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Hebrews and the Ebionites

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Hebrews was written to dissuade certain Jewish-Christian members of the community from lapsing; it proclaims a Pauline-type faith, the incarnation and the atonement. Our earliest account of Jewish Christians is of Irenaeus's Ebionites: they thought Christ to be an angelic power who possessed the human Jesus from his baptism to before his passion. Such a creed would explain Hebrews' deprecation of angels and insistence on Christ's humanity through his passion. This then gives sense to the widely mistranslated 6.1, and gives context and force to the paraenesis in chapter 13: Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, before his incarnation, and today – not as the Jewish Christians claim, in a temporary possession by an angel.

The Epistle to the Hebrews opens with two chapters designed to show that angels are inferior to the Son of God. The author is not sparing in his argument: he adduces seven primary texts, and then a further four, to make the point. It was not to an angel that God said, 'Thou art my Son . . .' (1.5; Ps 2.7), or 'I will be to him a father . . .' (1.5; 2 Sam 7.14). In fact at his birth God said, 'Let all the angels of God worship him' (1.6; Deut 32.43). Angels are mutable beings, liable to change into winds or flame (1.7; Ps 104.4), whereas God's anointed is addressed as 'God', and his throne is for ever and ever (1.8–9; Ps 45.6–7). It is he who is addressed as Lord, the founder of earth and heaven in the beginning; they will perish (angels included) but his years will not fail (1.10–12; Ps 102.25–7). It was to no angel that God said, 'Sit thou at my right hand . . .' (1.13; Ps 110.1): they are just ministering spirits, appointed to serve for our sakes, the future heirs of salvation. The seven texts are marked off as an inclusion by the recapitulated formula 'To which of the angels has it ever been said . . .?' (1.5, 13), and by the summary in 1.14.

The battle is resumed in chapter 2. We must abide by the preaching we have heard; if the old law, proclaimed by angels, brought just punishment for infringement, how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, vouched for by the Lord, and now by the Spirit? God did not subject the world to come to angels but to a man, a son of man, who was crowned with glory because he suffered death (2.5–9; Ps 8.4–6). It was proper for God in this way to bring many sons to salvation, and this is again proved with a chain of texts. It was said, 'I will proclaim thy name to my brethren; in the midst of the Church I will praise thee' – so the link from

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Christ to Christian was promised (2.12; Ps 22.22). 'I will have faith in him' (2.13; Isa 8.17) shows that the essential faith is there; and the next verse, 'Lo, I and the children God has given me' (Isa 8.18), shows that Christians are the children of the Lord. The reader may be anxious where the thought is tending, but our author knows what he is about. The conclusion is in 2.16: 'For indeed it is not angels that he comes to save, but he comes to save the seed of Abraham.' The angels have been in mind throughout. They are nowhere near the level of God's Son, and God is not concerned for them, but for us, his Son's brethren.

Not polemical?

This formidable assault has been hard to explain. Two principal suggestions have been made, neither of which has been widely convincing. It has been thought that the reference is to the inferiority of the Law to the new dispensation.[1] The part of angels in promulgating the Law is mentioned at 2.2, as it is in Acts 7.53 and Gal 3.19; and the inferiority of the old Law, covenant, priesthood, etc. is a major theme of the epistle. But it hardly seems believable that our author should cite all these scriptures and not draw the required conclusion in so many words. Indeed, 2.2 mentions the angelic dispensation of the Law only as having been valid at the time, and this would have provided an obvious trigger for the proposed contrast, if that had been in mind. In any case the battery of citations is too heavy for such a purpose: who would begin a critique of the old dispensation with two chapters on the inferiority of angels? Neither Stephen nor Paul mentions the angels as any signal of the Law's weakness.

An alternative has been to suspect an 'angel Christology';[2] and this would have the advantage of explaining the seriousness of the contrast with the author's view that Jesus was the Son of God incarnate. It is, however, difficult to find such a position represented in recent commentaries. Otto Michel, whose commentary appeared in its first edition in 1935, cites the Slavonic Testimony of Josephus, which the editors of the new Schürer regard as a late interpolation.[3] He also cites

1 Barnabas Lindars, *The Theology of the Letter to the Hebrews* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1991) 38. Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids, MI/Carlisle: Eerdmans/Paternoster, 1993) 104, suggests that the inferiority of the angels is the first of a series of stages in which the old dispensation of priesthood, sacrifice, etc. is shown to be superseded. Craig R. Koester, *Hebrews* (AB 36; New York: Doubleday, 2001) 200–1, adds references to angels in 2.5–9 and 12.22–4.

