

THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS.*

I. Chapters i.-vi.

BY W. T. WHITLEY, M. A., LL. D.

Fellow of the Theological Senate.

Some books leap into instant popularity and circulate by hundreds of thousands. Some win a position as classics and are reprinted for centuries. Others fall nearly flat at first appearance, and only obtain recognition at a later crisis. To this third class belong some of the masterpieces of literature, which come late to their own, but come then to stay. Spinoza penned such a book, which was not appreciated till Matthew Arnold popularized his doctrines two centuries later. A like experience had befallen two other tracts by men of his race, known as the epistles to the Romans and to the Hebrews. Romans lay really neglected for fourteen centuries, translated and copied indeed as part of a conventional body of literature, but not forming opinion or regulating practice. Then arose a great Saxon and discerned in it the systematic exposition of one great doctrine needed in his day, Justification by Faith. And since then a large part of the Christian world has exalted this to a foremost position.

The Epistle to the Hebrews has been waiting longer for its discoverer and expositor; but the message that it bears is one for this age. The foundation of faith is laid secure; the question is whether Protestants will be content to lay that over and over again, and incur the rebuke of becoming dull, or whether they will press on unto perfection. Others have reared on that foundation an elaborate

*This article will be followed by two others from the pen of Dr. Whitley, covering in the three the entire Epistle to the Hebrews.—Editor.

system of ritualism replete with priests and sacrifices; the need to-day is to test that edifice with the plummet of this epistle, when it will prove falsely built. "No sacrifice since Calvary, no priest other than Christ" is a watchword fatal to much error, ancient and modern too.

The attempt will be made here to show briefly what this epistle taught, and the situation it discloses in a certain Christian circle; to comment on some of the implications in its argument, and especially to expand and apply the main thought to the situation of to-day. Considerations of space make it needful to deal with the epistle in three articles; it is therefore the more needful to say a word or two first as to its perfect unity and artistic design. The only other treatises in the Bible that can compare with it in this respect are the Gospel and Revelation of John. From both of these it differs; on the one hand it interweaves many religious phrases endeared by the familiar version of the Bible, and indeed embodying many lengthy quotations; on the other it is in a style both pure and elevated, betokening a literary master. Yet no book seems more intensely Jewish, in its choice of a narrow field of argument and in its appeal to Jews at one crisis of their history.

ARGUMENT OF THE EPISTLE.

A birds-eye view of the whole epistle may be taken. The three paragraphs correspond to sections ending at iv. 13, x. 18, xiii. 19.

"The New Covenant is better than the Old in two respects, its Mediator and its High Priest. Its Mediator is the very Son of God; greater than the angels who mediated the Old Covenant, in that He is the glorified heir (and so worthy of deeper obedience) and in that He has been exalted through death to be High Priest. He is greater than Moses the human mediator of the Old Covenant, even as a son is greater than a servant, however trusty; so He should not be grieved as Moses was, by

unbelief or fickleness. Moses and Joshua failed to bring the people to the promised rest, but Jesus has entered into it and will lead into it all who persevere.

“The High Priest of the New Covenant is Jesus, the Son of God. This doctrine is indeed difficult, but it is a safeguard against apostasy and ruin, which can be averted if you have faith (like Abraham’s) on Jesus our forerunner and High Priest. Consider Melchizedek; he was both priest and king, and his priestly rank was earlier and greater than that of Levi. Now Jesus is a priest of this kind, not like others by mere descent from Aaron, but on His own merits. This rank is confirmed by God’s oath, eternal and unchangeable, for He Himself is holy, separate, and perfect. Consider Aaron the high priest; his office was typical, as was shown at its institution, and by the promise of a *new* covenant, and by the dull repetition of its ritual. Jesus is the intended High Priest; He cleanses from sin really, not by promise only. His death really ratified the true covenant, and opened the way to heaven. Devoting Himself to doing God’s will, He became the only and eternal High Priest.

