

**EDWARDS
THOMAS
CHARLES**

THE EXPOSITOR'S BIBLE:
THE EPISTLE TO THE
HEBREWS

Thomas Edwards
The Expositor's Bible: The
Epistle to the Hebrews

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The Expositor's Bible: The Epistle to the Hebrews:*

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Thomas Charles Edwards

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PREFACE

In this volume the sole aim of the writer has been to trace the unity of thought in one of the greatest and most difficult books of the New Testament. He has endeavoured to picture his reader as a member of what is known in the Sunday-schools of Wales as "the teachers' class," a thoughtful Christian layman, who has no Greek, and desires only to be assisted in his efforts to come at the real bearing and force of words and to understand the connection of the sacred author's ideas. It may not be unnecessary to add that this design by no means implies less labour or thought on the part of the writer. But it does imply that the labour is veiled. Criticism is rigidly excluded.

The writer has purposely refrained from discussing the question of the authorship of the Epistle, simply because he has no new light to throw on this standing enigma of the Church. He is convinced that St. Paul is neither the actual author nor the originator of the treatise.

In case theological students may wish to consult the volume

when they study the Epistle to the Hebrews, they will find the Greek given at the foot of the page, to serve as a catch-word, whenever any point of criticism or of interpretation seems to the writer to deserve their attention.

T. C. E.

Aberystwyth, *April 12th, 1888.*

CHAPTER I

THE REVELATION IN A SON

“God, having of old time spoken unto the fathers in the prophets by divers portions and in divers manners, hath at the end of these days spoken unto us in His Son, Whom He appointed Heir of all things, through Whom also He made the worlds; Who being the effulgence of His glory, and the very image of His substance, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had made purification of sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high.” – Heb. i. 1–3 (R.V.).

“God hath spoken.” The eternal silence has been broken. We have a revelation. That God has spoken unto men is the ground of all religion. Theologians often distinguish between natural religion and revealed. We may fairly question if all worship is not based on some revelation of God. Prayer is the echo in man’s spirit of God’s own voice. Men learn to speak to the Father Who is in heaven as children come to utter words: by hearing their parent speak. It is the deaf who are also dumb. God speaks first, and prayer answers as well as asks. Men reveal themselves to the God Who has revealed Himself to them.

The Apostle is, however, silent about the revelations of God in nature and in conscience. He passes them by because we, sinful men, have lost the key to the language of creation and of our

own moral nature. We know that He speaks through them, but we do not know what He says. If we were holy, it would be otherwise. All nature would be vocal, "like some sweet beguiling melody." But to us the universe is a hieroglyphic which we cannot decipher, until we discover in another revelation the key that will make all plain.

More strange than this is the Apostle's omission to speak of the Mosaic dispensation as a revelation of God. We should have expected the verse to run on this wise: "God, having spoken unto the fathers in the sacrifices and in the prophets, institutions, and inspired words," etc. But the author says nothing about rites, institutions, dispensations, and laws. The reason apparently is that he wishes to compare with the revelation in Christ the highest, purest, and fullest revelation given before; and the most complete revelation vouchsafed to men, before the Son came to declare the Father, is to be found, not in sacrifices, but in the words of promise, not in the institutions, but in holy men, who were sent, time after time, to quicken the institutions into new life or to preach new truths. The prophets were seers and poets. Nature's highest gift is imagination, whether it "makes" a world that transcends nature or "sees" what in nature is hidden from the eyes of ordinary men. This faculty of the true poet, elevated, purified, taken possession of by God's Holy Spirit, became the best instrument of revelation, until the word of prophecy was made more sure through the still better gift of the Son.

But it would appear from the Apostle's language that even the

lamp of prophecy, shining in a dark place, was in two respects defective. "God spake in the prophets by divers portions and in divers manners." He spake in divers portions; that is, the revelation was broken, as the light was scattered before it was gathered into one source. Again, He spake in divers manners. Not only the revelation was fragmentary, but the separate portions were not of the same kind. The two defects were that the revelation lacked unity and was not homogeneous.

In contrast to the fragmentary character of the revelation, the Apostle speaks of the Son, in the second verse, as the centre of unity. He is the Heir and the Creator of all things. With the heterogeneous revelation in the prophets he contrasts, in the third verse, the revelation that takes its form from the peculiar nature of Christ's Sonship. He is the effulgence of God's glory, the very image of His substance; He upholds all things by the word of His power; and, having made purification of sins, He took His seat on the right hand of the Majesty on high.

Let us examine a little more closely the double comparison made by the Apostle between the revelation given to the fathers and that which we have received.

First, the previous revelation was in portions. The Old Testament has no centre, from which all its wonderful and varied lights radiate, till we find its unity in the New Testament and read Jesus Christ into it. God scattered the revelations over many centuries, line upon line, precept after precept, here a little and there a little. He spread the knowledge of Himself over the ages

of a nation's history, and made the development of one people the medium whereby to communicate truth. This of itself, if nothing more had been told us, is a magnificent conception. A nation's early struggles, bitter failures, ultimate triumph, the appearance within it of warriors, prophets, poets, saints, used by the Spirit of God to reveal the invisible! Sometimes revelation would make but one advance in an age. We might almost imagine that God's truth from the lips of His prophets was found at times too overpowering. It was crushing frail humanity. The Revealer must withdraw into silence behind the thick veil, to give human nature time to breathe and recover self-possession. The occasional message of prophecy resembles the suddenness of Elijah's appearances and departures, and forms a strange contrast to the ceaseless stream of preaching in the Christian Church.

Still more strikingly does it contrast with the New Testament, the greater book, yea the greatest of all books. Only two classes of men deny its supremacy. They are those who do not know what real greatness is, and those who disparage it as a literature that they may be the better able to seduce foolish and shallow youths to reject it as a revelation. But honest and profound thinkers, even when they do not admit that it is the word of God, acknowledge it to be the greatest among the books of men.

Yet the New Testament was all produced – if we are forbidden to say “given” – in one age, not fifteen centuries. Neither was this one of the great ages of history, when genius seems to be almost contagious. Even Greece had at this time no original thinkers.

Its two centuries of intellectual supremacy had passed away. It was the age of literary imitations and counterfeits. Yet it is in this age that the book which has most profoundly influenced the thought of all subsequent times made its appearance. How shall we account for the fact? The explanation is not that its writers were great men. However insignificant the writers, the mysterious greatness of the book pervades it all, and their lips are touched as with a live coal from the altar. Nothing will account for the New Testament but the other fact that Jesus of Nazareth had appeared among men, and that He was so great, so universal, so human, so Divine, that He contained in His own person all the truth that will ever be discovered in the book. Deny the incarnation of the Son of God, and you make the New Testament an insoluble enigma. Admit that Jesus is the Word, and that the Word is God, and the book becomes nothing more, nothing less, than the natural and befitting outcome of what He said and did and suffered. The mystery of the book is lost in the greater mystery of His person.