2 Otto Michel, *Der Brief an die Hebräer* (KEK; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, [13]1975) 131–2. Attempts to align the high priest Melchizedek with the angelic Melchizedek in the Dead Sea Scrolls have now been abandoned: see F. F. Bruce, 'Recent Contributions to Understanding Hebrews', *ET* 80 (1969) 260–4.

3 E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B.C.– A.D.135)* (New English Version rev. and ed. by G. Vermes and F. Millar; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1973–) 1.440.

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Justin, *Dial.* 34.2, 'For Christ is king and priest and God and Lord and angel and man and Captain and Stone'; but these are titles drawn from the OT (Pss 72; 110; etc.), and 'angel and man' is probably a reference to the three 'men' of Gen 18. Otherwise Michel points to elements in Jewish tradition: the *mal'ak yhwh* as both man and angel; Melchizedek as man and angel (at Qumran), and the combination of earthly and heavenly roles in Dan 7.9–10 and *Eth. Enoch* 71. These last texts are more significant, and have been brought together with an impressive body of further material by William Horbury; but he makes only a passing reference to Hebrews.[4] Hugh Montefiore's 1964 commentary also takes up an (Ebionite) form of the angel-Christology, to which I return below.

Critics commonly say that 1–2 is not 'polemical';[5] but in view of the tone of some other passages in the epistle we may wonder. It is true that the general stance of our author is pastoral, if rather heavily so. He is trying to win back a number of Jewish Christians[6] who are drifting away from church gatherings (10.25) and lapsing from the faith, under pressure of persecution (10.32–4).[7] But behind such backsliding there are some 'adversaries' (10.29) who are worthy of punishment worse than death; and no doubt they are the purveyors of the various alien teachings on food, warned against in 13.9. Both passages are in the context of christological assertions (10.29b; 13.8), and invite the possibility of a polemical interpretation of 1–2, albeit an indirect one.

It is often said that after 1–2 we hear no more of the second-class status of angels: but we hear plenty more of Christ as the Son of God. Chapter 3 opens with ὅθεν, and proceeds to a contrast between Moses as a servant in God's house and Christ as a Son; and this leads into a prolonged exhortation, 'Harden not your hearts'. 4.14–5.10 defends the humanity of 'Jesus, the Son of God' (4.14; 5.5, 8), and this is succeeded by a sharp exhortation (5.11–6.12): the recipients have become dull of understanding; they have been Christians a good time, and should be teachers by now – instead they need milk. Once they have received the blessings of the new life, there is no hope for them if they fall away; their end is to be burned.

4 William Horbury, *Jewish Messianism and the Cult of Christ* (London: SCM, 1998) 125.

5 Michel, *Der Brief an die Hebräer*, 132; Marie E. Isaacs, *Sacred Space* (JSNTSS 73; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1992) 176; Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 103; Robert P. Gordon, *Hebrews* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000) 41; but contrast H. W. Montefiore, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Black's NTC; London: A. & C. Black, 1964) 37–42, and James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* (London/Philadelphia: SCM/Trinity Press International, ²1990) 260 – Dunn puts *polemic against Ebionite christology* in italics.

6 I use the term Jewish Christians to mean those Christians who gave importance to Jewish observances (circumcision, sabbath, food-laws, etc.), regardless of ethnicity: thus Jewish Christians included some observing Gentiles, while Paul was not a Jewish Christian.

7 There have been other views of Hebrews, but this has been the dominant one; it has recently been discussed by Gordon, *Hebrews*, 11–29, and justified on the basis of the strange teachings on 'food' at 13.9 (15).

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If all this is not polemical, it is at least adversarial and aggressive. There is a further sharp exhortation after the high-priestly exposition (10.19–39) – 'For if we wilfully persist in sin . . . there no longer remains a sacrifice for sin' (10.26).

These menaces do not just arise from a pastor's fear of demoralisation in his church. Behind the recipients stand the 'adversaries' (ὑπεναντίους) at 10.27, who are *false teachers*. They have 'trodden under foot the Son of God and profaned the blood of the covenant by which they were sanctified, and outraged the Spirit of grace' (10.29). The same people are probably spoken of at 6.6 as having fallen away and 're-crucified to themselves the Son of God, and made a spectacle of him'. But these are precisely the christological emphases with which the epistle began: Christ is the Son of God, and he has made purification for sin (1.2–3). Any adversary who was encouraging Jewish Christians to 'fall away' was urging them to deny the cardinal points of the author's Christology.[8] The suspicion must arise that they hold some form of the 'angel Christology' which seems to be latent behind 1–2.