“The way being open to God, and such a sponsor being ready to introduce us, let us draw near in faith, not turning back nor throwing away the advantage won. Faith is no new specific, it was ever the mainstay of Israel’s heroes. We should patiently follow Jesus, the leader and perfecter of faith, accepting trials as the discipline appointed by our Father, not repining as Esau did, but encouraged by the thought of our covenant being better. Let us manifest the fruits of faith; let us hold to the faith of our teachers in Jesus Christ, the eternal Priest, even though it involve being driven out of the earthly Israel and worshiping by new sacrifices offered through Him alone. So may you strengthen your teachers, old and new.”

This condensation of the argument reveals a few points at once. The tract was obviously addressed to people deeply attached to the Old Covenant, and extreme-

ly loth to abandon it. So fully does it enter into their frame of mind, that the whole of the first section has no other bearing. It may have incidental glimpses of wide truth, it may have passages of striking beauty and permanent value; but as a whole, the argument down to iv. 13 has done its work.

The great section, which after a digression, really begins at vii. 1 and ends at x. 18, is of very different value for our times. If Jesus is a priest of God's own appointment, who has once for all finished atonement, and permanently remains the unique priest; then not only Aaron, but all modern "priests" have nothing more to do in His line. And as sacerdotalism is so insistent to-day, this great passage is exactly the message needed.

The exhortations that follow are also of perennial application, and it is really astonishing how easily we can forget the exact circumstances of the original appeal, in finding the words instinct with life for ourselves.

PARAPHRASE OF i.-iv. 11.

After these preliminary glances, we may now narrow our field of view and attend to the first six chapters, paragraph by paragraph. The first is in such majestic rhythmic Greek that it deserves some special reproduction even in our less sonorous tongue:

"In numerous portions, in numerous manners, God formerly spoke to our sires through the prophets. To us at the last of these days in His Son, constituted of all things the heir, and through whom He created the ages. Who, being His glory's effulgence and print of His substance; upholding too all by the word of His power, achieved first a purification of sins, then seated Himself on God's right hand in heaven, becoming by so much the better than angels, as He is the heir of a Name more excellent.

"For to what angel did God ever say, 'Thou art my son, this day have I begotten thee?' Was not this meant

for Jesus alone at his baptism? Or what angel ever received the promise, 'I will be his Father, and he shall be my son?' But looking forward to the Second Advent of Jesus, He says, 'And let all God's angels worship him.'

"Again, while about the angels He says, 'Who maketh His angels spirits, His ministers a flaming fire,' yet about the Son His language is as to an equal, 'Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever; the sceptre of Thy kingdom is a right sceptre. 'Thou lovest righteousness and hatest wickedness; therefore God, Thy God, hath anointed Thee with the oil of gladness above Thy fellows.' Nor does this stand alone; 'Of old, O Lord, hast Thou laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of Thy hands. They shall perish, but Thou shalt endure. Yea, all of them shall wax old like a garment, as a vesture shalt thou change them, and they shall be changed; but Thou art the same, and Thy years shall have no end.' Or, once again, to what angel did God ever say, as He did to Jesus, 'Sit Thou at my right hand, until I make Thine enemies thy footstool.' Angels are just laboring spirits, sent forth continually for service to God, on behalf of those about to inherit salvation.

"Wherefore we are bound to heed more earnestly what we heard, lest we be at all misled. For if the word spoken from Sinai through angels was established, so that every transgression or neglect received a just recompense; how shall we escape, if we are heedless of our great salvation. This was first announced to us by the Lord, was then confirmed to us by His apostles, and God added His witness by signs and miracles and various mighty works and endowments of the Holy Spirit according to His will.