Here the second verse comes in, to tell us of this great Person, and how He unites in Himself the whole of God's revelation. He is appointed Heir of all things, and through Him God made the ages. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, He which is, and which was, and which is to come, – the spring from which all the streams of time have risen and the sea into which they flow. But these are the two sides of all real knowledge; and revelation is nothing else than knowledge given by God. All the

infinite variety of questions with which men interrogate nature may be reduced to two: Whence? and whither? As to the latter question, the investigation has not been in vain. We do know that, whatever the end will be, the whole universe rises from lower to higher forms. If one life perishes, it reappears in a higher life. It is the ultimate purpose of all which still remains unknown. But the Apostles declare that this interrogation is answered in Jesus Christ. Only that they speak, not of “ultimate purpose,” but of “the appointed Heir.” He is more than the goal of a development. He is the Son of the living God, and therefore the Heir of all the works and purposes of His Father. He holds His position by right of sonship, and has it confirmed to Him as the reward of filial service.

The word “Heir” is an allusion to the promise made to Abraham. The reference, therefore, is not to the eternal relation between the Son and God, not to any lordship which the Son acquires apart from His assumption of humanity and atoning death. The idea conveyed by the word “Heir” will come again to the surface, more than once, in the Epistle. But everywhere the reference is to the Son’s final glory as Redeemer. At the same time, the act of appointing Him Heir may have taken place before the world was. We must, accordingly, understand the revelation here spoken of to mean more especially the manifestation of God in the work of redemption. Of this work also Christ is the ultimate purpose. He is the Heir, to Whom the promised inheritance originally and ultimately belongs. It is this that befits

Him to become the full and complete Revealer of God. He is the answer to the question, Whither? in reference to the entire range of redemptive thought and action.

Again, He, too, is the Creator. Many seek to discover the origin of all things by analysis. They trace the more complex to the less complex, the compound to its elements, and the higher developments of life to lower types. But to the theologian the real difficulty does not lie here. What matter *whence*, if we are still the same? We know what we are. We *are* men. We are capable of thinking, of sinning, of hating or loving God. The problem is to account for these facts of our spirit. What is the evolution of holiness? Whence came prayer, repentance, and faith? But even these questions Christianity professes to answer. It answers them by solving still harder problems than these. Do we ask who created the human spirit? The Gospel tells us who can sanctify man's inmost being. Do we seek to know who made conscience? The New Testament proclaims One Who can purify conscience and forgive the sin. To create is but a small matter to Him Who can save. Jesus Christ is that Saviour. He, therefore, is that Creator. In being these things, He is the complete and final revelation of God.

Second, previous revelations were given in divers manners. God used many different means to reveal Himself, as if He found them one after another inadequate. And how can a visible, material creation sufficiently reveal the spiritual? How can institutions and systems reveal the personal, living God? How

can human language even express spiritual ideas? Sometimes the means adopted appear utterly incongruous. Will the great Spirit, the holy and good God, speak to a prophet in the dreams of night? Shall we say that the man of God sees real visions when he dreams an unreal dream? Or will an apparition of the day more befittingly reveal God? Has every substance been possessed by the spirit of falsehood, so that the Being of beings can only reveal His presence in unsubstantial phantoms? Has the waking life of intellect become so entirely false to its glorious mission of discovering truth that the God of truth cannot reveal Himself to man, except in dreams and spectres? Yet there was a time when it might be well for us to recall our dreams, and wise to believe in spiritualism. For a dream might bring a real message from God, and ecstasy might be the birth-throes of a new revelation. Some of the good words of Scripture were at first a dream. In the midst of the confused fancies of the brain, when reason is for a time dethroned, a truth descends from heaven upon the prophet's spirit. This has been, but will never again take place. The oracles are dumb, and we shall not regret them. We consult no interpreter of dreams. We seek not the seances of necromancers. Let the peaceful spirits of the dead rest in God! They had their trials and sorrows on earth. Rest, hallowed souls! We do not ask you to break the deep silence of heaven. For God has spoken unto us in a Son, Who has been made higher than the heavens, and is as great as God. Even the Son need not, must not, come to earth a second time to reveal the Father in mighty deeds and a mightier

self-sacrifice. The revelation given is enough. “We will not say in our hearts, Who shall ascend into heaven? (that is, to bring Christ down:) or, Who shall descend into the abyss? (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead.) The word is nigh us, in our mouth, and in our heart: that is, the word of faith, which we preach.”¹

The final form of God’s revelation of Himself is, therefore, perfectly homogeneous. The third verse explains that it is a revelation, not only in a Son, but in His Sonship. We learn what kind of Sonship is His, and how its glorious attributes qualify Him to be the perfect Revealer of God. Nevermore will a message be sent to men except in Jesus Christ. God, Who spake unto the fathers in divers manners, speaks to us in Him, Whose Sonship constitutes Him the effulgence of God’s glory, the image of His substance, the Upholder of the universe, and, lastly, the eternal Redeemer and King.

1. He is the effulgence of God’s glory. Many expositors prefer another rendering: “the reflection of His glory.” This would mean that God’s self-manifestation, shining on an external substance, is reflected, as from a mirror, and that this reflection is the Son of God. But such an expression does not convey a consistent idea. For the Son must be the substance from which the light is reflected. What truth there is in this rendering is more correctly expressed in the next clause: “the image of His substance.” It is, therefore, much better to accept the rendering adopted in the Revised Version: “the effulgence of His glory.” God’s glory is

¹ Rom. x. 6–8.

the self-manifestation of His attributes, or, in other words, the consciousness which God has of His own infinite perfections. This implies the triune personality of God. But it does not imply a revelation of God to His creatures. The Son participates in that consciousness of the Divine perfections. But He also reveals God to men, not merely in deeds and in words, but in His person. He *is* the revelation. To declare this seems to be the Apostle's purpose in using the word "effulgence." It expresses "the essentially ministrative character of the person of the Son."² If a revelation will be given at all, His Sonship points Him out as the Interpreter of God's nature and purposes, inasmuch as He is essentially, because He is Son, the emanation or radiance of His glory.

2. He is the image of His substance. A solar ray reveals the light, but not completely, unless indeed it guides the eye back along its pencilled line to the orb of day. If the Son of God were only an effulgence, Christ could still say that He Himself is the way to the Father, but He could not add, "He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father."³ That the revelation may be complete, the Son must be, in one sense, distinct from God, as well as one with Him. Apparently this is the notion conveyed in the metaphor of the "image." Both truths are stated together in the words of Christ: "As the Father hath life in Himself, so *hath He given to*

² Newman, *Arians*, p. 182 (ed. 1833).

³ John xiv. 6, 9.

the Son to have life *in Himself*.”⁴ If the Son is more than an effulgence, if He is “the very image” of God’s essence, nothing in God will remain unrevealed. Every feature of His moral nature will be delineated in the Son. If the Son is the exact likeness of God and has a distinct mode of subsisting He is capable of all the modifications in His form of subsisting which may be necessary, in order to make a complete revelation of God intelligible to men. It is possible for Him to become man Himself. He is capable of obedience, even of learning obedience by suffering, and of acquiring power to succour by being tempted. He can taste death. We might add, if we were studying one of St. Paul’s Epistles (which we are not at present doing), that this distinction from God, involved in His very Sonship, made Him capable of emptying Himself of the Divine form of subsisting and taking upon Him instead of it the form of a servant. This power of meeting man’s actual condition confers upon the Son the prerogative of being the complete and final revelation of God.

