

BEFORE READING THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS

This article is written for those who know little about the Epistle to the Hebrews, in the hope that the latter will become more readable and more significant for them. It is not easy to decide how best this purpose may be served, for a choice has to be made among the many problems which face the beginner. But I think that some insight into the way in which its author considered and explained the world about him may serve our purpose best, for it clarifies the language he used in attempting to describe how God has achieved the perfect fulfilment of His plan to save us.

We do not read the Holy Scriptures in order to learn new truths. We read them in order that the truths of our faith may move us to a greater love and arouse a more burning enthusiasm. To do this the same truths are presented to us in the Bible in many different ways. There is a rich variety, which should prevent our faith from becoming a collection of banal and ineffective propositions. But it follows that we must pay attention to the different ways in which the inspired authors speak to us. It is in this that the variety lies. We believe that our Lord Jesus Christ is the divine redeemer, and that all God's efforts on our behalf manifested during the days before his coming were leading up to this great climax. But to let the author of Hebrews tell us this, in his own particular way, is to experience a new joy and a new enthusiasm for this truth, and this experience will surely infuse a new vigour into our efforts to live a faithful life.

To appreciate our author's way of speaking to us, we must try our hand at a little popular philosophy. This sounds rather uninviting. Most of us are not given to philosophising. But it is worth the effort. We are not philosophising for its own sake; we are not even asked to agree with our author's way of looking at things. We simply want to understand it, in order that we may understand what he has to tell us, not about his philosophy but about the truths of our faith. It is not that we were unaware of the latter before; it is because these truths of faith never quite meant so much to us until he has told us of them in his own particular way.

Let us begin then by asking ourselves a very odd question: How do we begin to do anything? I for instance want to write the introduction to this epistle best suited to the readers I have in mind. But how can I have readers in mind? How for that matter do I know the 'best introduction' before I have written it? I would say that I have

an *idea* of what I want to write, and I have an *idea* of my readers. But what are these ideas, and from where do I obtain them? I can see and touch the typewriter and the paper, but not the ideas without which the typewriter and paper would produce no article. If I say, as is true, that my ideas owe very much to other writers, I have only made the problem less personal: I have not solved it. From where do ideas come, the mainsprings of all actions that have ever been done? If we asked the author of Hebrews he would say that when God creates men, He stamps their minds with a number of images. These are their ideas which they try to reproduce whenever they say or do anything. Seemingly then, I was stamped with the image of 'the best introduction to the Epistle to the Hebrews,' and I am now reproducing it in written words. Rather I should have said that I am *trying* to do so, because I am already realising that I have fallen short of that image stamped in my mind. I can already compare what I am writing with that image, and it does not correspond very well. I suffer from various deficiencies which prevent me from realising my ideal. But even if I could repair these deficiencies you would not read from my pen the best introduction to Hebrews. Sad to say, even my ideal is deficient. You see, it is a long time since God stamped it on my mind, and you know how impressions are rubbed away. If I could get hold of that stamp, and if I could see it clearly, and if I could reproduce it perfectly—then it would be a different story!

But where is this strange stamp or seal I have been talking about? I said that God stamped my mind with it, so presumably it is in God's workshop, where He stamps minds with ideals or forms or images. Where is this? God is in heaven, so the stamps must be there too. But what a colossal number of them there must be, for there are so many ideas! Yet perhaps God has a master stamp, a seal which at one stamping is able to make a whole multitude of different images? After all, I have only one mind, but I have many ideas. In similar fashion God's one mind must contain all the ideas that can exist.

How otherwise could God Himself do anything? You cannot make anything unless you first think of what you are going to make. If I am an architect and I receive a commission to build a church, my first task is to 'build' the church in my mind. So too, before God made the world He had the idea. He pictured the world in His mind, and said, Yes, I will make it just like that! When you think of how many different kinds of things there are in this universe, you will realise how many ideas God had before He made the world.

But no! In reality He did not have a multitude of ideas: He had only one, and that one contained the whole of creation. This is the

difficult part, but it is about time we stopped talking about God as though He were just a man. Strange though it may seem to us, God had only one idea : not because He was lacking in ideas, but because His one idea was as perfect and all embracing as Himself, for it is the idea of Himself. When therefore He made the world, He made it according to this one idea : He made the world in His image and likeness, as far as material things could reproduce that image. That is why man reproduces it so much better than anything else : man is not just material ; he is also spiritual, and so he takes the impression better.