Angels and possessing powers

We know of two developments of Jewish Christianity in the second century. One, preserved in the Pseudo-Clementines but drawing on the earlier traditions of the *Preaching of Peter*, speaks of Jesus regularly as 'the Prophet'. But it also thinks of 'the true Prophet' as a heavenly power which had previously been temporarily active in the saints of the OT, and had come to rest permanently in Jesus. It is easy to see that if any such doctrine were maintained in our author's hearing, he would have rejected it with disgust; though perhaps he would not have thought of 'the true Prophet' as an angel.

The second evidence we have of second-century Jewish Christianity is in Irenaeus. The first book of his *Adversus Haereses* gives a catalogue of Christian heresies, but only one of them is clearly close to Jewish roots, that of the Ebionites (1.26.2): they observe circumcision and Jewish customs, they reject Paul, use Matthew's Gospel only, and pray facing Jerusalem.[9] Their Christology is said to be the same as that taught by Cerinthus, famous for his encounter with St John in the bathhouse at Ephesus. This position is set out as follows:

8 So ibid., 15, 20–1, 122.

9 The angels of Heb 1–2 are associated with the Ebionite possessing power by Montefiore, *Hebrews*, 37–42, and by Dunn, *Unity and Diversity*, 239–66, esp. 259–62. Despite a number of curiosities, Montefiore's commentary is clear on this issue, and importantly right, although he does not pursue it. Dunn develops an unhappily complex picture, in which Hebrews is both pro- and anti-Ebionite. This is due to his use of the muddling term Adoptionism; Hebrews' teaching that Jesus was appointed God's Son because of his obedience to suffering is no different from that of Paul in Phil 2.

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> He represented Jesus as not having been born of a virgin; he was the son of Joseph and Mary, conceived like the rest of mankind, and excelled mankind in justice, prudence and wisdom. And after his baptism Christ entered into him in the form of a dove from the highest power; and then he proclaimed the unknown Father, and performed miracles. In the end Christ withdrew from Jesus, and Jesus suffered and rose again, while Christ continued untouched by suffering (ἀπαθής), as a spiritual being.

For the Ebionites Christ *is* an angel, then, within the meaning of the act. Epiphanius, who is well informed, writing two centuries later, says they believed that 'Christ was not begotten by God the Father [as the orthodox believe], but was created as one of the archangels . . . and that he is lord over the angels' (*Panarion* 30.16.4). He is a heavenly figure (πνευματικόν), but only on a second level; he is despatched by the supreme power (αὐθεντίας), who is, however, distinct from 'the unknown Father'. The orders of heavenly spirits are described by various terms in the NT, but ἄγγελοι is used alongside other words in such passages as Rom 8.38 and 1 Pet 3.22. Heb 1.2 seems to equate the angels with τοὺς αἰῶνας, but it is likely that 'angels' carried a slightly pejorative overtone; they were perhaps less grand than the principalities and powers, thrones and lordships, and our author does not mind the suggestion that they are more proletarian.

Epiphanius gives an excerpt from the Gospel of the *Ebionites* (which he calls the *Gospel of the Hebrews*). In this the same possession of Jesus by a heavenly power is attributed to the Holy Spirit: 'he saw the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove that descended and entered into him' (*Panarion* 30.13.7). The heavenly voice also added, 'This day I have begotten thee', thus confirming the baptism as the crucial moment when the possession began.

We might be inclined to think that the Holy Spirit featured in an earlier form of the Ebionite creed than did the angelic Christ, for traditionally Jews have been thought to expect a purely human Messiah. But Horbury's study shows that this picture is much oversimplified. Alongside the human Messiah is a second tradition, evidenced from the LXX, early apocalypses like the *Psalms of Solomon*, 2 Esdras and *1 Enoch*, from Qumran and on to the rabbis; in this an angel or spirit is seen as acting in the human leader. An important text is Isa 9.5(6). Here the Hebrew already gave the new king's name as 'wonderful counsellor, mighty God/divine champion (*'el gibbor*)'; the LXX translator cannot render *'el* with θεός, so he gives the king's name as Μεγάλης βουλῆς ἄγγελος. Thus for the LXX, Messiah's name (and so his nature) is known before his birth to be angelic; and the context seems to bear this out, since his coming is identified with the 'great light' of 9.1(2), and is cited as such in Matt 4.16. Similarly the 'spirit of Yahweh' will rest upon the scion of Jesse in Isa 11.1-5; and in the LXX this becomes a series of uses of the Greek πνεῦμα. But πνεῦμα in Greek commonly means an angelic spirit, so that Messiah is seen as the incarnation of an angelic power.

