

## CHAPTER I

### THE PROBLEM OF THE EPISTLE AND MODERN CRITICAL THOUGHT

BY its splendid eloquence, impassioned argument, and sustained elevation of religious thought the Epistle to the Hebrews has left a permanent mark on the literature and theology of the Christian Church. In respect, however, of its origin, its historical setting, and its purpose the great Epistle has remained an enigma presenting unsolved problems to our minds. Within a generation of its composition substantial fragments of its majestic language are found embedded in the letter which Clement of Rome wrote to the Corinthian Church; but of the title, authorship, and character of the source from which these borrowings were derived there is no hint in Clement. In course of time Hebrews was destined to exercise a notable influence on the language of Christian liturgy and devotion, Catholic and Reformed—nor could it be otherwise with a book so profoundly engaged with the holiness of God and with the conception of Christian life as worship; but this was an influence which could proceed without any other understanding of the Epistle than was supplied by the tradition which soon became current that Hebrews was a letter written by St. Paul to the Jews.

In fact, of this document so charged with the inspiration of the first age of Christianity, and so potent in imaginative appeal to the mind of later times, next to

no traces have survived in the literature of the century which immediately succeeded Clement. We must assume a period of obscurity during which any authentic tradition which existed as to the origin of the Epistle had time to disappear.

There were particular reasons for this fading out of historical tradition in the case of the Epistle to the Hebrews. The Epistle was anonymous. It was not apparently connected at first with the name or authority of any Apostle. It was not apparently known by any distinctive title. In the West, after the momentary gleams of it which appear in Clement's letter, it was drawn into the vortex of ecclesiastical controversy over discipline, and so perhaps swept to the side. The community to which it was first addressed disappeared possibly at an early date, or merged itself in the larger unity of the Church. In the East, though where and how is not known, the Epistle was adopted into the family of the Pauline letters at some date well before the close of the second century, and as Pauline, and bearing the superscription *TO THE HEBREWS*, it came to Alexandria. From there, through the powerful advocacy of the local tradition, the authority of Hebrews as a work of St. Paul established itself in the third century over all the Eastern Churches, and eventually, though by slow degrees, the book secured a place in the New Testament canon of the West.

Even at Alexandria, however, the origin, authorship, particular destination, and purpose of the Epistle were matters of dispute, and the questions which were then debated, though now more accurately defined and focussed, have still to engage the minds of New Testament theologians.

LITERARY, HISTORICAL, AND THEOLOGICAL  
ASPECTS OF THE PROBLEM

In scope and character the problems raised by Hebrews group themselves around the three primary aspects under which, like other New Testament writings, the letter presents itself to our minds.

The Epistle is, in the first place, a literary creation, an individual structure of thought and expression, a unity and harmony of conception and design, which once took shape in a writer's mind, and by its style, matter, and moral and emotional quality bears witness to the distinctiveness of his spirit. Secondly, it is a work of historical significance in the sense that it sprang from, and reflects or registers, a contemporary situation in some quarter of the Early Christian Church and, as such, remains a memorial of an age or phase of an age. Thirdly, it is a confessional and theological document, an impressive witness to the religion of the New Testament Church. Here it rises like a massive column, a soaring grandeur of faith in the edifice of first-century Christianity, and, as such, it engages our attention and compels our wonder, whether or not we can clear away the obscurity which envelops its base and conceals the exact circumstance of its origin from our sight.

I. As regards the first or literary aspect of Hebrews, the cultured quality and distinction of its language and style have at all times commanded recognition. Origen in his day commented on the pronouncedly Hellenic character of its phraseology and composition, contrasting its merit in this respect with the less ornate diction of the Apostle Paul to whom at Alexandria

the Epistle was ordinarily attributed. His words are:

'Everyone skilled to discern differences in phraseology will admit that the diction of the Epistle bearing the title "To the Hebrews" has nothing in it of the stamp of ordinary speech characterising the Apostle, who admitted himself to be "a man of common talk". The style of the Epistle has a more Hellenic quality. . . . If I were to give my own opinion, I should say that the conceptions are the Apostle's, but the language and style those of one who drew upon memory for the Apostle's matter and, so to speak, composed a *scholion* on his words.'<sup>1</sup>