But I have been talking about what happened a very long time ago. I have been talking about God having this thought of Himself, and then creating the world as the reflection of this thought. This seems to suggest that He then turned His mind to something else. The architect thinks of the church he is going to build ; he designs the church he has in mind. Then he produces the church, more or less corresponding to that image. But after that the image in his mind passes away : he has to make room for the image of another church. God's idea, on the contrary, never passes away : it is as eternal and unchanging as He is Himself. If then you are dissatisfied with the world as you find it, take a look at God's idea and you will discover what the world ought to be. Are you dissatisfied with what you yourself are ? Would you like to know what you ought to be ? Then take a look at God's idea of you, and you will see what your Maker intended you to be.

This all seems to be growing more and more ridiculous ! How can we take a look at God's idea ? If we are not satisfied with the architect's church, we might silence our criticism with the thought that perhaps it is not as he intended it to be. In all fairness let us examine his plans, and then we will be able to see whether the causes of our dissatisfaction lay beyond the architect's control. If after examining the plans we remain critical, and voice our complaints to the architect, he will probably reply that one reason or another prevented him from realising his ideal. But further we cannot go, for we cannot see that ideal in his mind. He must at least put it into words, or draw it on paper, and by that time it has been blurred. How then can we hope to take a look at God's ideal ? As a popular philosopher, I suspect the author of Hebrews would not have much of any answer to that question, except to repeat that God has stamped the ideal on our mind, and that by long and careful scrutiny, and by purifying our mind in all sorts of odd ways—such as eating less, and keeping silent, we will see it more clearly. The ideal is within us, like a seed sown there by God. It gives us life, makes us do things, enables us to ' have

ideas' as we say, and to act on them. It is the one and only link between God and ourselves.

All this must seem very odd ! Either it is too profound or more likely, too naïve. In a way it is both. But do not condemn it as complete nonsense. It does explain some things about this mysterious world, and about the mysterious God who made it. In so far as it explains things it is useful enough. In so far as it leaves many things unexplained, and raises a cloud of difficulties and illogicalities, then it is deficient. I am not concerned with the validity of Platonic philosophy : neither, let me hasten to add, do I claim that the author of Hebrews was an orthodox Platonist—he was not—or that he was in any sense a good philosopher. I have simply tried to give you the way of thinking which was his, because he saw no reason to rid himself of it before writing Hebrews. As a matter of fact it was a common enough way of thinking, and it is to a varying degree reflected not only in Hebrews but in other New Testament writings.

But I must now make some attempt to show that I have not been misleading you altogether. In other words I must show that what I have tried to describe very simply is in fact the author's way of thinking, and I must point to the expressions he uses. This creates a difficulty : his terms have to be translated into English, and the translators have not necessarily the same 'philosophy,' or better, the English words immediately fit into a pattern of 'philosophy' which was not his. You must be prepared therefore to understand certain words in slightly different ways.

Let us consider then how our author describes God's creation of the world. In II:3 he writes : 'By faith we understand that the worlds were created by a word of God, so that what is seen was made out of things which do not appear.' God created 'by a word,' because, you remember, He simply said 'Let there be light' and light was. It is true that, according to Genesis I, God spoke eight words, but really there was only one, namely 'Let there be the world.' God is not a man to take so much time over making the world. So it was 'by a word' that God made the universe. His word did everything : in fact the only thing God did was speak, the only thing He made was His word, and yet in making His word He made everything. In fact having God speak eight words instead of one is, strictly speaking, as bad as having God work for six days before He can rest on the seventh. The philosopher knows that God's six days of creation were one timeless moment, so that, odd though it may sound, God was already enjoying this seventh-day rest when the world was begun. That is why we read : 'His works were finished from the foundation of the world' (4:3). The text we quoted first (II:3) said that what is seen

was made out of things which do not appear. Join this to the other idea that the worlds were made by a word of God, and you arrive at the idea in God's mind, which does not appear, but 'out of' it visible things were made. This idea in God's mind is at the same time the word of God, because when you form an idea in your mind you 'say' something to yourself, you speak a word. What we have been calling God's idea, or image, or form, can also be called, and actually is called by our author, God's word. But notice also, and this is crucial, that the text says 'out of things which *do* not appear.' Ought it not to be '*did* not appear'? The church our architect built was a thing which is seen, and it was made out of an idea which did not appear; but that idea exists no longer, and even at the time it was only 'in his mind.' But God's idea never disappears; it is; and it is self-existing.