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Horbury speaks of 'co-ordination of angelic and messianic deliverers', and writes: 'the messiah could be understood as the embodiment of an angel-like spirit'.[10] He gives 20 pages of examples (86–108), in which the Messiah pre-exists in God's foreknowledge, or is prepared, or 'comes forth'; and in some of these, e.g. Amos 4.13 LXX, Lam 4.22 LXX and 1QSa 2.11–22, the heavenly spirit is identified with the Messiah. Thus the Hebrew Amos is rendered by NRSV as 'the one . . . who creates the winds reveals his thoughts to mortals'; but in the LXX this becomes κτίζων πνεῦμα καὶ ἀπαγγέλλων εἰς τοὺς ἀνθρώπους τὸν χριστὸν αὐτοῦ. The wind has become a spirit, and has been identified with Messiah: we thus have evidence of a heavenly spirit or angel called Christ current many years before Jerusalem Christianity and its Ebionite successors. The substitution of the Holy Spirit is testified only from the fourth century, with Epiphanius; and the account in *Ev. Eb.* is not from Matthew, but from a *macédoine* of the Synoptics.

The Jewish Christians of the Pseudo-Clementine wing still spoke of Jesus as a prophet, not (at least normally) as the Messiah; and the Ebionite wing limited any messianic action to teaching about the unknown Father and doing miracles. This is unsurprising, because Jesus' career was very far from what might normally be expected of a messiah. No doubt Peter hailed him as Messiah, but there may well have been reluctance in his family to accept this, since they will hardly have traced their ancestry to King David;[11] and in the long run it was the family which settled the Jerusalem church's doctrine. It is striking that Hebrews begins by contrasting strongly the many and various ways in which God in the past spoke through the prophets whereas now in these last days he has spoken to us through a Son.

The Ebionite picture of Jesus had something in common with the later orthodox picture, but with two vital differences. What they had in common was the ministry period, in which, according to our Gospels also, Jesus 'proclaimed the unknown Father, and performed miracles'; though of course the evangelists' 'my Father in heaven' is by no means unknown. The two differences come at the beginning and the end of the story. Paul (and our evangelists) believed that Jesus Christ was a united, eternal being, the Son of God, who had become incarnate at Jesus' conception/birth (2 Cor 8.9; Phil 2.6–7; Mark 1.1, 11; 2.17; 10.45; etc.). The Ebionites thought that Christ was a heavenly figure of the second order who had taken Jesus over at his baptism. Paul and our evangelists believed that, divine

10 Horbury, *Jewish Messianism*, 83, 86.

11 Scepsis about family traditions of Davidic descent arises from the differences between the Matthaean and Lucan genealogies. Hegesippus's account of the grandsons of Jude (Eusebius, *H.E.*, 3.19.1–20.7; 3.32.5–6) represents them as being accused before Domitian of descent from David. R. J. Bauckham, *Jude and the Relatives of Jesus in the Early Church* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1990) 94–106, allows that much of the story is legend. He thinks the Davidic descent element comes from church tradition; but this tradition may have arisen from the conviction that Jesus was the Christ.

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though he was in origin, Jesus Christ had suffered in the full human way; his passion had begun with the agony in Gethsemane, and had continued through his false trials to his crucifixion and death. The Ebionites thought that spiritual beings could not suffer, so Christ had withdrawn from Jesus before the passion, and the human Jesus alone had suffered.

Now this pattern of agreement and double difference is a dominant feature of Hebrews. Chapters 1–2 proclaim that Jesus is the Son of God. He is the reflection of the divine glory and the stamp of God's being, as set out in Gen 1 and Wisd 7.26; through him God made the aeons, and he upholds all things by the word of his power – echoes of Col 1. God 'brought the firstborn into the world' (1.6); he was 'made for a little while lower than the angels' (2.9); he shared our flesh and blood and calls us his brothers (2.10–15); 'when he comes into the world he says, . . . A body hast thou prepared for me . . . Lo, I have come . . .' (10.5–6). He is the Son of God incarnate, and emphatically not an angel possessing a human man, a far inferior notion, which scripture repeatedly disproves.

Hebrews contains a number of references to the human Jesus, but there is the barest hint of the ministry period: just 2.3, where the author's Christology is claimed optimistically to have been 'declared at first through the Lord'. The other human references are all to the passion. He made purification for sins (1.3); he is now crowned with glory because of the suffering of death (2.9); he was made perfect through suffering (2.10); he was tested by what he suffered (2.18); he was tested in all things as we are, yet without sin (4.15);[12] in the days of his flesh Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, and was heard because of his reverent submission . . . he learned obedience through what he suffered (5.8–9). The main theme of the epistle is the theology that can be made out of Jesus' death on the cross.