3. He upholds all things by the word of His power. This must be closely connected with the previous statement. If the Son is the effulgence of God’s glory and the express image of His essence, He is not a creature, but is the Creator. The Son is so from God that He is God. He so emanates from Him that He is a perfect and complete representation of His being. He is not in such a manner an effulgence as to be only a manifestation of God, nor in such a manner an image as to be a creature of God. But, in fellowship

⁴ John v. 26.

of nature, the essence of God is communicated to the Son in the distinctness of His mode of subsisting. The Apostle's words fully justify – perhaps they suggested – the expressions in the Nicene and still earlier creeds, “*God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God.*” If this is His relation to God, it determines His relation to the universe, and the relation of the universe to God. Philo had described the Word as an effulgence, and spoken also of Him as distinct from God. But in Philo these two statements are inconsistent. For the former means that the Word is an attribute of God, and the latter means that He is a creature. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews says that the Word is not an attribute, but a perfect representation of God's essence. He says also that He is not a creature, but the Sustainer of all things. These statements are consistent. The one, in fact, implies the other; and both together express the same conception which we find in St. John's Gospel: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things were made by Him; and without Him was not anything made that hath been made.”⁵ It is also the teaching of St. Paul: “In Him were all things created, in the heavens and upon the earth, things visible and things invisible, whether thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things have been created through Him, and unto Him; and in Him all things consist.”⁶

But the Apostle has a further motive in referring to the Son as

⁵ John i. 1, 3.

⁶ Col. i. 16, 17.

Upholder of all things. As Creator and Sustainer He reveals God. He upholds all things *by the word of His power*. “The invisible things of God are perceived through the things which are made, even His everlasting power and Divinity.”⁷ There is a revelation of God prior even to that given in the prophets.

4. Having made purification of sins, He took His seat on the right hand of the Majesty on high. We come now, at last, to the special revelation of God which forms the subject of the Epistle. The Apostle here states his central truth on its two sides. The one side is Christ’s priestly offering; the other is His kingly exaltation. We shall see as we proceed that the entire structure of the Epistle rests on this great conception, – the Son of God, the eternal Priest-King. By introducing it at this early stage, the author gives his readers the clue to what will very soon prove a labyrinth. We must hold the thread firmly, if we wish not to be lost in the maze. The subject of the treatise is here given us. It is “The Son as Priest-King the Revealer of God.” The revelation is not in words only, nor in external acts only, but in love, in redemption, in opening heaven to all believers. It is well termed a revelation. For the Priest-King has rent the thick veil and opened the way to men to enter into the true holiest place, so that they know God by prayer and communion.

⁷ Rom. i. 20.

CHAPTER II

THE SON AND THE ANGELS

Hebrews i. 4–ii. 18

The most dangerous and persistent error against which the theologians of the New Testament had to contend was the doctrine of emanations. The persistence of this error lay in its affinity with the Christian conception of mediation between God and men; its danger sprang from its complete inconsistency with the Christian idea of the person and work of the Mediator. For the Hebrew conception of God, as the “I AM,” tended more and more in the lapse of ages to sever Him from all immediate contact with created beings. It would be the natural boast of the Jews that Jehovah dwelt in unapproachable light. They would point to the contrast between Him and the human gods of the Greeks. An ever-deepening consciousness of sin and spiritual gloom would strengthen the conviction that the Lord abode behind the veil, and their conception of God would of necessity react on their consciousness of sin. If, therefore, God is the absolute Being – so argued the Gnostics of the day – He cannot be the actual Creator of the world. We must suppose the existence of an emanation or a series of emanations from God, every additional link in the chain

being less Divine, until we arrive at the material universe, where the element of Divinity is entirely lost. These emanations are the angels, the only possible mediators between God and men. Some theories came to a stand at this point; others took a further step, and worshipped the angels, as the mediators also between men and God. Thus the angels were regarded as messengers or apostles from God and reconcilers or priests for men. St. Paul has already rejected these notions in his Epistle to the Colossians. He teaches that the Son of God's love is the visible image of the invisible God, prior to all creation and by right of primogeniture Heir of all, Creator of the highest angels, Himself being before they came into existence. Such He is before His assumption of humanity. But it pleased God that in Him, also as God-Man, all the plenitude of the Divine attributes should dwell; so that the Mediator is not an emanation, neither human nor Divine, but is Himself God and Man.⁸

Recent expositors have sufficiently proved that there was a Judaic element in the Colossian heresy. We need not, therefore, hesitate to admit that the Epistle to the Hebrews contains references to the same error. Our author acknowledges the existence of angels. He declares that the Law was given through angels, which is a point not touched upon more than once in the Old Testament, but seemingly taken for granted, rather than expressly announced, in the New. Stephen reproaches the Jews, who had received the Law as the ordinances of angels, with

⁸ Col. i. 15, 19.

having betrayed and murdered the Righteous One, of Whom the Law and the prophets spake.⁹ St. Paul, like the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, argues that the Law differs from the promise in having been ordained through angels, as mediators between the Lord and His people Israel, whereas the promise was given by God, not as a compact between two parties, but as the free act of Him Who is one.¹⁰ The main purpose of the first and second chapters of our Epistle is to maintain the superiority of the Son to the angels, of Him in Whom God has spoken unto us to the mediators through whom He gave the Law.

The defect of the doctrine of emanations was twofold. They are supposed to consist of a long chain of intermediate beings. But the chain does not connect at either end. God is still absolutely unapproachable by man; man is still inaccessible to God. It is in vain new links are forged. The chain does not, and never will, bring man and God together. The only solution of the problem must be found in One Who is God and Man; and this is precisely the doctrine of our author, on the one hand, that the Revealer of God is Son of God; and, on the other hand, that the Son of God is our brother-man. The former statement is proved, and a practical warning based upon it, in the section that extends from chap. i. 4 to chap. ii. 4. The latter is the subject of the section from chap. ii. 5 to chap. ii. 18.

⁹ Acts vii. 53.

¹⁰ Gal. iii. 19.

I. The Revealer of God Son of God

“Having become by so much better than the angels, as He hath inherited a more excellent name than they. For unto which of the angels said He at any time,

Thou art my Son,
This day have I begotten Thee?

and again,

I will be to Him a Father,
And He shall be to Me a Son?

And when He again bringeth in the Firstborn into the world He saith, And let all the angels of God worship Him. And of the angels He saith,

Who maketh His angels winds,
And His ministers a flame of fire:

but of the Son *He saith,*

Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever;
And the sceptre of uprightness is the sceptre of Thy kingdom.
Thou hast loved righteousness, and hated iniquity;

Therefore God, Thy God, hath anointed Thee
With the oil of gladness about Thy fellows.

And,

Thou, Lord, in the beginning hast laid the foundation of the
earth,
And the heavens are the works of Thy hands:
They shall perish; but Thou continuest:
And they all shall wax old as doth a garment;
And as a mantle shall Thou roll them up,
As a garment, and they shall be changed:
But Thou art the same,
And Thy years shall not fail.

But of which of the angels hath He said at any time,

Sit Thou on My right hand,
Till I make Thine enemies the footstool of Thy feet?

Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to do service for
the sake of them that shall inherit salvation?