God's idea of the world therefore continues to exist. But the world as we know it does not correspond to that idea. It is only a poor and faint reflection of God's idea. Consequently it keeps changing: drawing nearer to, or receding further from, the idea it represents. This is very important to our author: there is a discrepancy between the idea and its realisation; the die is perfect but the image it produces is imperfect and liable to fade, thus demanding a re-stamping, a new image:

His voice then shook the earth; but now He has promised: Yet once more I will shake not only the earth, but also the heaven. This phrase: Yet once more, indicates the removal of what is shaken, as of what has been made, in order that what cannot be shaken may remain. (12:26-7)

I said that the die itself is perfect. This is because the die is God's idea of Himself, containing within itself all ideas, and therefore producing all those images which go to make the created universe: 'For the word of God is living and active' (4:12). But this master idea is called 'the reflection of the glory and the stamp of His nature' (1:3). The reflection of God's glory obviously comes from God, it is obviously splendid, obviously like to God, and yet it is in some way distinguished from God, rather as my image in a mirror is distinct from me. If we compare God to light, or the sun, then His idea of Himself, that is His word, is the reflection of that light. If the sun is too brilliant for you to look at, then train a mirror on it, and in that mirror you will see the image which gives you 'the idea' of the sun. And if you did this, you could say two things: without the sun there would be no reflection; and without the reflection you would not know the sun. The image in your mirror is, one might say, *lumen de lumine*, light out of light. Putting it another way, God's word is the character, that is the stamp in its passive sense, the image engraved, the imprint, the

facsimile, the double. God's word then is the reflection and double of Himself, and at the same time is distinguished from Himself: it is not just 'in His mind' as our ideas are. We have called this God's word, God's master idea, God's idea of Himself. But another name would be God's wisdom, and of God's wisdom we read:

It is a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty; therefore nothing defiled gains entrance into it. For it is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of His goodness. Though it is but one, it can do all things, and while remaining in itself, it renews all things; in every generation it passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God, and prophets. (Wis. 7:25-7)

So our author calls God's master-idea 'the reflection of the glory, and the imprint of His substance.' And it is said that through it 'He created the world' (1:2; cf. Wis. 9:1-3; Prov. 8:22-30). But there are many different things in the world, things which are constantly changing. How do these correspond to that divine master-idea whereby God made the world? Everything is a reflection of an idea, and all the ideas are really the one divine master-idea. This master-idea or word of God distinguishes one thing from another, cutting things apart from one another more effectively than a two-edged sword (cf. 4:12). So one might say that the master-idea, like a master-die, contains many ideas and many dies. These our author calls 'types' or better, 'models.' These models really exist as does the reflection of God's glory, and they are in heaven. There is for instance the model city (cf. 11:10; Wis. 8:6; 13:1; 14:2, 18), and God's model of His temple complete with all its furnishings. Before Moses made the Tent he had gone up the mountain to have a look at the model: 'And see that you make them (the furnishings) after the pattern for them, which is being shown you on the mountain' (Ex. 25:40; cf. Ac. 7:44). It seems strange to think of a model temple up there in heaven, and from eternity: but there must be, it would seem to our author, for otherwise how could anyone ever have had the idea of the temple? Our author had not been the first to reason this way:

Thou hast given command to build a temple on Thy holy mountain, and an altar in the city of Thy habitation, a copy of the holy tent which Thou didst prepare from the beginning. (Wis. 9:8)

But Moses had not succeeded in reproducing this model very well: it was only a shadowy reproduction:

They (the Israelite priests) serve as a reproduction and shadow of the heavenly things; for when Moses was about to erect the Tent, he was instructed by God, saying: See that you make everything according to the pattern which was shown you on the mountain. (8:5)

The same thing happened with regard to the Law. Moses had gone up the mountain to receive the Law from God. But as it turned out in practice, the Law was a poor reproduction of the divine model Moses had seen there :

The Law has but a shadow of the good things to come, instead of the form of the realities. (10:1)

In fact all that pertained to the Law and the Sanctuary and its sacrifices and its priesthood were simply poor copies of the divine model :

It is therefore necessary that the reproductions of the things which are in the heavens be purified in this way. (9:23)

The sanctuary made by hands is only a copy of the genuine one (9:24).