Origen, in feeling the necessity of maintaining *some* connection between Hebrews and St. Paul, was heavily influenced by the strength of the tradition current at Alexandria. In our own time Dr. Adolf Deissmann wrote of Hebrews:

'It is, on account of its polished form and scholarly contents, the first example of what we can consider Christian art-literature. That means that, with this book, Christianity took the first step out of the class in which it had its roots.'<sup>2</sup>

According to Dr. Deissmann, Christianity had its beginning in the lower and middle strata of society. It was the ordinary simple people of Galilee who surrounded Jesus, and the Churches founded by St. Paul consisted of slaves, day-labourers, hand-workers, and poor folks. 'With the little book to the Hebrews', Deissmann continues, 'Early Christianity stepped out of this class. . . .

<sup>1</sup> Eusebius, *History*, VI. 25.

<sup>2</sup> *The New Testament in the Light of Modern Research* (1929), pp. 51 f.

Christianity began to take up ancient philosophy and education.'

But while Hebrews by its cultivated and philosophical language and cast of thought takes good rank as literature, it is not certain that its appearance signified so abrupt a step above and beyond the ordinary level of Christian intercourse as Deissmann and Dr. J. H. Moulton, who here agrees with him, would have us believe. Across the Early Christian stage cultured teachers had always been passing—men like Barnabas, Silvanus, Apollos, Luke, Paul, and later John of Ephesus. Also there were cultivated groups of Jewish Christians and Greek Christians among the rank and file of the Church from the first days, and even among slaves and hand-workers in that age a degree of education might exist from the standpoint of which the profound Wisdom-Christology and Atonement-doctrine of Colossians or Hebrews or Romans need not have appeared altogether abstruse or unintelligible. St. Paul, at any rate, did not think so. The real question which must here concern us, however, is whether Hebrews is just a literary exercise or expatiation, just a development of speculative and esoteric ideas on the part of an individual theologian, or is grounded essentially on truths which were a part of the common Christian confession, and which, at the time when it was written, stood in vital relation to a particular situation in the history of quite ordinary people.

II. Under the other two aspects the problem raised by the Epistle admits of being more exactly and concretely stated. What was the historical situation which evoked the Epistle, and what, if any, reality attaches to its traditional title TO THE HEBREWS? Does the

letter relate, as tradition has generally assumed, to a phase in the development of *Jewish* Christianity within the Church, and if so, what? Or had the situation nothing specifically to do with Jewish Christianity, and to whom, then, was the Epistle written? This problem is prescribed for us anew by a marked change in the trend of modern critical opinion with regard to Hebrews, and we shall see that numerous questions of a quite fundamental kind have to be faced before the point at issue can be settled. For example—

(a) Reason may be found for thinking that on neither side of the modern debate has sufficient attention been paid to, or adequate allowance made for the *complexity* of Early Christian history, or for the diversities of thought and sympathy which might co-exist in an average congregation in the first-century Church.

(b) A more thorough investigation than has hitherto been undertaken may be found necessary into the special character of the Church at Rome, within which there are generally admitted reasons for locating the group of persons to which the Epistle to the Hebrews was addressed.

(c) Incidentally it may be found important to consider whether the teaching of the Pauline Epistles—apart possibly from the Epistle to the Romans—has not been given a disproportionate emphasis, with reference to the general life of the first-century Church, by some exponents of the modern interpretation of Hebrews.

III. Very similar is the issue which confronts us when we turn to the third aspect of the Epistle, its theological teaching. The great question here concerns the central doctrine of the Epistle, its emphasis on the

fulfilment and supersession by Jesus of the Jewish cultus and the sacrifices. Have we here a *gnosis*, a speculative development of thought designed merely to prove the grandeur, the finality, the absoluteness of Christianity compared with other religions? Does the interest of the Epistle lie in the realm of *ideas*, in an idealistic and intellectual presentation of Christianity, and is this the meaning of the famous words (vi. 1):

‘Let us bear forwards to perfection’?