Therefore we ought to give the more earnest heed to the
things that were heard, lest haply we drift away *from them*. For
if the word spoken through angels proved steadfast, and every
transgression and disobedience received a just recompense of
reward; how shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation?
which having at the first been spoken through the Lord, was

confirmed unto us by them that heard; God also bearing witness with them, both by signs and wonders, and by manifold powers, and by gifts of the Holy Ghost according to His own will” (Heb. i. 4—ii. 4, R. V.).

Christ is Son of God, not in the sense in which angels, as a class of beings, are designated by this name, but as He Who has taken His seat on the right hand of the Majesty on high. The greatness of His position is proportionate to the excellency of the name of Son. This name He has not obtained by favour nor attained by effort, but inherited by indefeasible right. Josephus says that the Essenes forbade their disciples to divulge the names of the angels. But He Who has revealed God has been revealed Himself. He is Son. Which of the angels was ever so addressed? To speak of the angels as sons and yet say that not one of them individually is a son may be self-contradictory in words, but the thought is consistent and true.

From the pre-existent Son, regarded as the idealised theocratic King, the Apostle passes to the incarnate Christ, returning to the world which He has redeemed, and out of which He brings¹¹ many sons of God unto glory. God brings Him also in as the First-begotten among these many brethren. But our Lord Himself describes His coming. “The Son of man shall come in His glory, and all the angels with Him.”¹² In allusion to this saying of Christ, the Apostle applies to His second advent the

¹¹ ἀγαγόντα.

¹² Matt. xxv. 31.

words which in the Septuagint Version of the Old Testament are a summons to all the angels to worship Jehovah. They are the Son's ministers. Like swift winds, they convey His messages; or they carry destruction at His bidding, like a flame of fire. But the Son is enthroned God for ever. The sceptre of righteousness, by whomsoever borne, is the sceptre of His kingdom; all thrones and powers, human and angelic, hold sway under Him. They are His fellows, and participate only in His royal gladness, Whose joy surpasses theirs.

The author reverts to the Son's pre-incarnate existence. The Son created earth and heaven, and, for that reason, He remains when the works of His hand wax old, as a garment. Creation is the vesture of the Son. In all the changes of nature the Son puts off a garment, while He remains unchanged Himself.

Finally, our author glances at the triumphant consummation, when God will do for His Son what He will not do for the angels. For He will make His enemies the footstool of His feet, as the reward of His redemptive work. The angels have no enemy to conquer. Neither are they the authors of our redemption. Yea, they are not even the redeemed. The Son is the Heir of the throne. Men are the heirs of salvation. Must we, then, quite exclude the angels from all present activity in the kingdom of the Son? Do they altogether belong to a past epoch in the development of God's revelation? Must we say of them, as astronomers speak of the moon, that they are dead worlds? Shall we not rather find a place for them in the spirit-world corresponding to the

office filled in the sphere of nature by the works of God's hands? God has His earthly ministers. Are not the angels ministering spirits? The Apostle puts the question tentatively. But the pious instinct of the Church and of good men has answered, Yes. For salvation has created a new form of service for which nature is not fitted. The narrative of the Son's own life on earth suggests the same reply. For an angel appeared unto Him in Gethsemane and strengthened Him.¹³ It is true that the Son Himself is the Minister of the sanctuary. He alone serves in the holiest place. But may not the angels be *sent forth* to minister? Salvation is the work of the Son. But shall we not say that the angels perform a service for the Son, which is possible only because of men who are now on the eve of inheriting that salvation?

We must beware of minimising the significance of the Apostle's words. If he means by "Son" merely an official designation, where is the difference between the Son and the angels? The only definition of "Son" that will satisfy the argument is "God the Revealer of God." Sabellius said, "The Word is not the Son." The contrary doctrine is necessary to give any value to the reasoning of our Epistle. The Revealer is Son; and the Son, in order to be the full Revealer, must be "of the essence of the Father," inasmuch as God only can perfectly reveal God. This is so vital to the Apostle's argument that he need not hesitate to use a term in reference to the Son which in another connection might be liable to be misunderstood, as if it

¹³ Luke xxii. 43. The genuineness of the verse is somewhat doubtful.

expressed the theory of emanation. The Son is “the effulgence” of the Father’s glory, or, in the words of the Nicene Creed, He is “Light out of Light.” It is safe to use such words when our very argument demands that He should also be “the distinct impress of His substance,” – “very God out of very God.”

The Apostle has now laid the foundation of his great argument. He has shown us the Son as the Revealer of God. This done, he at once introduces his first practical warning. It is his manner. He does not, like St. Paul, first conclude the argumentative portion of his Epistle, and afterwards heap precept on precept in words of warning, sympathy, or encouragement. Our author alternates argument with exhortation. The Epistle wears to a superficial reader the appearance of a mosaic. The truth is that no book in the New Testament is more thoroughly or more skilfully welded into one piece from beginning to end. But the danger was imminent, and urgent warning was needed at every step. One truth was better fitted to drive home one lesson, and another argument to enforce another.

The first danger of the Hebrew Christians would arise from indifference. The first warning of the Apostle is, Take care that you do not drift.¹⁴ In the Son as the Revealer of God we have a sure anchorage. Let us fasten the vessel to its moorings. That the Son has revealed God is beyond question. The fact is well assured. For the message of salvation has been proclaimed

¹⁴ μή παραρῶμεν (ii. 1).

by the Lord Jesus Himself. It has run its course down to the writer of the Epistle and his readers through the testimony of eye-witnesses and ear-witnesses. God Himself has borne witness with these faithful men by signs and wonders and divers manifestations of power, yea by giving the Holy Ghost to each one severally according to His own will. The last words are not to be neglected. The apparent arbitrariness of His sovereign will in the distribution of the Spirit lends force to the proof, by pointing to the direct, personal action of God in this great concern.

But the warning is based, not simply on the fact of a revelation, but on the greatness of the Revealer. The Law was given through angels, and the Law was not transgressed with impunity. How, then, shall we escape God's anger if we contemptuously neglect a salvation so great that no one less than the Son could have wrought or revealed it?

Observe the emphatic notions. Salvation is contrasted with law. It is a greater sin to despise God's free, merciful offer of eternal life than to transgress the commandments of His justice. There may be emphasis also on the certainty of the proof. The word spoken by angels was firmly assured, and, because no man could shelter under the plea that the heavenly authority of the message was doubtful, disobedience met with unsparing retribution. But the Gospel is proved to be of God by still more abundant evidence, – the personal testimony of the Lord Jesus, the witness of those who heard Him, and the cumulative argument of gifts and miracles. While these truths

are emphatic, more important than all is the fact that the Son is the Giver of this salvation. The thought seems to be that God is jealous for the honour of His Son. Our Lord Himself teaches this, and the form which it assumes in His parable implies that He speaks, not as a speculative moralist, but as One Who knows God's heart: "Last of all he sent unto them his son, saying, They will reverence my son." But when Christ asks His hearers what the lord of the vineyard will do unto those wicked husbandmen, the manner of their reply shows that they only half understand His meaning or else pretend not to see the point of His question. They acknowledge the husbandmen's wickedness, but profess that it consists largely in not rendering to the owner the fruits in their season, as if, forsooth, their wickedness in killing their master's son had not thrust their dishonesty quite out of sight.¹⁵ The Apostle, too, appeals to his readers,¹⁶ evidently in the belief that they would at once feel the force of his argument, whether trampling under foot the Son of God did not deserve sorer punishment than despising the law of Moses. Christ and the Apostle speak in the spirit of the second Psalm: "Thou art My Son. Ask of Me, and I shall give Thee the heathen for Thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for Thy possession... Kiss the Son!" Now, if Christ adopts this language, it is not mere metaphor, but is a truth concerning God's moral nature. Resentment must, in some sense or other, belong to God's

¹⁵ Matt. xxi. 33, sqq.