"For not to angels did God subject the coming world, of which we were speaking. Remember the testimony, 'What is man, that Thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that Thou visitest him?' For Thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honor. Thou hast put all things under his feet.' Note, in that phrase 'all things,' nothing

is excepted from his power. Now as a matter of fact, we do not yet see everything put under our feet; but we do see One, 'a little lower than the angels,' Jesus, 'crowned with glory and honor' to suffer death, that by God's grace He might taste death for every one. For it be-
seemed God, because of whom are all things, and through whom were all things, when He led many sons to glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through His sufferings. For both Jesus who hallows, and we who are being hallowed, are all of one Father; wherefore Jesus is not ashamed to call us Brethren, saying, 'I will declare Thy name unto my brethren; in the midst of the congregation will I praise Thee.' And again He ranks himself with us, 'I will put my trust in Him.' Or again, 'Behold, I and the children whom the Lord hath given me.' Since then the children have shared flesh and blood, He too in like fashion partook of the same, that through his death he might neutralize him who held the power of death, the devil, and might free all who in fear of death passed all their life in slavery. For as we well know, it is not angels that He helps, but 'he helps the seed of Abraham.' So He ought in every way to become like His brethren, that He might become a merciful High Priest, and faithful, in all things relating to God, to make atonement for the sins of God's people. For having been tried by suffering, He can succor those who are still being tried.

"So then, holy brethren, partakers of a calling not to an earthly Canaan, but to a heavenly, consider Jesus as God's messenger, and as High Priest in our system. He is faithful to God who appointed him, as indeed 'Moses was in all God's house.' But our Jesus is worthy of more honor than Moses; Moses certainly was 'faithful in all God's house as a trusty servant,' calling attention to matters which should afterwards be explained; but Christ is the son, set over the house. What is the house? We are, if we persevere to the end, for against His church the gates of Hades shall not prevail. Prove that you be-

long to it, by holding fast, and remember the warning from the past:

“ ‘To-day if ye will hear His voice, harden not your heart, as in the provocation, and as in the day of temptation in the wilderness; when your fathers tempted me and saw my work. Forty years long was I grieved with that generation and said, They ever err in their heart, they have not known my ways. So I swore in my wrath, They shall not enter into my rest.’

“So beware, brethren, lest in any of you too there be found an evil unbelieving heart, standing off from the living God. Exhort one another every day, while still the To-day echoes, lest any of you too be hardened by the deceit of sin. For indeed we have become partners with the Christ, provided our confident beginning is persevered in to the end. Reflect on that passage: ‘To-day if ye will hear His voice, harden not your hearts as in the provocation.’ Who heard, yet provoked Him? All who came out of Egypt with Moses. With whom was He angry forty years? Those who sinned and left their bodies in the desert. Of whom did He swear that they should not enter into His rest? The disobedient. Now we see that it was their unbelief that kept them out; despite their glorious beginning; what may not unbelief do even for you, despite your glorious beginning?

“That promise of entering into His rest remained over for us; do not fall short of it. Good news is come to us as to them; it took no effect with them for lack of faith. Faith made us the heirs of that promise. The eternal rest mentioned at the creation; forfeited in the days of Moses was again offered in the days of David—clearly Joshua’s entry into Canaan did not exhaust it—and was first earned by Jesus when He ended His atoning work. Shall not we also labor to the end, and then join Him therein?”

JESUS, THE SCRIPTURES, THE HEBREWS.

If now we pause to study this first section, the substance of the argument will not detain us long. Christian readers regard it as axiomatic that angels and Moses are not to be mentioned in the same breath with Jesus. Other readers doubt whether angels and Moses ever existed, and from utterly different motives would grant this result at once.

The description of Jesus however at the outset is remarkable, for its explicit ranking Him as only one shade less than the eternal God. The final revealer of God, the original creator of the universe, the destined ruler over it, partaker of God's glory, wielder of His power, Son and Heir. No such description had as yet been penned. And the greatness of the theme has produced a majesty of language hardly approached elsewhere in the whole Bible.

Then note the astonishing use made of the Old Covenant scriptures. The Law indeed is passed by, but from Psalms and Prophets are taken passages, regardless of their first application, which are regarded as bearing directly on Jesus. Nor is there any apology for this employment, it is assumed as current in the circles addressed. At Antioch in Pisidia, Paul had quoted the second psalm as really referring to the resurrection of Jesus; now this is seen to be a stock Christian argument. Solomon is taken as a mere shadow of Jesus, the true Son of David, as He had suggested to the Pharisees. Then the words of Jesus as to His coming on the clouds with great glory, sending forth his angels, recalls a passage from the old Greek Bible that seems to foretell it. So passage after passage is seen to have received already a Christian application, so that from the ancient scriptures new glories were flashing forth.