Or is it nearer the truth to say that for both the writer and the readers of Hebrews the doctrine of the Priesthood and Oblation of Christ was of the givenness and very essence of the received Christian faith; and, when he bids the readers leave behind them the first beginnings of Christian instruction and bear forwards to perfection, he is announcing not a new advance in the matter of Christian doctrine but a summons to the group to resume once more the eschatological journey of life on which they had entered at their first conversion, but from which now, for one reason or another, they were hanging back? In the latter case we shall be driven back again on a question already mentioned.

We shall have to ask whether the doctrine of St. Paul gives us the full measure of the apostolic message preached to the world in the first generation, since St. Paul does not speak of the Priesthood of Christ; and we shall have to envisage the possibility that Romans and Hebrews must be taken *together* if we are to obtain a balanced and adequate conception of the wholeness of the world-mission gospel. The bracketing of these two documents, in order to obtain a stereoscopic view of the theology of the World Church in the apostolic age, may prove the more instructive because the two

Epistles converge in the point of their being both directed to the Christian community at Rome. We shall consider this point later. Meantime it is plain that many intricate questions of historical and theological interest confront us even at the first approach to the Epistle.

#### PURPOSE OF THE PRESENT WORK

If, therefore, I venture to take my rush-light afresh into some of the dark corners of this obscurity, it is with the consciousness that any illumination which I may hope to offer on this or that point may only cast into deeper shadow some untouched recesses of the problem. I hope it may not be so in the event, but the risk must be taken in an experiment of this kind, and I shall have to guard my taper-flame carefully against the wind, the more so as I am constrained to go in the teeth of certain opinions widely favoured at present and confidently offered as the introduction of a new and better hope for the understanding of Hebrews. Reference has already been made to this modern re-orientation of criticism with regard to the Epistle. There has been an abandonment of the traditional view which related the letter to a crisis in the history of a group of Jewish Christians tempted in some way to relapse to Judaism. We are asked, instead, to see in the situation behind the Epistle a quite general phase in the life of the Hellenistic Church at large. As I am unable to convince myself that the latter theory either comports with the special character of the argument of Hebrews or reveals a sufficient sense of the complexities of the religious situation in the period to which the Epistle belongs, it seems to me a task of the first

urgency to re-open the whole question with a view to obtaining an exacter orientation to the Epistle and its historical background.

It appears to me for one thing, and this is an essential point in my contention, that neither the older nor the modern interpretation of Hebrews has done adequate justice to the *eschatology* of the Epistle. By this I mean its supreme concentration of interest on the critical finality of the moment of time in which Christians are placed by the Gospel. For the writer to the Hebrews this moment is one which permits no dallying and no turning of the eyes backwards. He sees all things in the light of the crisis brought about by the announcement of the Eternal World in Jesus and the swift approach of the end of the present order, including the Last Judgment. He believes with the Johannine writer that 'It is the last hour',<sup>1</sup> with St. Paul that 'The time is foreshortened . . . the fashion of this world is passing away'.<sup>2</sup> Eschatology in this sense is a determination of mind or attitude according to which all life and all history are judged purely as they relate to that Ultimate Event towards which all things are now fast hastening. It is in this sense that the terms 'eschatological calling', 'eschatological tension', 'eschatological Now' will be employed in the following pages, and it will, I think, be found that a fuller appreciation of this most important aspect of the writer's thought will help towards the solution of not a few of the problems presented to us by the Epistle.

Before, however, entering on these questions, it is necessary to look a little more closely at the two sides of the modern debate, and first at the older view, in order to establish some general positions.

<sup>1</sup> 1 John ii. 18.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Corinthians vii. 29-31.