It is striking how often Hebrews uses the word *suffer*. 'Because of the suffering (πάθημα) of death crowned with glory' (2.9); 'to make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings (παθημάτων)' (2.10); 'in what he himself has suffered (πέπονθεν)' (2.18); 'though he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered (ἔπαθεν)' (5.8); 'Jesus also . . . suffered (ἔπαθεν) outside the gate' (13.12). Although the centre of the epistle's theology is Christ's *death*, which as high priest he offers as the blood of the new covenant, we do not find the Pauline ἀπέθανεν ever used of him. This then seems to confirm the suspicion of proto-Ebionite 'adversaries': what the ὑπενάντιοι are alleging is that Jesus was possessed by an angelic power which was ἀπαθής, and therefore withdrew from him

12 'In all things' might suggest 'throughout his life', which would indeed be congenial to the author's incarnation Christology. But the 'testing' recalls the passion context of 2.18, and the references to the high priest passing through the heavens (4.14–15) suggest that his eye is on the passion.

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before his passion, i.e. before Gethsemane. This would then require our author's double emphasis: Jesus was God's Son incarnate, not a human possessed by an angel; and he suffered the testing of the passion because he had become a full divine-human being, not a man deserted by his heavenly counterpart in the hour of his need. Hebrews is concerned to provide a reason for this Christology: it was proper for God's Son to share human flesh and blood and be tested as we are; he was made perfect through sufferings. But even more important, he was the prophesied human high priest of the order of Melchizedek, who could offer the blood of the eternal covenant.[13]

The word of the beginning of Christ

The passages about Christ's testing in Gethsemane fall in chapters 2–5, and form a bridge over to the high priest section in 6.13–10.18. The author wants to say that the Son of God became fully human, as was proper (2.10), and this involved his suffering, contrary to the beliefs of the adversaries. What has blurred this picture is an unhappy mistranslation at 6.1. Here διὸ ἀφέντες τὸν τῆς ἀρχῆς τοῦ Χριστοῦ λόγον is rendered by NRSV, 'Therefore ... leaving behind the basic teaching about Christ'; and other translations are similar. There is no parallel for ἀρχή to mean 'basic teachings'. Commentators (and BAGD) allege one a few verses earlier, at 5.12: τινὰ τὰ στοιχεῖα τῆς ἀρχῆς τῶν λογίων τοῦ θεοῦ; but here the meaning is 'what are the elements of the beginning of the oracles of God': ἀρχή has its normal meaning of 'beginning', not 'basic teachings', which is στοιχεῖα. The Greek at 6.1 means 'Therefore leaving the discussion of the origin of Christ'. The discussion has been between the epistle, which holds Christ to have his origin as the Son of God, made for a little while lower than the angels, and the adversaries, who think that before possessing the human Jesus, Christ was an angel.

This exegesis is confirmed by the context. 5.10 introduces the topic of Melchizedek, which is long and hard to explain, since the recipients have become dull of understanding, and need milk and not solid food. If 6.1 were about 'leaving behind the basic teachings about Christ', it would need to be introduced by 'Nevertheless ...' (μέντοι), not 'Therefore ...' (διό): 'you need milk, not solids; however, let us finish with basic teachings'.[14] But in fact 6.1 continues the move on

13 I have argued elsewhere that the creed of the first-century Jerusalem church was virtually that of Irenaeus's Ebionites; and that this counter-theology can be traced behind 1 Cor 12.3, John and the Johannine epistles, the Pastorals, Ignatius and Justin. See M. Goulder, 'A Poor Man's Christology', *NTS* 45/3 (1999) 332–48; idem, 'Ignatius' "Docetists"', *VC* 53 (1999) 16–30.

14 This point is made by virtually all commentators, but without drawing the inference that the Greek of the following words has been forced.

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to the Melchizedek material: we have this large and difficult subject to expound, *so* let us finish with the topic of whether Christ had been an angel or God's Son, and move on (φερώμεθα).