¹⁶ Heb. x. 29.

Fatherhood. The doctrine of the Trinity implies the necessary and eternal altruism of the Divine nature. It would not be true to say that the God of the Christians was less jealous than the God of the Hebrews. He is still the living God. It is a fearful thing to fall into His hands. He will still vindicate the majesty of His law. But now He has spoken unto us in One Who is Son. The Judge of all is not a mere official Administrator, but a Father. The place occupied in the Old Testament by the Law is now filled by the Son.

II. The Son the Representative of Man

“For not unto angels did He subject the world to come, whereof we speak. But one hath somewhere testified, saying,

What is man, that Thou art mindful of him?
Or the son of man, that Thou visitest him?
Thou madest him a little lower than the angels;
Thou crownedst him with glory and honour,
And didst set him over the works of Thy hands:
Thou didst put all things in subjection under his feet.

For in that He subjected all things unto him, He left nothing that is not subject to him. But now we see not yet all things subjected to him. But we behold Him Who hath been made a little lower than the angels, *even* Jesus, because of the suffering of death crowned with glory and honour, that by the grace of

God He should taste death for every *man*. For it became Him, for Whom are all things, and through Whom are all things, in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the Author of their salvation perfect through sufferings. For both He that sanctifieth and they that are sanctified are all of one: for which cause He is not ashamed to call them brethren, saying,

I will declare Thy name unto My brethren,
In the midst of the congregation will I sing Thy praise.

And again, I will put My trust in Him. And again, Behold, I and the children which God hath given Me. Since then the children are sharers in flesh and blood, He also Himself in like manner partook of the same; that through death He might bring to nought him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; and might deliver all them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage. For verily not of angels doth He take hold, but He taketh hold of the seed of Abraham. Wherefore it behoved Him in all things to be made like unto His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High-priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For in that He Himself hath suffered being tempted, He is able to succour them that are tempted” (Heb. ii. 5–18, R.V.).

The Son is better than the angels, not only because He is the Revealer of God, but also because He represents man. We have to do with more than spoken promises. The salvation through

Christ raises man to a new dignity, and bestows upon him a new authority. God calls into existence a “world to come,” and puts that world in subjection, not to angels, but to man.

The passage on the consideration of which we now enter is difficult, because the interpretation offered by some of the best expositors, though at first sight it has the appearance of simplicity, really introduces confusion into the argument. They think the words of the Psalmist,¹⁷ as applied by the Apostle, refer to Christ only. But the Psalmist evidently contrasts the frailty of man with the authority bestowed upon him by Jehovah. Mortal man has been set over the works of God’s hand. Man is for a little inferior to the angels; yet he is crowned with glory and honour. The very contrast between his frailty and his dignity exalts the name of his Creator, Who judges not as we judge. For He confronts His blasphemers with the lisping of children, and weak man He crowns king of creation, in order to put to shame the wisdom of the world.¹⁸

We cannot suppose that this is said of Christ, the Son of God. But there are two expressions in the Psalm that suggested to St. Paul¹⁹ and the author of this Epistle a Messianic reference. The one is the name “Son of man;” the other is the action ascribed to God: “Thou hast made him lower than the angels.” The word²⁰

¹⁷ Ps. viii. 4.

¹⁸ Ps. viii. 2.

¹⁹ 1 Cor. xv. 27.

²⁰ ἡλάττωσας.

used by the Seventy, whose translation the Apostle here and elsewhere adopts, means, not, as the Hebrew, “to create lower,” but “to bring from a more exalted to a humbler condition.” Christ appropriated to Himself the title of “Son of man;” and “to lower from a higher to a less exalted position” applies only to the Son of God, Whose pre-existence is taught by the Apostle in chap. i. The point of the Apostle’s application of the Psalm must, therefore, be that in Christ alone have the Psalmist’s words been fulfilled. The Psalmist was a prophet, and testified.²¹ In addition to the witnesses previously mentioned,²² the Apostle cites the evidence from prophecy. An inspired seer, “seeing this beforehand, spake of Christ,” not primarily, but in a mystery now explained in the New Testament. The distinction also between crowning with glory and putting all things under his feet holds true only of Christ. The Psalmist, we admit, appears to identify them. But the relevancy of the Apostle’s use of the Psalm lies in the distinction between these two things. The creature man may be said to be crowned with glory and honour by receiving universal dominion and by the subjection of all things under his feet. “But we see not yet all things put under him;” and, consequently, we see not man crowned with glory and honour. The words of the Psalmist have apparently failed of fulfilment or were at best only poetical exaggeration. But Him Who was actually translated from a higher to a lower place than that of angels, from heaven to earth – that

²¹ Cf. Acts ii. 30.

²² Chap. ii. 4.

is to say, Jesus, the meek and lowly Man of Nazareth – we see crowned with glory and honour. He has ascended to heaven and sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high. So far the prophecy has come true, but only so far. All things have not yet been put under Him. He is still waiting till He has put all enemies, even the last enemy, which is death, under His feet. As, then, the glory and honour are bestowed on man through his Representative, Jesus, so also dominion is given him only through Jesus; and the glory comes only with the dominion. Every honour that falls to man's share is won for him by the victory of Christ over an enemy. This is the nearest approach in our Epistle to the Pauline conception of Christ as the second Adam.

But is there any connection between Christ's victory and His being made lower than the angels? When the Psalmist describes the great dignity conferred on frail man, he sees only the contrast between the dignity and the frailty. He can only wonder and worship in observing the incomprehensible paradox of God's dealings with man. The Apostle, on the other hand, fathoms this mystery. He gives the reasons for the strange connection of power and feebleness, not indeed in reference to man as a creature, but in reference to the Man Christ Jesus. Apart from Christ the problem that struck the Psalmist with awe remains unsolved. But in Christ's incarnation we see why man's glory and dominion rest on humiliation.

1. Christ's humiliation involved a propitiatory death for every man, and He is crowned with glory and honour that His

propitiation may prove effectual: “that He may have tasted²³ death for every man.” By His glory we must mean the self-manifestation of His person. Honour is the authority bestowed upon Him by God. Both are the result of His suffering death, or rather the suffering of His death. He is glorified, not simply because He suffered, but because His suffering was of a certain kind and quality. It was a propitiatory suffering. Christ Himself prayed His Father to glorify Him with His own self with the glory He had with the Father before the world was.²⁴ This glory was His by right of Sonship. But He receives from His Father another glory, not by right, but by God’s grace.²⁵ It consists in having His death accepted and acknowledged as an adequate propitiation for the sins of men. In this verse the great conception of atonement, which hereafter will fill so large a place in the Epistle, is introduced, not at present for its own sake, but in order to show the superiority of Christ to the angels. He is greater than they because He is the representative Man, to Whom, and not to the angels, the world to come has been put in subjection. But the Psalmist has taught us that man’s greatness is connected with humiliation. This connection is realised in Christ, Whose exaltation is the Divine acceptance of the propitiation wrought in the days of His humiliation, and the means of giving it effect.