TRADITIONAL AND OLDER APPROACHES TO  
THE SUBJECT

It has been noticed that with the coming of the Epistle to Alexandria as part of a corpus of Pauline Letters there came also the designation of the Epistle as TO THE HEBREWS: also that the powerful support given to this tradition at Alexandria, despite reserves on the part of the theologians of the Church, notably Origen, led to the Pauline authorship of Hebrews being everywhere acknowledged in the Eastern Churches and eventually conceded also in the West. In the latter region, though the Epistle was known to Clement of Rome and shows traces of itself in Hermas and Justin Martyr—all of them teachers connected with Rome—it had not been ascribed to Paul or any Apostle, nor was it known by the title 'To the Hebrews' earlier than A.D. 200. In the extant text of what is known as the Muratorian Canon of Christian writings Hebrews is not mentioned unless it is the letter *ad Alexandrinos* to which that document alludes. The first substantial reference to the Epistle in the West after Clement is in Tertullian, who cites Hebrews as a work of Barnabas:

'Extat enim et Barnabae titulus ad Hebraeos.'<sup>1</sup>

Tertullian's interest in the writing lay in its strict enforcement of Church discipline, its rigorous exclusion of the possibility of any second repentance for apostates (Hebrews vi. 1 f.). He describes the author as

'Monens itaque discipulos, omissis omnibus initiis,  
ad perfectionem magis tendere.'

But Tertullian's ascription of the book to Barnabas—an ascription based obviously on the authority of the

<sup>1</sup> Tertullian, *De Pudicitia*, 20.

manuscript which he used—and his commendation of the writer as a man of excellent authority did not give rise to a Barnabas tradition in the Western Church. Even when the force of Eastern influence prevailed—von Soden cites St. Augustine's admission:

‘Mouet auctoritas ecclesiarum orientalium’—

there were still in the days of St. Jerome and St. Augustine some who declined to recognise Hebrews as Paul's. The ordinary understanding, however, once the Pauline authorship was conceded, was that the Apostle wrote the Epistle as an appeal to the Jewish people or nation, and this has remained the official teaching both of the Roman and the Reformed Churches.

With the rise of modern scholarship these opinions came under serious criticism. The Pauline authorship of Hebrews was generally abandoned in critical circles for the same reasons as once imposed themselves on Origen's mind, namely, the non-Pauline character of the language and style of the document. Also the traditional idea that the writer addressed the Jewish people as a whole gave way before the distinct evidence of the Epistle that the recipients were Jewish *Christians*, and not even Jewish Christians at large but a limited group, a particular local community known to the writer. Here critical opinion, sifting out the possible alternatives, has rallied steadily, though not universally, to the conclusion that the persons addressed in Hebrews were a community of Jewish Christians at *Rome*, Jewish Christians who formed a section or sept or wing of a Jewish-Christian congregation or synagogue in that centre. The main arguments on which the assumption of a Roman destination for the Epistle are based are the following:

1. There is the reference in xiii. 24 to ‘those from

Italy', whose greetings the writer conveys along with his own. While the words 'those from Italy' might be used to describe Christians domiciled in Italy who desired to associate themselves with the writer in a message directed to brethren in some other country, they admit equally well of the interpretation that the persons in question were Italian Christians, absent from their country, who wished to be remembered to their friends at home.

2. There is the fact that the first traces of the existence of the Epistle are at Rome, where substantial extracts from its language occur, as has been noted, in the First Epistle of Clement,<sup>1</sup> and where occasional, though less distinct, echoes of its ideas can be detected, a generation later, in the Visions and Similitudes of Hermas.

3. There are the allusions in the Epistle to the impressive past history of the community addressed, the beneficence of its service to the saints (vi. 10), the conspicuous fidelity of its behaviour under the ordeal of public prosecution (x. 32-34), and the eminence of its former leaders (xiii. 7). All these, if Italy be taken to represent the general direction in which we are to look, would point with force to the Church at Rome as the likeliest particular centre in which to find the community located. It may be remembered that the experience of suffering and persecution has a marked prominence in St. Paul's Epistle to the Church at Rome.<sup>2</sup> Persecution was a condition of existence with which the latter was apparently familiar.