Yet while prophets and historians and psalmists were thus claimed as foretelling Christ, they are unhesitatingly subordinated to Him even in the very point of revealing

God. Their knowledge was piecemeal in effect, and gained in indirect ways; His was complete and direct. Clearly if ever it should be hard to reconcile an O. T. word with a word of Christ, the latter will decide and govern. Scripture is valuable as it relates closely to Christ. Such are obvious conclusions from the treatment of scripture here.

There is however no forgetfulness of the original meaning, even if it suits the writer often to leap on to the final. He can face facts frankly, comparing the ideal man of the eighth psalm with the real average man, and emphasizing the discrepancy; it is Jesus alone to whom are subjected the fish in the sea, and the waves thereof. He knows that the ninety-fifth psalm had a definite meaning for David's day; it was written to urge the men of that age to repentance, and he uses it in a similar fashion for his own age.

And this treatment of scripture, so unlike to the rabbinic style, he justifies by the profound remark that the word of God is living. Its power is not exhausted at first utterance; it may be only heard aright when Christ Jesus is taken as the true theme; its promises and warnings are not for the days of Moses and Isaiah and David alone, but for every generation. Nor is it feeble, easily dismissed; it has power to cleave to the heart of the most negligent and impenitent, and is so designed by Him whose glance pierces to the secrets of all, and whose word can stir the most careless.

This section also throws a little light on the writer and the readers. Of course he is a Jew; no one else would have the Jewish scriptures at his finger ends and treat them with such familiarity and reverence. And as plainly they are Jews too, for nobody else cared about angels and Moses and the devil. They live near enough to Christ to be witnesses of signs and wonders, and to experience the special gifts of the Spirit, yet far enough off to have heard of Him only through the apostles. They are in some great crisis, for the word To-day is hurled at them

again and again, as if to-morrow may be too late.

SECOND SUBJECT STATED, iv. 14—v. 10.

Having closed the first part of the argument, the author next announces his second proposition, that Jesus is the High Priest. The phrase has been employed once already, but not dwelt upon. It is part of the consummate art of this artist, that he springs no surprises, but drops hints and tones up the mind for his most startling doctrine. Even now he advances very cautiously, first enunciating his thesis at some length, then defining his terms, and sketching the two stages in his proof:

“As then we have a great High Priest who has entered the inmost heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firm our confession of Him. Our High Priest is not unable to appreciate our weaknesses, He has been tried in every way like us, except by sinning. So let us boldly come forward to the seat of grace, that we may receive mercy, and may find grace to help in due season.

“Consider what a high priest is for. He is taken from among men; he is appointed to act for us in everything relating to God, especially to offer gifts and sacrifices for sin; he can compassionate the ignorant and erring because he himself is full of weakness; indeed this weakness obliges him not only to sacrifice for the people, but also for his own sins. And no one can assume this post of honor, he is called to it by God, as in the case of Aaron.

“Observe how Jesus fulfils these conditions. He did not thrust himself into the high-priesthood, but God glorified him when He said at the baptism, ‘My Son art Thou, I this day have begotten Thee.’ And more emphatically elsewhere, ‘Thou art a Priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek.’ Jesus, in His life on earth made offerings, prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears, to God who could save him from death, and who did indeed heed his piety. Jesus, Son as He was, yet had to suffer, and therein learned obedience. And

having thus ripened, Jesus became for all that obey Him a source of eternal salvation. For God saluted Him as High Priest after the order of Melchizedek."

INTERLUDE: v. 11—vi. 20.