²³ γεύσεται (ii. 9).

²⁴ John xvii. 5.

²⁵ χάριτι.

2. Christ's glory consists in being Leader²⁶ of His people, and for such leadership He was fitted by the discipline of humiliation. There is no incongruity in the works of God because He is Himself the ground of their being²⁷ and the instrument of His own action.²⁸ Every adaptation of means to an end would not become God, though it might befit man. But this became Him for Whom and through Whom are all things. When He crowns man with glory and honour, He does this, not by an external ordinance merely, but by an inward fitness. He deals, not with an abstraction, but with individual men, whom He makes His sons and prepares for their glory and honour by the discipline of sons. "For what son is there whom his father does not discipline?"²⁹ Thus it is more true to say that God leads His sons to glory than to say that He bestows glory upon them. It follows that the representative Man, through Whom these many sons are glorified, must Himself pass through like discipline, that, on behalf of God, He may become their Leader and the Captain of their salvation. It became God to endow the Son, in Whose Sonship men are adopted as sons of God, with inward fitness, through sufferings, to lead them on to their destined glory. Perhaps the verse contains an allusion to Moses or Joshua, the leaders of the Lord's redeemed to the rich land and large. If so,

²⁶ ἀρχηγόν (ii. 10).

²⁷ δι' ὅν.

²⁸ δι' ὅϛ.

²⁹ Chap. xii. 7.

the author is preparing his readers for what he has yet to say.

3. Christ's glory consists in power to consecrate³⁰ men to God, and this power springs from His consciousness of brotherhood with them. But, first of all, the author thinks it necessary to prove that Christ has a deep consciousness of brotherhood with men. He cites Christ's own words from prophetic Scripture.³¹ For Christ has vowed unto the Lord, Who has delivered Him, that He will declare God's name unto His brethren. Here the pith of the argument is quite as much in the vow to reveal God to them as in His giving them the name of brethren. He is so drawn in love to them that He is impelled to speak to them about the Father. Yea, in the midst of the Church, as if He were one of the congregation, He will praise God. They praise God for His Son; the Son joins in the praise, as being thankful for the privilege of being their Saviour, while they offer their thanks for the joy of being saved. That is not all. Christ puts His trust in God. So human is He that, conscious of utter weakness, He leans on God, as the feeblest of His brethren. Finally, His triumphant joy at the safety of His redeemed ones arises from this consciousness of brotherhood. "Behold, I and the children" (of God) "which God hath given Me."³² The Apostle does not fear to apply to Christ what Isaiah³³ spoke in reference to himself and his disciples, the children of

³⁰ ὁ ἀγιάζων (ii. 11).

³¹ Ps. xxii. 22.

³² Chap. ii. 13.

³³ Isa. viii. 18

the prophet. Christ's brotherhood with men assumes the form of identifying Himself with His prophetic servants. Evidently He is not ashamed of His brethren, though, like Joseph, He has reason to be ashamed of them for their sin. The expression means that He glories in them, because His assumption of humanity has consecrated them. For this consecration springs from union. We do not, for our part, understand this as a general proposition, of which the sanctifying power of Christ is an illustration. No other instance of such a thing exists. Yet the Apostle does not prove the statement. He appeals to the intelligence and conscience of his readers to acknowledge its truth. Whether we understand the word "sanctification" in the sense of moral consecration through an atonement or in the sense of holy character, it springs from union. Christ cannot sanctify by a creative word or by an act of power. Neither can His power to sanctify be transmitted by God to the Son externally, in the same way in which the Creator bestows on nature its vital, fertilising energy. Christ must derive His power to sanctify through His Sonship, and men must become sons of God that they may be sanctified through the Son. Our passage adds Christ's brotherhood. He that consecrates, therefore, and they that are consecrated are united together, first, by being born of the same Divine Father, and, second, by having the same human nature. Here, again, the chain connects at both ends: on the side of God and on the side of man. Now to have dwelling in Him the power of consecrating men to God is so great an endowment that Christ may dare even to glory in the

brotherhood that brings with it such a gift.

4. Christ's glory manifests itself in the destruction of Satan, who had the power of death, and his destruction is accomplished through death.³⁴ The children of God have every one his share of blood and flesh, which means vital, mortal humanity. Blood signifies life, and flesh the mortality of that life. They are, therefore, subject to disease and death. But to the Hebrews disease and death involved vastly more than physical suffering and the termination of man's earthly existence. They had their angel, by which is meant that they had a moral significance. They were spiritual forces, wielded by a messenger of God. This angel was Satan. But, following the lead of the later Jewish theology, our author explains who Satan really is. He identifies him with the evil spirit, who from envy, says the Book of Wisdom, brought death into the world. To make clear this identification, he adds the words, "that is, the devil." The reference to Satan is sufficient to show that the writer of the Epistle means by "the power of death" power to inflict it and keep men in its terrible grasp. But the difficulty is to understand how the devil is destroyed through death. Evidently the death of Christ is meant; we may paraphrase the Apostle's expression by rendering, "through *His* death." At first glance, the words, taken in connection with the reference to Christ's humanity, seem to favour the doctrine, propounded by many writers in the early ages of the Church, that God delivered His Son to Satan as the price of man's release

³⁴ Chap. ii. 14.

from his rightful possession. Such a notion is utterly inconsistent with the dominant idea of the Epistle: the priestly character of Christ's death. A Hebrew Christian could not conceive the high-priest entering the holiest place to offer a redemptive sacrifice to the spirit of evil. Indeed, the advocates of this strange theory of the Atonement admitted as much when they described Christ as outwitting the devil or escaping from his hands by persuasion. But the doctrine is quite as inconsistent with the passage before us, which represents the death of Christ as the *destruction* of the Evil One. Power faces power. Christ is the Captain of salvation. His leadership of men implies conflict with their enemy and ultimate victory. Death was a spiritual conception. Here lay its power. Deliverance from the crushing bondage of its fear could come only through the great High-priest. Priesthood was the basis of Christ's power. We shall soon see that Christ is the Priest-King. The Apostle even now anticipates what he has hereafter to say on the relation of the priesthood to the kingly power. For as Priest Christ delivers men from guilt of conscience and, by so doing, delivers them from their fear of death; as King He destroys him who had the power to destroy. He is "death of death and hell's destruction." It has been well said that the two terrors from which none but Christ can deliver men are guilt of sin and fear of death. The latter is the offspring of the former. When the conscience of sin is no more, dread of death yields to peace and joy.

In these four ways is the glory of Christ connected with

humiliation, and thus will the prophecy of the Psalmist find its fulfilment in the representative Man, Jesus. His humiliation implied propitiation, moral discipline, conscious brotherhood, and subjection to him who had the power of death. His glory consisted in the effectiveness of the propitiation, in leadership of His people, in consecration of His brethren, in the destruction of the devil.