4. There is the notable absence, both in Hebrews and Romans, of all reference to Gnostic and heathen

<sup>1</sup> 1 Clement xxxvi. 1-5, lxi. 3, lxiv. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Romans v. 3-5, viii. 18-19, 31-39.

errors on the part of the Christians counselled. The only erroneous teaching which is commented upon in Hebrews concerns food-laws, and this is a point in curious agreement with St. Paul's Romans, where the same or similar doctrines are attributed to a section of the Roman community, and form the only subject on which the Apostle takes the community seriously to task.<sup>1</sup> Again, the call 'not to forsake the gathering of yourselves together' in Hebrews (x. 24-25) has a very close inverse parallel in St. Paul's injunction to the Roman brethren to 'accept' or 'welcome' one another.<sup>2</sup> These coincidences, to mention no others, constitute a strong case for taking the two Epistles together as dual witnesses to the character of Roman Christianity. No ethnic aberrations in this metropolitan Church, only minority tendencies towards Jewish practices! For the freedom of the same Church from the infection of pagan syncretism Dr. E. F. Scott appositely quotes a later eulogy which represents the Roman Christians as 'filtered clean from every foreign stain'.<sup>3</sup>

The older theory, then, accepting on good grounds the Roman destination of the Epistle, goes on to interpret the situation in Hebrews by assuming the existence in the Roman-Christian community of a group of Jewish Christians who were drifting from their Christian moorings back to Judaism, and whom the writer warns. This is a more debatable position. In favour of the theory of a reversion to Judaism, stress has been laid on a number of factors in the contemporary history of the Church and of the Empire. These include:

(a) Christian disappointment over the non-fulfilment

<sup>1</sup> Romans xiv. 13-23.

<sup>2</sup> Romans xv. 7.

<sup>3</sup> Ignatius, Letter to the Romans, Preface; E. F. Scott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, p. 13.

- of the expectation of the Lord's return (x. 35-38);
- (b) the growing pressure of persecution, or of social opinion adverse to the confessors of Christ (x. 32-34);
- (c) the increasing strength of Jewish propaganda at Rome under the Flavian emperors—this frankly presupposes a post-Neronian dating for the Epistle; and
- (d) the sentimental revulsion produced in Jewish hearts by the political extinction of Jerusalem and the cessation of the Temple-worship—this again posits a date later than the year A.D. 70.

It has been argued that these last events, or premonitions of them, may have had the effect in certain circles of creating an archaising tendency of thought in the direction of the ancient Biblical records of the 'Tabernacle' and the cultus. It has even been supposed that the passage, Hebrews vi. 4-6, which denies the possibility of a second 'repentance', is expressly pointed against persons who, disappointed with Christianity, were seeking to re-ignite the flickering lamp of religion at the altar-fires, so to speak, of the old religion. Such reversion the writer pronounces to be 'an impossibility'. It is not only not a renovation of repentance, but a re-crucifixion of the Son of God.<sup>1</sup>

But, over and above the fact that this is rather a strained interpretation to put on the word 'repentance' in the passage in question, it has to be observed that only the first and second of the above factors can be admitted, on the evidence of Hebrews itself, to have been operative in the minds and lives of the group of

<sup>1</sup> See Dr. A. Nairne, *The Epistle of Priesthood*, pp. 13-15.

Christians indicated in the letter. There is not an atom of evidence that either the third or the fourth entered as elements into the situation. In other words, *any dangers which made themselves felt from the side of Judaism were not of a racial, or political, or sentimental, but of a purely religious kind.*

Granting, however, that deflecting influences of a religious kind were at work on the community from the side of Judaism, we do not necessarily conclude that the peril was that of a conscious and deliberate return to Judaism. Such an inference overruns the evidence, and prejudices the question of the historical bearings of the Epistle. The latter does not actually speak of apostasy to Judaism. It does speak of apostasy from the living God. This implies certainly a falling away from the truth of Christianity, but it leaves the door open to other interpretations of the group's unfaithfulness besides that of a return by choice to the old religion. The delinquents may have been Christians who had no thought of abandoning the Christian position, but who, nevertheless, were hanging back from accepting the full consequences of their calling, were not maintaining their original 'confidence' in it, were certainly not going forward to 'perfection'. This, it would seem, is as much as the Epistle itself warrants us in holding with regard to the motives actuating the community. It would appear, therefore, that the traditional explanation of the position of the 'Hebrews' at Rome leaves something to be desired.

While strong reasons remain, as we shall see, for upholding the Jewish-Christian character of the group, it is possible that the danger to their faith lay not in a return to Judaism as such, but in a retardation of their Christian progress by factors having their causes in the

Jewish element in their Christianity, in other words, by an undue assertion of their Jewish-Christian inheritance.