The models of which we have man-made and defective copies on this earth are called the true or the genuine. Thus the author of Hebrews speaks of the genuine tent, which is in heaven (8:2). Clearly he means the divine model which God erected in heaven before the foundation of the world. In parenthesis I would like to remark that I am translating the word *alēthinos* as 'genuine' rather than 'true,' though both words suffer the same disadvantage in English. For us, all that is not genuine is spurious, and what is not true is false. But this is not correct when our author uses the word. When he contrasts the Mosaic tent with the genuine or true one in heaven, he does not wish to imply that the Mosaic tent was spurious or untrue. What he means is, that it was deficient with regard to the heavenly model, of which it was the hand-made reproduction. To put it another way, it was not the true tent, because it did not reproduce *perfectly* its heavenly model : it was not completely according to the divine idea. In this philosophy nothing created is true ! God is true (Jn. 3:33 ; 8:26) : but every man is false (cf. Rom. 3:4). When Jesus says that his flesh is true food and his blood true drink (Jn. 6:55), he does not mean that bread is false food and wine is false drink. Yet neither bread nor wine correspond perfectly to the divine model of food and drink : only Jesus can be the true food for only Jesus is the divine idea. He is the genuine bread (Jn. 6:32) in contrast to the manna, which we would say was genuine food, but which in John's terminology is not genuine because it was not the perfect reproduction of the divine idea of food. When our Lord says 'I am the genuine vine' (Jn. 15:1) we can see clearly the difference in the use of this word. In our terms we must say : Our Lord is a metaphorical vine : you only find true or genuine vines in a hothouse. But our Lord is the genuine vine in the terminology of the Gospel, precisely because he *is* the divine idea of the vine, as he is the genuine light (1:9) and the genuine judgment (8:16).

We have now seen that the popular philosophy we described at the

beginning is that of the author of this epistle. We have spent what may well seem a disproportionately long time discussing it, and it may well be considered unbalanced to consider his theological message more briefly, for in the end it is only this that we seek when we read the epistle. Yet the truth is, that once we understand his language, our author's message is easy : it is the very same Gospel we have heard from the rest of the New Testament. But in this language it thrills us anew, and for such a reward our efforts to learn his language have surely not been in vain.

How much we need to hear that gospel, for if everything here on earth is defective, if nothing is true or genuine, how hopeless it all seems to be. Man can only be genuine by conforming himself perfectly to the divine idea ; the worship of God can only be genuine by being conformed to the divine idea of worship. If it be true that the Mosaic Law, the Temple, its sacrifices and its priesthood were all defective, and consequently did not perfectly achieve their end, what hope is there for us ? After all, Moses was taken up the mountain to see the model. Unless I see the divine model I cannot attain my end ; or better, unless the divine idea become my idea, and thereby become the mainspring of my life—for we all live according to our ideas—I cannot achieve my divine end. But surely it is impossible to grasp the divine idea ? Surely it is inaccessible to men ? Mount Sinai was not high enough it would seem for Moses to reach it. No mountain is high enough. God dwells in light inaccessible, and on that light no man can gaze. If our author had had no more than his philosophy, he might perhaps have prayed : ‘ Give me Thy wisdom that sits by Thy throne ’ (Wis. 9:4) : send me Your idea, send me Your word, send me the reflection of Your glory and the imprint of Your substance. But our author had no need to pray merely as a philosopher. He is not a philosopher in spite of all that we have said about his philosophical ideas. He is a great theologian, and he has a wonderful message : he has the good news indeed ; he believes that, incredible though it may seem to the philosopher, God has in actual truth sent His master-idea, His word and the reflection of His glory down to this earth :

In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets ; but in these last days He has spoken to us by His son, whom He appointed the heir of all things, through whom also He created the world. He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of His nature, upholding the universe by his word of power. (1:1-3)

This is the man Jesus Christ. Our author proclaims it ; we by the merciful grace of God believe it. Jesus is the perfect reflection of God ; he is God's Word, containing in himself the genuine models of all God's ideas. Consequently he is the genuine, the perfect man ; he is

the genuine Moses, the genuine law-giver, the genuine priest, the genuine intercessor, entering into the genuine sanctuary and there performing the genuine liturgy of God. With a wealth of comparison the author drives home this truth. Once we have understood our author's philosophical outlook of the divine idea with its many divine models, and the inadequate copies which are on this earth; and once we make the stupendous act of faith that the true man Jesus Christ is that divine idea, or to use St John's words that 'The Word was made flesh,' then the Epistle to the Hebrews will contain fewer difficulties for us.

