

Conclusion

The background of Hebrews as studied here has led to the consideration of a wide range of material and a tentative weighing of this has been undertaken in the summary at the end of each section. Some attempt must now be made to draw together these strands of evidence into a coherent conclusion. At this point it should be noted that an element of subjectivity invariably enters into the weighing of evidence. No matter what external standards are used, ultimately a great deal depends on the impression one gains from the evidence.

The evidence considered comprises a wide range of material – hermeneutical method, use of the Septuagint, vocabulary, thought-forms, philosophical presuppositions, attitude to Jewish institutions, Messianic interpretation, covenant-theology, eschatology, relation to the Synoptic tradition in matters of detail, relation to the primitive *kerygma*, the relation to Pauline, Lucan and Johannine writings. Numbers of comparisons have been quite striking, but in no case has there been evidence pointing with any conclusiveness to a strong connection with any one element of background, except primitive Christianity as a whole.

It seems clear from the polished style of the writer and from other aspects considered in connection with Philo that the writer may well have had a thorough Greek education. It seems clear that he would have known of the concepts of Greek philosophy, especially as these may have become part of common educated thought. However, these concepts are not to be seen as normative for the writer's thought. He may, indeed, have had recourse to them at various points of his argument, but at most used them as vehicles of his thought, not as the actual substance. For this reason, it is not possible to see any one concept of Greek philosophy used unmistakably, as the writer is not basically working from the philosophical presuppositions of Greek thought and remoulds phrases and concepts to the needs of his own outlook and message.

There is another point at which possible Greek influence needs to be considered – the readers' background. However, this cannot clarify the situation, since in this case one would expect the writer to use concepts more specifically. The very broad and unspecific way in which they come into the Epistle does not concur with a deliberate attempt at communication. If the background of the readers is at all reflected in the Epistle, it is most likely that it would be similar to that of the writer himself, since the readers' thought-forms do not receive any special consideration. However, that the writer is fluent in literary Greek is beyond doubt, and such acquaintance with the language would almost certainly involve some knowledge of current ideas, though, as noted, this is not to be seen as normative for the writer's thought.

With the Qumran literature, the connection tends by the nature of the case to be a broad one, as the writer expressed himself in polished Greek while the Scrolls are in Hebrew. One cannot expect to find the same kind of linguistic parallels as with Alexandrian literature.

This line of study is fruitful, however, because it illuminates the first-century Palestinian background. It has for some time been clear that, although the writer seems at first glance to be writing from a Jewish Christian point of view to Jewish Christians, it is difficult to explain it in terms of traditional Judaism. This is why there has been so much recourse to an Alexandrian background, since here there was a *rapprochement* between the Jewish religion and Greek culture. However, it is significant that the existence of a non-conformist group within Judaism had been all but removed from the records of Jewish literature and that the surviving accounts of the teaching and practice of the group seemed to indicate that they may indeed have had quite a degree of influence. Thus, while they were an exclusive kind of group, their teaching must be taken into consideration in viewing a total Palestinian background. This was formerly not possible, but now it is clear that a number of points which seemed to be explicable only in terms of late Hellenism may not have been meaningless at all to Palestinian ears. Here again, the problem is brought no nearer solution by assuming that the readers were of Essene background. Such a conclusion is too restrictive to suit the evidence. While the Qumran scrolls provide valuable information on Palestinian background and offer striking parallels in some instances with the Epistle to the Hebrews, it can hardly be said to be normative or to be clearly the specific background of the Epistle.

With relation to early Christianity, it is quite possible to focus most attention on the distinctiveness of the Epistle. There are, indeed, distinctive elements, but nonetheless the Christian background is clearly foundational. The Epistle's presuppositions, religious or philosophical, are to be sought in common Christian belief and teaching of the first century, no matter how their expression may seem to be coloured by other elements of first-century thought. Hebrews has its distinctive emphases, but that they are closely

related to the primitive tradition and *kerygma* is equally clear. This relation is confirmed by the consideration of other facets of New Testament thought.

It is somewhat difficult to place Hebrews exactly in the New Testament background, perhaps because the groups are not as distinctly different from one another as is sometimes supposed. They are all based on early tradition – some of the parallels stem from this fact. To pass beyond generalities, however, there are a number of specific points to be made. While the writer is clearly not a Paulinist, he does have points of contact with Pauline thought. Further, the facets related to the Synoptic tradition seem closest to its Lucan expression. (Yet it is hardly sufficient to say that the Pauline contacts are through Luke.) The closest contacts of the Epistle with other New Testament thought seem to be with the Johannine literature, though the relation is one of proximity rather than of dependence.

In conclusion, the philosophical and religious background of the Epistle to the Hebrews is rather complex. The background of thought of those days was itself complex and the writer cannot be tied down to one specific strand. Two strands, however, do throw light on the background of the Epistle in a general way – the Philonic and the Qumranian. Yet the only specific background is that of early Christian thought in which the Epistle does not represent the development of some other tradition (except the primitive tradition itself), so that it is related to the other writings co-laterally.

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