### THE MODERN VOLTE-FACE IN CRITICISM

The modern theory, in seeking an explanation of Hebrews, detaches the Epistle altogether from its traditional Jewish-Christian moorings and floats it out into the mid-stream of the general life of the contemporary Church. This change of front dates back at least to 1836, when E. M. Röth published at Frankfurt a work designed to show that 'the Epistle commonly styled to the Hebrews was intended for Christians of Gentile extraction (*ad Christianos genere gentiles*)'.

According to this view, the danger of the group was not that of reaction towards Judaism but either of falling away to unbelief or disappointment with religion generally—so we are asked to understand the language of Hebrews vi. 3-6—or, alternatively, of succumbing to the fascinations of Hellenistic paganism, mystery-cults, angel-worship, theosophy, and the like. The purpose of the letter on this showing was to assert the finality and grandeur of the Christian religion, to emphasise its incomparable greatness with respect to other faiths, to insist on its absoluteness as a redemption-mystery. Here let full acknowledgment be made of the stimulus given to modern studies in this field by H. von Soden who stated the new theory fully in his edition of the Epistle in 1890, by Weizsäcker, Jülicher, McGiffert and other scholars who gave the theory publicity with varying emphasis on this or that point in the argument, and more recently by James Moffatt and E. F. Scott who have popularised the new approach

to Hebrews by their lucid and attractive powers of exposition. Dr. Moffatt's *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (1924) is the most valuable critical study of the book which the modern age has received. It draws upon very rich knowledge of the Wisdom-literature of Judaism, of the voluminous writings of Philo of Alexandria, and of the religious and ethical philosophy of the contemporary Hellenistic world, and it is lit up by fresh, sympathetic, and incisive exegetical insight. Dr. Scott also in various books, notably *The Epistle to the Hebrews: its Doctrine and significance* (1922), has contributed very greatly to the modern re-awakening of a lively interest in the Epistle, and has stated the new critical theory in a very fascinating way. Nevertheless, great as is the debt which we owe to these scholars for research and acumen which have gone far to advance our general understanding of the Epistle, I find it impossible to think that the critical theory to which their support has been given and their insights annexed marks a step in the right direction.

The arguments which they have adduced in favour of the position do not, as I consider, establish the full conclusions which they have thought to build upon them. For one thing, these arguments start to a considerable extent from *a priori* assumptions with regard to Christian history in the apostolic age: the influence of St. Paul, for instance, is given an inordinate importance with regard to contemporary Christian teaching in the World-Church. For another thing, they take off, not from the central substance of the doctrine of the Epistle but from peripheral features, and it is difficult, therefore, to think that the conclusions at which these scholars arrive represent a real landing on historical ground. In defence of this criticism it is only

necessary to call the witness of the reasons which are ordinarily offered in support of the position.

### CRITICISM OF THE MODERN THEORY

According to Dr. Moffatt, 'Hebrews' is a misleading name for the book, for whether as an equivalent for Jewish Christians or for Hebrew-speaking Jewish Christians, the title is 'inapplicable to the circle for whom this remarkable treatise was produced'.

1. Importance is attached to the absence from Hebrews of all reference to 'the distinction of Jew and Gentile' in the Church, to the non-occurrence of even the terms Jew and Gentile, and to the omission of all allusion to such matters as circumcision, the authority of the Law with relation to Christians, and the anti-thesis of faith and works. It is argued that these omissions point to a time when the issues in question had ceased to have a living significance for religion, and therefore indicate a society which was no longer distinctively either Jewish-Christian or Gentile-Christian in consciousness, but already incipiently Catholic.

To this it may be replied that all these omissions admit of being perfectly well explained if we suppose the writer of the Epistle to have been addressing a group of Christians of Jewish extraction or tradition, who formed a self-contained, self-conscious religious unit within the larger Church. Such a society would not in principle be interested in, or affected by any of the controversies turning on the distinction of Jew and Gentile. These would not ordinarily come within the horizon of a Jewish-Christian group's particular consciousness, nor would it be necessary for a group-leader to introduce or argue about them. The absence from

Hebrews of the above features, therefore, is no sign that the Epistle had not Jewish Christians as its objective.

