

THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS

# THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS

AN HISTORICAL AND THEOLOGICAL RECONSIDERATION

THE BAIRD LECTURE, 1949

BY

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## PREFACE

THE present volume incorporates a series of lectures undertaken at the invitation of the Baird Lectureship Trustees, and delivered in the Martin Hall, New College, Edinburgh, in February 1950. I desire cordially to thank the Trustees for the honour conferred on me by the invitation and for their consent to my request under stress of other duties to defer the delivery of the lectures from the autumn of 1949 to the following spring. I wish also to acknowledge the kindness of the Principal and Senate of New College in making the Martin Hall available at the time.

The reasons which have led me to undertake a re-consideration of the purpose of the Epistle are stated in some detail in the opening chapter of the book. As a New Testament teacher I have for long been dissatisfied with the direction which critical thought, principally associated for us in this country and the English-speaking world with the names of two distinguished scholars, Professor James Moffatt and Professor E. F. Scott, has taken with regard to Hebrews during the last half-century. Whereas the older criticism understood the Epistle to reflect a phase or crisis in the evolution of Jewish Christianity in the apostolic period, the modern theory has unhitched the Epistle from these moorings and floated it out into the mid-stream of the general life of the first-century Church, so taking it out of a supposed backwater to give it a place in the main current of Christian history. On this

interpretation the religious situation of the community addressed in Hebrews had nothing specifically to do with any attraction exercised by Judaism but was determined by some form of secular drift to irreligion or to paganism.

I cannot conceal the conviction that this right-about-face in critical opinion has involved a turning of the back on some of the most salient features of the Epistle, and has therefore brought about a clouding of the issues. The new theory starts not from the central substance of Hebrews but, as it seems to me, from peripheral features and from a number of *a priori* and not sufficiently examined assumptions regarding both Judaism and Christianity in the apostolic age. I cannot therefore think that it makes real contact with history. Indeed neither the older nor the more recent approach to the problem of Hebrews has sufficiently integrated the Epistle into the historical development of the world-mission of Christianity or brought the situation behind the letter into clear and adequate focus.

In this opinion I have become confirmed by considerations based on a fresh study of the Stephen-records in the book of the Acts of the Apostles. I am convinced that a straight line runs from the teaching and apologia of the proto-martyr to the Epistle to the Hebrews, and I believe it is to be regarded as a central line in the development of the Christian world-mission. In the present book, therefore, I have sought an approach to Hebrews which will (1) integrate the Epistle afresh into the history of the world-mission from its inception in Stephen, (2) re-evaluate the potentialities of the religious situation in such a centre of world-mission Christianity as Rome, (3) trace the connection between the doctrine of Hebrews and the

theology of the world-mission as a whole, and (4) from careful study of the argument of the Epistle establish conclusions as to the situation and character of the community addressed and so recover for the Epistle its organic position in relation to first-century evangelism and life.

It is not necessary here to set out in detail the positions to which I have been led. They are indicated in outline in the closing section of Chapter I, in the summaries which conclude Chapters III and V, and in Chapter VI. The historical ground of the approach is set out in Chapter II, which deals with Stephen and his eschatology; here is indeed the pivot on which my whole argument turns. I have come to see that distinctions of a very important order have to be made within the field of the Early Christian eschatology, and that the stand taken by Stephen has been determinative of Christian theology to its furthest bounds. I have not, however, in the exposition of the relevant material of Hebrews which is undertaken in Chapters III-V attempted anything like a full commentary on the Epistle, but have confined myself to the points which bear on the above critical issues. There is, therefore, no wealth of side-reference to learned works on the more general aspects of the teaching. For myself the results of the particular inquiry on which I have concentrated attention have been to broaden the outlook both on the history—Hebrews is no mere academic treatise—and on the theology of the world-mission of Christianity in the New Testament age. If my construction of the facts is disallowed, I shall look to see it refuted; if it is defective, I trust it will be improved; if it should be thought right, I hope that even within its limits it may help at certain important points to put

Christian doctrine more squarely on the foundation of Christian history, and to show it, as I say at the end of the book, rising phoenix-like from the embers not only of Jewish legalism but of the Jewish means of grace.

W. MANSON.

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*1st September 1950.*

#### NOTE ON TRANSLATIONS

The rendering of the Epistle is from the author's own translation, and the same holds of passages cited from the Septuagint and other ancient texts, including verse renderings from Greek poets.

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Hebrews, epistle to the. The longest of the non-Pauline letters in the NT. Traditionally it follows the thirteen Pauline letters; in the great uncial it comes between Paul's nine letters to churches and his four to individuals; in P46, the oldest MS of the corpus Paulinum (end of 2nd cent.), it comes second among the letters to churches, next after Romans. The difficulty felt by the Rom. church was largely due to the tradition by which canonical authority and apostolic authorship went hand in hand.