Here then the subject is plainly announced, but before proving it in detail, the author diverges from the main track in a masterly appeal not to rest content with repeating elementary truisms, but to brace themselves and discern new truth, that their growth in knowledge may keep pace with their growth in grace. This is skillfully brought round again to the very point of divergence, and the main theme is a second time led up to and announced:

"There will be much to say about Melchizedek, and it will be difficult to state it, as you have become dull in learning. For though after all this time you ought to be teaching, some one must actually teach you the very elements of Christian doctrine. You are like sucklings, not men; those who live on milk have no experience of sound doctrine, they are babes; but solid food is for mature men, who are practised in distinguishing good and evil teaching.

"So let us cease reiterating the simplest truths about Christ, and press on to fuller growth. Let us no longer lay the foundation, that work is dead before God and must be abandoned, that He demands faith in His promises, that Christian baptism is more than John's or than Jewish immersions, that the laying on of hands is in prayer for the gift of the Spirit, that our religion stands or falls with the reality of the resurrection, that there is eternal condemnation for sin. Let us build on this, if God will grant us aid. Build we must, yet how hard for those who have stopped. For when a man has once seen Christ and experienced the new life, and rejoiced in the gift of the Spirit, and realized how beautiful are God's promises and the might of the dawning age, if then he falls away, he cannot be renewed again to repent while he is cruci-

fyng afresh the Son of God on his own account, and openly shaming Him. For the ground which has soaked in the frequent rain and yields food fit for those for whom it is tilled, receives again God's blessing; but if it produces thorns and thistles it is valueless and is near inheriting the curse of Adam; its end will be burning.

“Now this is not your case, dear friends; we have better hope of your salvation, though we do speak thus. God is fair, He remembers your record, the love you showed to Him by helping the brethren, as you still do. But we earnestly desire that each of you will persevere, not slackening, but following those who by endurance and trust inherited the promises. God's promise to Abraham is lasting; it was ratified by an oath; and this promise was obtained by perseverance. And as men give greater confidence by taking an oath, God met this custom and conveyed assurance that His promise should stand permanently, by taking an oath. Thus we have two unchangeable pledges of a truthful God to us who have taken refuge, encouraging us to grasp the hope set before us. And our hope anchors our soul, holding fast in the unseen world beyond the veil which Jesus has entered, both as our forerunner, and as our eternal High Priest after the order of Melchizedek.”

CHARACTER OF THE HEBREWS.

This passage adds several strokes to the sketch of the readers. They were of long standing in Christian doctrine, so long that they ought to be an active, teaching, and missionary church. But unhappily they had rested content with works of practical benevolence, and had never striven to follow out the new doctrines to their natural issues. In their Christian thinking they revolved in a narrow circle. They had awakened to the best elements in the old prophetic teaching, as reiterated by John the Baptist, Jesus and James; they insisted on the uselessness of depending on their outward life for stand-

ing before God, and exercised a real trust in Him. They attached an undue importance to outward acts, such as baptism and laying on of hands, though certainly they dwelt upon the value of baptism as involving a pledge to Jesus, and of laying on of hands as indicating a recognition of the Spirit. They harped on the resurrection, as if it simply confuted the Sadducees, without seeing any deeper meaning; they were morbid about everlasting punishment, instead of preparing for everlasting life. These points are in the epistle by no means denied or disparaged, but are regarded as mere foundations on which a body of elaborate doctrine should already have been reared by a church of experience and thought.

And because these readers were so unenterprising, burying their talent in a napkin instead of trading with it, they were in grave danger of forfeiting it. Their duty was to spread the knowledge of Jesus, commending Him in every way to fresh peoples hungering for the bread of life. If they received the dew of heaven on their souls, and used it for no better purpose than to produce a crop of quarrels or of dry teaching with no nourishment for others, what could they expect but to be burned off, that better seed might be sown in the cleared land? Nothing was lacking to them of advantages and impulses to spread the Gospel; early conversion and appropriation of the Spirit, experience of the benefits of its promises and the Spirit's gifts; yet nothing happened! And this passivity, this silence in face of a perishing nation, an ignorant world, was not regarded as having any authority on earth, that His commands to make disciples of all nations might be ignored. This open and flagrant neglect of His charge was dangerously akin to a public repudiation of Him, a jeering at His claims. Should this last step be taken, there was no chance of rescuing a man while he persisted in the conduct of Caiaphas. To this explicit denial of Jesus these readers had not come, despite ominous signs. They were facing in the right direction, but had come to a halt. And the best way to set