That some questions remain unanswered it would be foolish to deny. One might well ask, for instance, why our author concentrates so much on the comparison between the levitical priesthood and Christ the genuine priest, and between the sacrificial liturgy of the Jewish temple and the spiritual liturgy carried out in the genuine temple in heaven, by the genuine high priest.

The epistle is an exhortation to certain Christians who are becoming weary of their Christianity, and are vacillating so much that they may soon renounce their faith. The epistle is an exhortation to stand firm. This may surprise you, for on first reading the epistle you are so struck by the riches of the doctrine it contains that you might think its primary purpose was to teach doctrine, to be 'dogmatic,' to present a theological treatise on the priesthood of Christ and the eternal efficacy of his intercession for us. But a closer examination shows that the riches of doctrine are not displayed for their own sake as in a manual of theology. This is subordinated to the author's purpose, which is to give encouragement to those whose faith is sorely tried :

I appeal to you, brethren, bear with my word of exhortation for I have written to you briefly. (13:22)

Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. . . . Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (4:14-16; cf. 3:12-14; 5:11-12; 6:11-12; 10:22-5; 12:12-14)

It is abundantly clear that the recipients of this epistle were in sore straits. There is one obvious reason for this, namely persecution such as they had already endured in the past (cf. 10:32-6). The fact that in their struggle against sin they have not yet resisted to the point of shedding their blood (12:4) suggests that there is at least the threat of martyrdom. But why does our author choose as the doctrinal basis for his exhortation to constancy the superiority of our high priest Christ over the Aaronic priesthood and the superiority of Christ's heavenly liturgy over the Jewish? The preoccupation with the

liturgy is very noticeable. Why is the superiority of Christ's liturgy particularly suited to the strengthening of their faith? Are these Christians by any chance regretfully sighing for the Jewish liturgy? The Christians are surely of Jewish origin, and likely to be particularly impressed by the 'cloud of witnesses' from the Old Testament (ch. 13). Nor is it difficult to imagine that converts from Judaism felt distressed when, after the first thrill of their conversion, they recalled the splendour of the Temple in Jerusalem and the magnificence of its liturgy. For what had they exchanged all this? Small gatherings in private houses, with readings from the Scriptures and prayers, to be followed by the Eucharist, might begin to appear a dull and disappointing reward. Moreover the Jewish liturgy had been the divinely revealed liturgy, offering worship to the true God, the God they still worshipped. There was not the clear-cut distinction which existed between the pagan worship and the Christian.

Undoubtedly, then, it is very plausible to suggest that our author was concerned with a group of Jewish Christians who were pining for the Jewish liturgy, and who were on the point of returning to it. But if we go one step further and ask who among these converts were the most likely to feel this distress, we may recall that among the Jewish converts there were many priests (Ac. 6:7). Not surprisingly, therefore, some commentators maintain the epistle was written precisely for them. But others deny this. They consider that the recipients have no leaning to Judaism: they are simply becoming weary, and beginning to doubt, because they are pining for a mess of potage (12:16), for the fleeting pleasure of sin (11:25), for the deceitful rest of this world, and are therefore ready to give up the eternal rest of God (4:1-11). To counteract this the author insists that the end has already arrived (12:28). To fall away now is to lose God's rest for ever, and therefore they must go out of the camp of this world (13:13). And to demonstrate that the end is already come, the author considers not the Temple liturgy but the Israelite liturgy celebrated in the Tent of the wilderness during the wanderings on the way to the rest of the Promised Land. This liturgy he compares with the heavenly liturgy of Christ to show how the latter fulfills the former and thus brings to its end that long and arduous journey: in Christ and through Christ we have already entered into God's rest.

Now may the God of peace Who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do His will, working in you that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ: to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. (13:20-1)

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