This then allows us to make sense of 6.1b–2. Jerusalem Christians, like Ebionites, had no gospel of the cross (1 Cor 1.17–2.16); their creed was that the kingdom of God had come *already* (1 Cor 4.8, ἤδη . . . ἐβασιλεύσατε; 4.20, ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ; 15.50), and their movement had its roots in the mission of John the Baptist.[15] He had announced the imminence of the kingdom (Matt 3.1–2), and according to the Fourth Gospel Andrew and Simon Peter had been his disciples (Jn 1.35–42) – as no doubt Jesus was also. Their form of the gospel was therefore fundamentally what John the Baptist had preached. His 'baptism of repentance' (Mark 1.4) soon became Jesus' μετανοεῖτε καὶ πιστεύετε ἐν τῷ εὐαγγελίῳ, and this in turn becomes the Jewish Christians' foundation of μετανοίας from dead works and πίστεως in God (Heb 6.1). This is the Jewish-Christian foundation: a Pauline like our author would require faith in Christ; cf. Acts 20.21, 'Repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus'. John had preached of the coming terrible day of the Lord (Mal 4.5; Matt 3.7–10), and the Jewish Christian preaching of the kingdom similarly spoke of 'the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgement' (6.2b). But Jerusalem Christians, like Ebionites, were still involved in Jewish purification rituals (1 Cor 2.13; Col 2.16, 20–2). Their 'teaching of baptisms (βαπτισμῶν διδαχῆς) and laying on of hands' recalls Mark 7.1–23, where Pharisees are criticised for their 'baptisms' of cups and pots, and are said to be 'teaching as teachings the commandments of men'. They are also rebuffed for their insistence on washing before laying their hands on food; and we are again reminded of the Jewish Christians of Col 2.21 with their 'Handle not, taste not, touch not'.[16] Our author is not going to waste time on this infantile business: he has the high doctrine of the atonement to expound.

15 In M. Goulder, *Paul and the Competing Mission in Corinth* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001) I present the case for seeing the opposition in the Corinthian letters as substantially that 'of Cephas'. The doctrines and practices of the Jerusalem leaders can then be inferred from the positions of Paul's Corinthian opponents; and this is borne out by other NT texts. The attitude of James in Acts 21 is of observance of traditional 'customs', as in Heb 6.2a (though Luke naturally makes the atmosphere more friendly); for the 'liberal' Apostolic Decree, cf. pp. 165–71. The Corinthian letters do not raise the question of links between Christianity and John's movement; but they are unique in making a single eschatological baptism the passport to heaven.

16 It is standard for commentators to go through the references to the *phrase* 'the laying on of hands', and offer the choice between healing the sick, ordaining, etc. But it is clear that 6.1b–2 consists of three pairs of concepts, and that the laying on of hands goes with 'baptisms'. βαπτισμοί recur at 9.10, coupled with βρώματα καὶ πόματα as temporary dispensations; one needs only a little imagination to see that handling and touching are not far from laying one's hands on things like food.

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A correct understanding of 6.1 is doubly important, for it not only shows that the angel/Son of God debate has been in mind throughout chapters 1–5, but also hints at the identity of the 'angel'. The discussion had been about the origin of *Christ*. Hebrews believes that Christ was the Son of God before becoming for a little while lower than the angels. It looks as if the counter-view was that Christ had been the name of the angelic power that had possessed Jesus, exactly as Irenaeus says. This is not necessary, as 'Christ' could just be the name used for Jesus; but it is an attractive possibility.

The underlying situation

The repeated references to Temple practice[17] in the present, and of the phrase 'every year', seem to place Hebrews before the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. 'The priests go continually into the first tent . . . the high priest goes into the second, and he but once a year . . . This is a symbol of the present time during which gifts and sacrifices are offered' (9.6–9); 'the high priest enters the Holy Place year after year' (9.25); 'the same sacrifices that are offered continually year after year . . . in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sin year after year' (10.1–3); 'we have an altar from which those who officiate in the tent have no right to eat' (13.10). Here at 13.10 the 'tent' surely means the Temple, and 9.9 speaks of 'the present time'. The comment about 'what is obsolete and growing old is near to passing away' (8.13) could hardly have been so stated if the Temple and sacrificial system had in fact just passed away.

The community addressed is under some state persecution: some of its members are in prison, or in chains (δέσμιοι), and may be under torture (κακουχούμενοι, 13.3 NRSV). There was similar state action in an earlier phase of their church life, with their leaders in prison, and they themselves fined ('the plundering of your possessions', 10.32–4). This may have been some time back, for their church is well established: 'by this time you ought to have been teachers' (5.12). At least they have not resisted unto death (12.4). With a date in the 60s, and a location for the letter 'from Italy' (13.24), we may speculate that the earlier upheaval was the expulsion of Jews, including Jewish Christians, from Rome under Claudius, usually dated to AD 49; and that the present trials are part of the Neronian persecution in 64, when some Christians were indeed tortured (*1 Clement* 6.1).[18] Such a

17 As is widely noted, Hebrews does not refer to the Temple, but always to the Tabernacle; and it is possible to take the uses of the present tense in this context as timeless. But it seems easier to read these passages as references to Temple rituals in current daily or annual use. An early (pre-70) date is given by Lindars (*Theology*, 20–1) and Ellingworth (*Hebrews*, 29–33), principally because 8.13 could hardly stand alone if the Temple had fallen.

18 Koester, *Hebrews*, 50–2, is sympathetic to Claudius's expulsion for the earlier persecution, but sceptical of a Neronian persecution to explain the present pressure.