But an interesting view of the passage has been proposed by Hofmann, and accepted by at least one thoughtful theologian of our country. They consider that the Apostle identifies the humiliation and the glory. In the words of Dr. Bruce,³⁵ “Christ’s whole state of exinanition was not only worthy to be rewarded by a subsequent state of exaltation, but was in itself invested with moral sublimity and dignity.” The idea has considerable fascination. We cannot set it aside by saying that it is modern, seeing that the Apostle himself speaks of the office of high-priest as an honour and a glory.³⁶ Yet we are compelled to reject it as an explanation of the passage. The Apostle is showing that the Psalmist’s statement respecting man is realised only in the Man Christ Jesus. The difficulty was to connect man’s low estate and man’s glory and dominion. But if the Apostle means that voluntary humiliation for the sake of others is the glory, some men besides Jesus Christ might have been mentioned in whom the words of the Psalm find their accomplishment. The

³⁵ *Humiliation of Christ*, p. 46.

³⁶ Chap. v. 4, 5.

difference between Jesus and other good men would only be a difference of degree. Such a conclusion would very seriously weaken the force of the Apostle's reasoning.

In bringing his most skilful and original argument to a close, the Apostle recapitulates. He has said that the world to come, – the world of conscience and of spirit, – has been put in subjection to man, not to angels, and that this implies the incarnation of the Son of God. This thought the Apostle repeats in another, but very striking, form: “For verily He taketh not hold of angels, but He taketh hold of the seed of Abraham.” Though the old versions were incorrect in so rendering the words as to make them express the fact of the Incarnation, the verse is a reference to the Incarnation, described, however, as Christ's strong grasp³⁷ of man. By becoming man He takes hold of humanity, as with a mighty hand, and that part by which He grasps humanity is the seed of Abraham, to whom the promise was made.

Four points of connection between the glory of Christ and His humiliation have been mentioned. In his recapitulation, the Apostle sums all up in two. The one is that Christ is Priest; the other is that He succours them that are tempted. His propitiatory death and His bringing to nought the power of Satan are included in the notion of priesthood. The moral discipline that made Him our Leader and the sense of brotherhood that made Him Sanctifier render Him able to succour the tempted. Even this also, as will be fully shown by the Apostle in a subsequent

³⁷ ἐπιλαμβάνεται (ii. 16).

chapter, is contained in His priesthood. For He only can make propitiation, Whose heart is full of tender pity and steeled only against pity for Himself by reason of His dauntless fidelity to others.

Thus is the Son better than the angels.

CHAPTER III

FUNDAMENTAL ONENESS OF THE DISPENSATIONS

Hebrews iii. 1–iv. 13 (R.V.)

“Wherefore, holy brethren, partakers of a heavenly calling, consider the Apostle and High-priest of our confession, *even* Jesus; who was faithful to Him that appointed Him as also was Moses in all his house. For He hath been counted worthy of more glory than Moses, by so much as he that built the house hath more honour than the house. For every house is builded by some one; but He that built all things is God. And Moses indeed was faithful in all his house as a servant, for a testimony of those things which were afterward to be spoken; but Christ as a Son, over His house; Whose house are we, if we hold fast our boldness and the glorying of our hope firm unto the end. Wherefore, even as the Holy Ghost saith,

To-day if ye shall hear His voice,
Harden not your hearts, as in the provocation,
Like as in the day of the temptation in the wilderness,
Wherewith your fathers tempted *Me* by proving *Me*,

And saw My works forty years.
Wherefore I was displeased with this generation,
And said, They do always err in their heart:
But they did not know My ways;
As I sware in My wrath,
They shall not enter into My rest.

Take heed, brethren, lest haply there shall be in any one of you an evil heart of unbelief, in falling away from the living God: but exhort one another day by day, so long as it is called to-day; lest any one of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin: for we are become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our confidence firm unto the end: while it is said,

To-day if ye shall hear His voice,
Harden not your hearts, as in the provocation.

For who, when they heard, did provoke? nay, did not all they that came out of Egypt by Moses? And with whom was He displeased forty years? was it not with them that sinned, whose carcasses fell in the wilderness? And to whom sware He that they should not enter into His rest, but to them that were disobedient? And we see that they were not able to enter in because of unbelief.

Let us fear therefore, lest haply, a promise being left of entering into His rest, any one of you should seem to have come short of it. For indeed we have had good tidings preached unto

us, even as also they: but the word of hearing did not profit them, because they were not united by faith with them that heard. For we which have believed do enter into that rest; even as He hath said,

As I sware in My wrath,
They shall not enter into My rest:

although the works were finished from the foundation of the world. For He hath said somewhere of the seventh *day* on this wise, And God rested on the seventh day from all His works; and in this *place* again,

They shall not enter into My rest.

Seeing therefore it remaineth that some should enter thereinto, and they to whom the good tidings were before preached failed to enter in because of disobedience, He again defineth a certain day, saying in David, after so long a time, To-day, as it hath been before said,

To-day if ye shall hear His voice,
Harden not your hearts.

For if Joshua had given them rest, he would not have spoken afterward of another day. There remaineth therefore a sabbath rest for the people of God. For he that is entered into his rest hath

himself also rested from his works, as God did from His. Let us therefore give diligence to enter into that rest, that no man fall after the same example of disobedience. For the word of God is living, and active, and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing even to the dividing of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and quick to discern the thoughts and intents of the heart. And there is no creature that is not manifest in His sight: but all things are naked and laid open before the eyes of Him with Whom we have to do.”

The broad foundation of Christianity has now been laid in the person of the Son, God-Man. In the subsequent chapters of the Epistle this doctrine is made to throw light on the mutual relations of the two dispensations.

The first deduction is that the Mosaic dispensation was itself created by Christ; that the threats and promises of the Old Testament live on into the New; that the central idea of the Hebrew religion, the idea of the Sabbath rest, is realised in its inmost meaning in Christ only; that the word of God is ever full of living energy. Hereafter the Apostle will not be slow to expose the wide difference between the two dispensations. But it is equally true and not less important that the old covenant was the vesture of truths which remain when the garment has been changed.

At the outset the writer's tone is influenced by this doctrine. He turns his treatise unconsciously into an epistle. He addresses his readers as brethren, holy indeed, but not holy after the

pattern of their former exclusiveness; for their holiness is inseparably linked with their common brotherhood. They are partakers with the Gentile Churches in a heavenly call. Startling words! Hebrews holy in virtue of their sharing with Greeks and barbarians, bond and free, in a common call from high Heaven, which sees all earth as a level plain beneath! The middle wall of partition has been broken down to the ground. Yet soothing words, and full of encouragement! The Apostle and his leaders were standing near the end of the Apostolic age, when the Hebrew Christians were despondent, weak, and despised, both by reason of national calamities and because of their inferiority to their sister Churches among the Gentiles. The Apostle does not bluntly assure them of their equality, but gently addresses them as partakers of a heavenly call. His words are the reverse of St. Paul's language to the Ephesians, who are reminded that the Gentiles are partakers in the privileges of Israel. Those who sometimes were far off have been made nigh; the strangers and sojourners are henceforth fellow-citizens with the saints and of the household of God. Here, on the contrary, Hebrew Christians are encouraged with the assurance that they partake in the privileges of all believers. If the wild olive tree has been grafted in among the branches and made partaker of the root, the branches, broken off that the wild olive might be grafted in, are themselves in consequence grafted into their own olive tree. Through God's mercy to the Gentiles, Israel also has obtained mercy.

