

HEBREWS – WORTH THE EFFORT!

Many people find The Letter to the Hebrews just too difficult to manage – either all of it or parts. Take, for example, chapter 7 with its intricate discussion of Abraham paying tithes to Melchizedek and the importance of Jesus having been born into the tribe of Judah. Hebrews was written for readers with a closer knowledge of Old Testament scripture and tradition than is widely found today. Yet the book has much that speaks forcefully and directly to us now about our faith and about Jesus Christ, the foundation of our faith.



Three examples...

*Chapter 1.1-4. We all know the prologue to St John's Gospel "In the beginning was the Word...", if only because it is read as the Christmas Gospel. The opening of Hebrews equally proclaims the divinity of Jesus Christ: "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being."

*Chapter 4.15 extols the other side of the Incarnation, not just that the man Jesus was "God with us" but that God had been found in human form, that God had been among his own creation: "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, but without sin."

*In Ecclesiasticus (alias Wisdom alias Sirach, in the Apocrypha) there is a long and splendid passage beginning "Let us now praise famous men..." (Chapters 44-50) extolling the national heroes of Israel. In Hebrews chapter 11, in an obvious echo, the author lists characters from the Old Testament, praising their faith and concluding "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith."

Is Hebrews really a letter?

Many of Paul's Epistles are real letters, written to specific churches or people.

For instance, the two letters to the Corinthians concentrate on the issues which that congregation were struggling with, and on Paul's concern about them. He ticks them off for faults and failures he has heard about, advises them how to mobilise their particular talents, tells them how best to worship and encourages them with transmitted accounts of Jesus. These letters give us a lively view of the earliest Christian communities but they give us only one side of the correspondence. We know Paul's answers – we sometimes have to guess the questions.

Hebrews is not like that – nor is James or the three Letters of John. Hebrews is presumably addressed to Christians with a Jewish background, but in general rather than in a particular place. It is really more like a sermon or a pamphlet or an essay. So it is more planned and more consistent, even if it lacks the intriguing personal touches of some of the real letters. You can see the author's argument unfolding and developing.

Right at the end, there are some verses that do read like a letter (13.18 and 22-25), which were maybe added or served as a kind of advertisement or acted to boost the idea that Paul wrote the letter (thus giving it higher authority). Which leads to the next question....

Who wrote Hebrews?

Origen, who died about 255AD, is quoted as saying that “only God himself knows who wrote the Letter to the Hebrews”, so I am not going to do any better. Although sometimes regarded as by Paul, the style and language is so different that it cannot actually have been written by him, although the writer may have been influenced by Paul, or maybe by Luke, or maybe by Barnabas, or...

My own favourite thought is that it may be by Apollos. He was a Jewish Christian from Alexandria, instructed in the faith by Priscilla and Aquila, a learned man and powerful in debate (Acts 18) and later a leader of the church in Corinth (1 Corinthians 1.12,4,6).

Whoever wrote it, it has, after some initial debate, long been accepted as part of the New Testament, and it is a “masterpiece of early Christian homiletics, weaving creative scriptural exegesis with effective exhortation” (Oxford Bible Commentary). Well worth a try.

A PSALM FOR THE ST ANDREW'S CENTRE

Unless the Lord builds the house,
Their labour is in vain who build it.

We give you thanks, O God, for a vision for the future;
We praise you for your loving guidance.

But now, O Lord, we are like Mosses standing on Pisgah;
Are we to look only: but never to attain?

Instruct us, we beseech you, and teach us the way we should go;
Watch over us and guide our minds into right paths.

Let us not be like creatures with no understanding,
But open our eyes, our ears and our will to your voice.

Lord, we strain to hear your voice;
We try to discern your will; we cry to you for help.

Day and night we seek to know your will,
For surely it is only in obedience to your will that we shall find our peace.

“Ask,” you said, “and you will receive.”
“Seek,” you said, “and you will find.”
“Knock,” you said, “and it will be opened unto you.”

Lord God, we do ask: but the answer is unclear;
We do seek: but the way is dark,
We seek out doors and knock on them: but so many refuse to open.

You, O Lord, are our Rock; do not turn a deaf ear to us.
If you remain silent, to whom can we turn?

In the name of Jesus, your Son, our Lord and Saviour,
We ask that the way forward will be made clear;
That his Spirit may guide us;

That doors will appear and be opened;
So that we may carry forward your Kingdom,
To your greater praise and glory.

Be merciful to us, O God, in our bewilderment;
Forgive our feeble faith.

O Lord, let your mercy lighten upon us:
As our trust is in you.

In you, O Lord, have we trusted;
Let us never be confounded. Alleluia!