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context would also fit the release of Timothy, an associate of the now deceased Paul (13.23).

But such details are incidental. What matters is that our author fears the break-up of a major church, whether in Rome or elsewhere. When we read Rom 14, we cannot help being surprised that the church retains its formal unity. Jewish members observe sabbath, and will not eat the meat served at Saturday worship, as it is not kosher; they judge their Gentile brethren as law-breakers. Meanwhile the Gentile members think that love is the fulfilment of the law, and that sabbath rules and food laws are superseded. It is not a recipe for a united church life. But now, whether at Rome or elsewhere, there are two further fissile influences. Hebrews is sharpening the doctrinal division already hinted at by Paul: Christ is an eternal being, the Son of God, who became man; he was not a human temporarily possessed by a heavenly power who left him before his passion. It was the eternal Son of God who offered the ultimate sacrifice of his own blood for us; without the cross, there is no remission of sins. Jewish Christians holding Ebionite opinions are not going to like this. Further, the Roman state is taking action against those bearing the name of Christian. Small wonder then if the manner of some is to desert their gatherings (τὴν ἐπισυναγωγὴν ἑαυτῶν, 10.25). They have not ceased being Jews, and can just form an apocalyptic-type synagogue. They will then be independent of the aggressive Pauline church, can teach their own beliefs and escape state action.

We should then have an explanation for the whole structure and stress of the epistle. First there is the assertion that Christ is the Son of God incarnate, and not a man possessed by an angel: this, with its stress on Christ's humanity, and the reason for it, extends to 5.10, with a paraenetic interlude in chapters 3–4 and a paraenetic conclusion in 5.11–6.12. The second part then follows, the exposition of the cross as the blood of the new covenant offered once for all by the Melchizedekian high priest; implied since 1.3 is the denial of the Ebionite angelic possession theory, that a heavenly being cannot suffer. Paul had proclaimed the gospel of the cross, but his doctrine of the atonement is not very clear. There are sacrificial references, like Rom 3.25, but they are not worked out. Our author has found the answer in the Melchizedek texts. The high-priestly exposition extends from 6.13 to 10.19, and is followed by a series of paraeneses. Of these, chapter 11 involves a recasting of sacred history in terms of faith, the great Pauline virtue; only now the word means not just trust in God but fitting the action to the hope.

Finally we reach chapter 13, which is less bland than is often supposed. Our author gives the following counsels:

(1) 13.1–3: 'Let brotherly love continue'. He gives two illustrations of this φιλαδελφία: hospitality (φιλοξενία), and the visiting of Christians in prison. We should note the emphasis on 'continue' (μενέτω). The Jewish and the Pauline wings of the church had in earlier days stood together as 'brethren', and had 'had

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compassion on those in prison' (10.32–4). Now that there is a move towards splitting the church, Jewish members are not so keen. Last time they suffered the plundering of their possessions (presumably in fines, 10.34), and the Pauline Christians do not feel like brethren any more. It will be the same whether they welcome the Paulines into their homes or visit them in gaol; they will simply be notifying the police that they are Christians too. Hence our author's emphasis, 'Let brotherly love *continue*'.

(2) 13.4: 'Marriage is honourable among all (ἐν πᾶσιν) . . .' The opportunity to receive fellow Christians depends on there being a family home in which to entertain them. An unfortunate feature of Jewish Christianity was its aspiration to visions, with consequent depreciation of sex, and so of marriage.[19] We have a long discussion of this in 1 Cor 7, from which it is clear that an opposition group has been commending celibacy and continence within marriage, or even divorce. We find the same ideal in the Pastorals, where the 'circumcision . . . forbid marriage' (1 Tim 4.3); and there are echoes of it in Matt 19.12; Rev 14.1–5, and in later Jewish Christian-related documents. We have the same issue here. Critics turn the verse into a colourless and contextless exhortation, by supplying ἔστω; but a nominative adjective opening a verbless sentence so widely assumes ἐστίν that that should be supplied here (cf.13.9, καλόν . . .; μακάριοι οἱ . . . *passim*).[20] The phrase ἐν πᾶσιν makes the same suggestion. It is not very meaningful to take it as neuter, 'honourable in all respects'; but it gives strong sense as a masculine. Marriage is honourable *in all cases*, for all people; there are no exceptions for aspiring visionaries. Naturally the tactful preacher goes on to stress 'the bed undefiled' and the fate of the licentious; as the wise father tells his boy that he will come to no harm on a glass of red wine, but drink can be a man's undoing.