2. It is contended, rather paradoxically, that the pre-occupation of the Epistle with the Old Testament priesthood and cultus, so far from indicating or proving the Jewish-Christian character of the community, does the exact opposite. For (i) Judaism at this time, it is contended, 'was not a matter of ritual but of fidelity to the Law', and (ii) the Jewish ordinances and the cultus were not living issues in Christianity after the time of St. Paul, least of all in cosmopolitan Rome.<sup>1</sup>

Here it has to be insisted by way of answer that what was true regarding contemporary Judaism was not necessarily true of *Jewish Christianity* when we allow for the renovation of religious insight and Biblical interest which had come to it through Christ;<sup>2</sup> and to say that after St. Paul Christianity had ceased to give any thought to the Old Testament cultus and ritual is to give to St. Paul's particular concentration on the purely ethical aspect of the Law an unwarrantable authority for Churches lying outside the domain of his personal activity. It is to make Paulinism the complete measure and standard of Christian belief in the world-wide Church. It fails to allow for the personal equation in the matter of St. Paul's peculiar emphases in his doctrine of grace. St. Paul had done a great work in Galatia, at Corinth, in Asia and elsewhere. But he was one who from early days had brooded over the Law in its aspect of *moral demand*, and for whom the question of questions was and remained how to be

<sup>1</sup> So E. F. Scott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, p. 17 etc.; J. Moffatt, *Commentary*, p. xvi etc.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Luke xxiv. 32 etc.

right with God in the face of that demand, how to be personally delivered from inward contradiction and frustration—the law of sin in his members as he calls it—how to attain to ‘no condemnation’ and ‘peace’. St. Paul’s doctrine of grace had thus acquired a highly individualised expression.

But this does not exclude the possibility that there were other Jewish Christians who had come to the heart of the Christian revelation of grace along another route, parallel indeed but separate. The writer to the Hebrews may have been one of these. He may not, like Saul of Tarsus, have brooded over the script of the moral Law in solitude, but there is nothing to disprove that he had stood, actually or in spirit, with the hushed assemblies which witnessed the offering of the sacrifices for sin in the Temple, or had been present when the high-priest made his oblation on the Day of Atonement. Nor is there anything to exclude the assumption that the supreme question for him was and remained how to be ‘clean’ from the guilt of sin, how to be ‘sanctified’ and ‘perfected’ for approach to God. If we allow the possibility of this, and assume that the *ritual approach* to the understanding of the Christian redemption—in the doctrine of Christ as our great High-Priest, whose self-oblation fulfils the Jewish cultus—may have been of the very essence of the matter for this Jewish-Christian theologian, and would ordinarily be propagated by him in his teaching, then, though we cannot say on this ground alone that the group which he addressed in the Epistle was necessarily Jewish-Christian, we cannot refuse to admit the possibility that it was. For he would teach his doctrine everywhere and, like St. Paul, to the Jew first.

3. It is insisted that the great use of the Old Testa-

ment made by the writer, whose version was the Septuagint which he knew chiefly in the A text form, lends no colour at all to the assumption that the persons he addressed were Jewish Christians. No more, for that part, it is said, do his archaizing tendencies, his dwelling on Israel's experience in the desert, his interest in the Tabernacle and in its furnishings, and his fondness for ritual details in his allusions to the cultus. The Septuagint, we are reminded, was the Bible of the whole Church, from which Apostles and others opened up the mystery of redemption for all Christians, Gentile as well as Jewish. St. Paul in writing to the Galatian and Corinthian Churches, which were predominantly Gentile-Christian, makes a similar use of the Old Testament as his text-book, and so later do Clement of Rome, the Apologists such as Justin Martyr, and others in writing to the world. The extensive employment of Biblical types and allegories, therefore, proves nothing, it is contended, with reference to the character of the community which the writer to the Hebrews has in mind.

