

Preface

I was made intensely aware of the relevance of Hebrews to today's world when I taught ordinands in South Africa. It was during the apartheid regime when the churches were under pressure to play safe and domesticate their message. I had a somewhat similar experience when I returned to the United Kingdom and found churches often preoccupied with maintenance, pushed out of public debate and intimidated by an aggressive secular or anti-Christian rhetoric. But it is not only Christian communities that are challenged by this part of the New Testament. Individuals find their cherished traditions and comfortable cultural or theological enclaves questioned as they are urged to leave these behind and follow Jesus Christ in new and uncertain ways. Whether it is the community or the individual, the message is the same: follow Christ "outside the camp." This is demanding discipleship but with the demand is the gift. Coupled with the pioneer is the priest who is ready to help those who undertake the journey of faith. The relationship of these disparate images and the part they play in Hebrews is the subject of this study.

The pioneer and priest motifs are integral to the author's very practical aim of helping a community that was experiencing a crisis. It was caused by societal pressures and an imperfect understanding of Jesus Christ and consequently a less than whole-hearted commitment to him. Their problem was by no means unique. It also affected communities of St. Paul's time. It affects Christian communities today. What Hebrews does to help those addressed is therefore of contemporary relevance.

In addressing the situation before him the author of Hebrews shows that however much religio-socio-political influences impinge upon those who hear the message, inhibiting or encouraging the response that he believes they have to make, it is God's word that is of paramount importance and it is this that must command attention. Fundamental to

Preface

everything the author has to say is Jesus Christ, the Son through whom God still speaks. It is the word that God is speaking through his Son and in the Scriptures that offers the church hope and direction. It is a challenging message, but it is accompanied by great pastoral sensitivity, care, and encouragement throughout.

From the different images Hebrews employs to describe Christ and renew the recipients' commitment to him, I have chosen pioneer and priest because of the light these images and especially their conjoined use have to throw on the message. I am well aware that singling out particular images that are part of a veritable web of ideas is a difficult, not to say, dangerous business. Consequently I have attempted to pay attention to the whole to which the images belong.

Anyone who is at all familiar with Hebrews knows that it has much material that the modern reader finds strange and not easily accessible. The extended treatment of the Levitical priesthood, the tabernacle and the use of Hellenistic philosophy soon make the reader aware of the different world of the writer and those he sought to help. But having said that, one wishes to emphasize that Hebrews contains very valuable insights that are not found anywhere else in the New Testament and those who make the effort to enter this world and familiarize themselves with it are amply rewarded. The more one gets into the document the more one appreciates the effort taken by the author to deal with the problems affecting the community and the lengths to which he goes in order to help them. Here is theology related to life, produced not for its own sake but to meet a pressing practical problem. It is my hope that this study will play some part in demonstrating that studying Hebrews is well worth the effort and essential for us today.

Many good commentaries are available to those interested in studying Hebrews. In my second chapter I survey a number of these. This attempts to put my subject in the wider context of Hebrews and note what the writers have to say or fail to say on the subject.

Quotations from the Bible and the Apocrypha are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible (Anglicized Edition) and the Revised Standard Version, except where I provide my own translation. For writings from Second Temple Judaism I quoted from James H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*. I used Danby's translation of the Mishnah and the Soncino edition of the Babylonian Talmud. Quotations from Philo, Josephus, and the classical authors are from the Loeb edition.

For the Qumran material I have used Florentino García Martínez, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated: The Qumran Texts in English*.

This is the place to acknowledge what I owe to others. I had numerous helpful and enjoyable discussions with my friends and former colleagues Dr. Stanley Russell and the Revd. Roger Tomes. The latter deserves a special word of thanks for the time he spent on the manuscript and the numerous helpful comments he made. Professor George Brooke was ever ready to help when I needed guidance on the Qumran scrolls. The members of the Ehrhardt Seminar in the University of Manchester had useful comments to offer on material I presented to them on a number of occasions. I owe my thanks to Dr. Paul Ellingworth, professors David Charles and Philip Davies, and to the Revd. F. Gerald Downing and Dr. Peter Oakes for their assistance at particular stages of my work. My ever-helpful wife Myrtle very patiently and graciously undertook a lot of the work on the computer, while our son David used the computer to good effect in bringing the manuscript into conformity with the publisher's house rules.

I am grateful to the publishers for producing my book so promptly and efficiently. It was a pleasure to work with Chris Spinks, Christian Amondson, Matthew Stock, Ian Creeger, and Raydeen Cuffe.

R. J. McKelvey
Manchester