1-5).
2. Because He is priest of the New Covenant (8:6ff).
3. A description of the old tabernacle and its services (9:1-7).
4. Ineffectiveness of its sacrifices (9:8-10).
5. Superiority of Christ's sacrifice (9:11-14).
6. The Mediator of the New Covenant through His own blood (9:15ff).
7. Weakness of the sacrifices of the law (10:1-5).
8. Incarnation for the sake of sacrifice (10:6-9).
9. The one satisfactory sacrifice (10:10-18).

IV. Practical Exhortations (10:19-13:25).

A. Draw near to God and hold fast the faith (10:19-23).

B. The responsibility of Christians and the judgment of God (10:24-31).

C. Past faithfulness a ground for present confidence (10:32ff).

D. The household of faith (11:1ff).
1. What is faith? (11:1-3).
2. The examples of faith (11:4-32).
3. The triumphs of faith (11:33ff).

E. Run the race looking unto Jesus (12:1-3).

F. Sufferings as discipline from the Father (12:4-11).

G. The duty of helping and loving the brethren (12:12-17)

H. Comparison of the trials and privileges of Christians with those of the Israelites (12:18ff).

I. Various duties (13:1-17).
1. Moral and social relations (13:1-6).
2. Loyalty to leaders (13:7f).
3. Beware of Jewish heresies (13:9-14).
4. Ecclesiastical worship and order (13:15-17).

J. Personal affairs and greetings (13:18ff).
1. A request for the prayers of the church (13:18f).
2. A prayer for the church (13:20f).
3. "Bear with the word of exhortation" (13:22).
4. "Our brother Timothy" (13:23).
5. Greetings (13:24).
6. Grace (13:25).

VII. **BIBLIOGRAPHY.**

A. Easton's Bible Dictionary.

B. International Bible Encyclopedia.

C. Commentary on Hebrews (Coffman).

--submitted by
Gregory L. Swango, Evangelist
Sunnyside Rd. church of Christ
Decatur, IL