To this it may be replied that, if the writer's extensive use of Old Testament material does not prove the Jewish-Christian character of the group receiving the letter, neither does it prove that the group was Gentile-Christian or Catholic. It must also be considered that, if the writer were taking his stand on the Old Testament merely in order to oppose some general Christian drift to irreligion or to paganism, it would have been open to him to go other ways about the matter than by leading an elaborate proof that Jesus is our High-Priest after the order of Melchizedek. What needs to be explained in Hebrews is not the writer's choice of the Old Testament as his starting-point and quarry of

theological argument, but the nature of the particular argument which he proceeds to draw out of it.

If, as is alleged by some defenders of the modern theory of Hebrews, a Jewish-Christian group would not, as such, be particularly interested in reasonings based on the Jewish high-priesthood and the ritual, much less would a Gentile-Christian or Catholic-Christian group be likely to be so interested, especially as, in turning from Christianity, such persons would be turning also from its holy Books. Moreover, the Septuagint has a very great deal to say about unbelief, the folly of thinking that 'there is no God', and it has a great deal to say also about the gods of paganism and the wickedness of sacrifices and offerings to demons, and if the writer to the Hebrews were calling attention to its teaching in order to warn a Gentile-born or Catholic section of the Church against a side-slip to unbelief or heathenism, he could have started from this more broadly relevant Old Testament material, and left Melchizedek and Psalm cx. alone. But there is not a word in Hebrews about unbelief in the sense of irreligion pure and simple, nor about pagan rites and mysteries, nor about the tables and cups of demons. Neither, for that part, is anything heard of these ethnic perils in the other great New Testament document addressed to the Roman Christians, St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans. In other Pauline letters, and very markedly in Galatians, 1 Corinthians, and Colossians, which were all addressed to Churches in the Eastern half of the Mediterranean world, we find regular allusion to the beliefs, the practices, and the moral aberrations of Hellenistic society. In Hebrews and in Romans, on the other hand, the argument for the Christian religion is presented consistently and exclusively in terms of its relation to

*Judaism.* This is a feature of some interest in these Epistles which has not been sufficiently noticed in modern works whether on Hebrews or on Romans.

For these and other reasons which will be brought out in the course of the succeeding chapters, neither the older nor the more recent approach to the Epistle can be regarded as satisfactory. Neither of them has brought the situation behind the Epistle into full and clear historical focus, and to this extent neither has done adequate justice to the theological and practical meaning of Hebrews. There is some justification, therefore, for attempting a reconsideration of the problem in some of its aspects, and igniting a fresh spark to explore the way.

#### PROVISIONAL STATEMENT OF POSITIONS ADVANCED IN THE PRESENT WORK

In what follows we shall be engaged in the task of seeking a fresh integration of Hebrews into the historical development of Early Christian thought and life. The first problem will concern the relation in which the eschatology and Christological doctrine of the Epistle stand to the gospel of the world-mission of Christianity. We shall inquire into the character of the Roman-Christian community as a whole and into the position within that community of the particular minority of Christians to whom Hebrews was written. In the course of the succeeding chapters I shall offer reasons in defence of the following, among other, positions:

I. The key to the Epistle is only to be found by examining the history of the world-mission of Christianity from its inception in the work of Stephen.

II. The direction and tone of the writer's thought are to be explained by his concentration of mind on the critical significance of the moment marked by the entrance of Christ into time. In Christ the Eternal World has announced itself, throwing all past religious history into the shadow, putting an end to the Law and the Cultus of Israel, and leaving no place in Christianity for Jewish-Christian archaism.

III. The particular message of the Epistle, that with the Priesthood and Oblation of Christ the Jewish means of grace are ended, represents the elaboration of a fundamental and integral element in the theology of the world-mission of Christianity. While St. Paul gives us a great part of that world-mission theology, he gives us only a part.

IV. The community of Christians established at Rome by the world-mission was predominantly Jewish-Christian in composition and character, rather than Gentile-Christian. Separatist tendencies within that Church inclined to the Jewish rather than to the Gnostic or Hellenistic side. The minority group to which Hebrews was addressed was definitely Jewish-Christian.

V. The sin of the 'Hebrews' group was not that of abandoning Christianity for Judaism, but rather of remaining as Christians under the covert of the Jewish religion, living too much in the Jewish part of their Christianity, and so missing the true horizon of the eschatological calling.