(3) 13.5–6: 'Without love of money (ἀφιλάργυρος) is the way of life . . .' The third φιλ-root adjective, and the lack of a connective, suggest that this is again no general, bland counsel, but one related to the context. Last time (10.34) the recipients 'accepted the plundering (ἁρπαγήν) of their possessions with joy', knowing that they had a greater, permanent reward in heaven. If they were fined last time, they must expect the same again, and this will be a disincentive. Our author does his best to counter such reluctance. First he describes it as 'money-mindedness', which some might think a bit rich. Then he reassures them that they will always have enough, for God has promised, 'I will not leave you . . .' Finally, we should take courage (θαρροῦντας), and say, 'The Lord is my help, I will not fear; what will man do to me?' As usual, the citations in Hebrews are carefully chosen. Those

19 See Goulder, *Paul and the Competing Mission in Corinth*, 141–51. Celibacy is not, so far as we know, an issue for Ebionites later on.

20 There may be a counter-instance at 13.5, though the syntax is defective: ἀφιλάργυρος ὁ τρόπος ἀρκούμενοι . . . In any case the meaning may be 'The [Christian] way of life is non-money-minded, ὁ τρόπος having a specialised sense, like ἡ ὁδός.

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addressed should be courageous and stick by their imprisoned brethren; there is no fine a magistrate can impose that they need to be afraid of.[21]

(4) 13.7–9: 'Remember your leaders . . .' Again the train of thought leads back to the church's past. The leaders referred to are those who 'spoke to you the word of God', that is, the Pauline gospel of the Son of God, the incarnation and cross, now expounded in the epistle. The close (ἔκβασις) of their way of life is something to be looked up to, and their faith(fulness) is to be imitated. ἔκβασις means their last days, and might suitably refer to Paul and others, if the letter were addressed to Rome.

The faith (πίστις) of such founding confessors is then stated, again without a connective: 'Yesterday and today Jesus Christ is the same, and for ever.' ἐχθές is used for the pre-incarnational period, σήμερον for the Christian era; and then, an afterthought, εἰς τοὺς ἀιῶνας for all the future after the coming judgment. This is in contradistinction from the Ebionites' view, by which Jesus Christ was not an eternal unity, but a temporary takeover; for them Christ was very different 'yesterday' from Jesus in his lifetime, and in the future. Hence the consequent warning in v. 9, 'Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings'. It is Pauline grace that strengthens the heart, not βρώματα, which were no help to those who observed them. These are food laws, like the βρώμασιν καὶ πόμασιν καὶ διαφόροις βαπτισμοῖς of 9.10, and the βαπτισμοί of 6.2. The Jewish Christians are just sliding back into an apocalyptic Judaism, with Jesus as no more than an inspired prophet. The section ends (13.10–16) with a sharp contrast between the Church and such a synagogue, and the cleft between them.

Conclusion

The key to understanding Hebrews is the recognition that chapter 1 is important. An author who can argue as forcefully throughout the rest of the epistle is not going to give seven scriptural proofs of the inferiority of angels for no good reason. The opposition against which he is writing is Jewish-Christian; and the earliest witness we have of Jewish Christians' Christology, Irenaeus, tells us that they thought Jesus was a man possessed by a heavenly power, an angel. The suggestion then follows that the 'adversaries' of 9.29, the purveyors of strange teachings of 13.9, are holding a possessionist Christology, against which chapter 1 is a polemic. This polemic is pursued till 5.10 with references to Christ as fully human and suffering in his passion.

21 The Ebionites traced their name, 'The Poor People', to their ancestors' having shared their possessions in the days of Acts 1–5 (Epiphanius, *Pan.* 30.17.2), and this may be borne out by the use of the same term in Gal 2.10. If so, their poverty will at first have been incidental; later it became a point of principle.

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The second section of the epistle, on Jesus as high priest of the new covenant, is introduced by the transition in 5.11–6.12. The failure to see the anti-Ebionite thrust of 1.1–5.10 has resulted in a widespread mistranslation of 6.1a, which sums up the preceding discussion: 'Therefore leaving behind the origin of Christ'. A second, consequent misunderstanding has been the view that 6.1b–2 are the outline of a *Christian* catechism approved by the author: not so, they are the bones of a *Jewish-Christian* instruction, which he thinks inadequate, and in part ('teaching of washings') wrong-headed.

Finally, chapter 13 is not a disconnected, general pious exhortation, which might well be divided from chapters 1–12. It carries the same particular, polemical message as the rest of the letter. Jewish Christians should identify themselves with their Gentile brethren in prison, accepting fines if necessary, and getting married so that they can entertain their brethren. It is grace, not kosher food, that gives strength to the heart, and no one should be seduced by alien teachings. Jesus Christ is an eternal unity, the same yesterday, before his incarnation, and today, in the new era.[22]

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