them again in motion was to supply fresh motive power; action depends on thought, and their thoughts were cramped. Their doctrines did not place Christ at the center, and could be expounded with hardly any mention of Him. It was needful to restore Him to the true place in their minds and hearts, then His bidding would inspire them afresh to obedience.

The new doctrine is founded on their favorite foundation. They insisted on faith in God. Now by exercising such faith, by patiently trusting in God's promise of a home, despite the long years of wandering in Mesopotamia and Egypt, despite the possession of Canaan by Hittites, Abraham obtained a new promise, of a great posterity. And lest his faith should waver at the long delay in fulfillment, God condescended to strengthen the promise by an oath. The promise descends to all Abraham's posterity, still unfulfilled in its deepest sense, and it may be claimed by all who exercise a like faith. But there is now a deeper sense evident. Is it the land which is in question? There is a heavenly Canaan into which Jesus has already entered as a forerunner of all the faithful. Is it the posterity which is in question? Jesus is the true son of Abraham, and those who join themselves to Him shall be as the sand on the shore or the stars in the sky. Into this Canaan he enters like Aaron into the Holy Place, and opens the way for all His brother priests to follow. These mighty and inspiring truths shall be unfolded in a way that shall appeal to every Jew captivated with the stately ritual of the temple.

In this interlude there are three obvious coincidences with I. Corinthians; the comparison with milk and solid food, the allusion to foundation, the reminiscence of planting, watering and increase. These may be due simply to the author's reading that letter, or to his depending also on his correspondents knowing it. This possibility deserves bearing in mind.

STAGNANT CHRISTIANS.

This passage is full of warning to us to-day. The church as a whole should be rebuked that after nineteen centuries its development of doctrine is so meager. Just a few points have been explored, and ever on them men are readier to repeat the formulas that satisfied the Greeks of the fifth century rather than think out afresh in the language of the twentieth. And strange to say, some have laid over again a very sandy foundation of teaching as to baptisms and laying on of hands, which is greatly in need of a storm to beat upon it.

Any local church will probably find many who should profit by studying this passage. How often we hear sturdy men of forty and aged Christians of seventy express their joy at "hearing the plain, simple gospel of salvation." Babies! They ought to be doing one of two things; either themselves going out into the country or slums or school to teach this simple gospel to others; or encouraging their pastor to lead them into deeper fields of study, and wider fields of action.

Protestants were very slow to learn that the duty of Christians is to spread the gospel everywhere. Lutherans never grasped this truth for two centuries, Baptists were a century later in learning it. And therefore Lutherans were cursed with rationalism, Baptists with Unitarianism or Antinomianism, a plentiful crop of thorns and thistles that had to be burned off before God could sow afresh. And where any group condemns itself to a blind conservatism on old lines, and cries with Moses that it will stand still and see the salvation of God, then it incurs the swift reproof of God. "Wherefore criest thou unto me? Go forward!" Against such dangers Baptists at least need only look at our past history; our victories have been won by our radicalism, by discarding tradition and going to the fountain head. And so there can surely be no lasting halt by those who began so well. The great fight of to-day, within Christian circles, is of evangelicals

against sacerdotalists. If we get a clear idea of the New Testament doctrine of Priesthood, there is less risk of being contaminated with a spurious doctrine. And in this study there are obvious advantages for those who vehemently disclaim all special priestly attributes for their ministers, alike in word, attire, and conduct, while they as strenuously insist on the atonement wrought by the Lord, and the right of every Christian—as a priest—to offer sacrifices of praise, prayer and beneficence. Such is the Baptist position.