The Apostle addresses them with affection. But his behest is sharp and urgent: “Consider the Apostle and High-priest of our profession, Jesus.” Consider intently, or, to borrow a modern word that has sometimes been abused, Realise Jesus. Dwell not with abstractions and theories. Fear not imaginary dangers. Make Jesus Christ a reality before the eyes of your mind. To do this well will be more convincing than external evidences. To behold the glory of the temple, linger not to admire the strong buttresses without, but enter. Realisation of Christ may be said to be the gist of the whole Epistle.

This spiritual vision is not ecstasy. We realise Christ as Apostle and as High-priest. We behold Him when His words are a message to us from God, and when He carries our supplications to God. Revelation and prayer are the two opposite poles of communion with the Father. The dispensation of Moses rested on these two pillars, – apostleship and priesthood. But the fundamental conceptions of the Old Testament centre in Jesus. Though our author has distinguished between God’s revelation in the prophets and His revelation in a Son, he teaches also that even the prophets received their message through the Son. Though he contrasts in what follows of the Epistle the high-priesthood of Aaron with Christ’s, still he regards Aaron’s office as utterly meaningless apart from Christ. The words “Apostle and High-priest” pave the way, therefore, to the most prominent truth in this section of the Epistle: that whatever is best in the Old Testament has been assimilated and inspired with new energy by

the Gospel.

1. To begin, we must understand the actual position of the founders of the two dispensations. Neither Moses nor Christ set about originating, designing, constructing, from his own impulse and for his own purposes. Both acted for God, and were consciously under His directing eye.³⁸ “It is required in stewards that a man be found faithful.”³⁹ They have but to obey, and leave the unity and harmony of the plan to another. To use an illustration, every house is built by some one or other.⁴⁰ The design has been conceived in the brain of the architect. He is the real builder, though he employs masons and joiners to put the materials together according to his plan. This applies to the subject in hand; for God is the Architect of all things. He realises His own ideas as well through the seeming originality of thinkers as through the willing obedience of workers. Now, the dispensation of the old covenant was one part of God’s design. To build this portion of the house He found a faithful servant in Moses. The dispensation of the new covenant is but another, though more excellent, part of the same design; and Jesus was not less faithful to finish the structure. The unity of the design was in the mind of God.

Moses was faithful when he refused the treasures of Egypt, and chose affliction with the people of God and the reproach

³⁸ Chap. iii. 2.

³⁹ 1 Cor. iv. 2.

⁴⁰ Chap. iii. 4.

of His Christ. He was faithful when he chid the people in the wilderness for their unbelief, and when he interceded for them again with God. Christ also was faithful to His God when He despised the shame and endured the Cross.

Yet we must acknowledge a difference. God has accounted Jesus worthy of greater honour than Moses, inasmuch as Moses was part of the house, and that part the pre-existent Christ erected. Moses was “made” all that he became by Christ, but Christ was “made”⁴¹ all that He became – God-Man – by God. Moreover, though Moses was greater than all the other servants of God before Christ, because they were placed in subordinate positions, while he was faithful in the *whole* house, yet even he was but a servant, whereas Christ was Son. Moses was in the house, it is true; but the Son was placed over the house. The work which Moses had to do was to uphold the authority of the Son, to witness, that is, to the things which would afterwards be spoken unto us by God in His Son, Jesus Christ.⁴²

The Apostle seems to delight in his illustration of the house, and continues to use it with a fresh meaning. This house, or, if you please, this household, are we Christians. We are the house in which Moses showed the utmost faithfulness as servant. We are the circumcision, we the true Israel of God. If, then, we turn away from Christ to Moses, that faithful servant himself will have none of us. That we may be God’s house, we must lay fast hold

⁴¹ ποιήσαντι.

⁴² Chap. iii. 5.

of our Christian confidence and the boasting of our hope out-and-out to the end.

2. Again, the threatenings of the Old Testament for disobedience to God apply with full force to apostasy from Christ. They are the authoritative voice of the Holy Spirit. The Apostle is reminded by the words which he has just used, “We are God’s house,” of the Psalmist’s joyful exclamation, “He is our God, and we are the people of His pasture, and the sheep of His hand.”⁴³ Then follows in the Psalm a warning, which the Apostle considers it equally necessary to address to the Hebrew Christians: “To-day, if indeed you still hear His voice (for it is possible He may no longer speak), harden not your hearts, as you did in Meribah, rightly called, – the place of contention. Your fathers, far from trusting Me when I put them to the test, turned upon Me and put Me to the test, and that although they saw My works during forty years.” Forty years, – ominous number! The readers would at once call to mind that forty years within a little had now passed since their Lord had gone through the heavens to the right hand of the Father. What if, after all, the old belief proves true that He returns to judgment after waiting for precisely the same period for which He had patiently endured their fathers’ unbelief in the wilderness! God is still living, and He is the same God. He Who swore in His wrath that the fathers should not enter into the rest of Canaan is the same in His anger, the same in His mercy. Exhort one another. In the wilderness

⁴³ Ps. xcvi. 7, sqq.

God dealt with individuals. He does so still. See that there be no evil heart, which is unbelief, in *any one* of you at any time while the call, “To-day!” is sounded in your ears. For sin weakens the sense of individual guilt, and thus deceives men by hardening their hearts.⁴⁴ All that came out of Egypt provoked God to anger. But they provoked Him, not in the mass, but one by one, and one by one, with palsied limbs,⁴⁵ they fell in the wilderness, as men fall exhausted on the march. Thus, for their persistent unbelief, God swore they should not enter into His rest – “His,” for He kept the key still in His own hand. But persistent unbelief made them incapable of entering. If God were still willing to cut off for them the waters of Jordan, they *could* not⁴⁶ enter in because of unbelief.

3. Similarly, the promises of God are still in force. Indeed, the steadfastness of the threatenings involves the continuance of the promises, and the rejection of the promises ensures the fulfilment of every threatening. As much as this is expressed in the opening words of chap. iv.: “A promise being left to us, let us therefore fear.”

To prove the identity of the promises under the two dispensations, the Apostle singles out one promise, which may be considered most significant of the national no less than the religious life of Israel. The Greek mind was ever on the alert for

⁴⁴ Chap. ii. 13.

⁴⁵ τὰ κῶλα. Cf. chap. xii. 12.

⁴⁶ οὐκ ἠδυνήθησαν (iii. 19).

something new. Its character was movement. But the ideal of the Old Testament is rest. Christ came into touch with the people at once when He began His public ministry with an invitation to the weary and heavy-laden to come unto Him, and with the promise that He would give them rest. Near the close of His ministry He explained and fulfilled the promise by giving to His disciples peace. The object of our author, in the difficult chapter now under consideration, is to show that the idea most characteristic of the old covenant finds its true and highest realisation in Christ. After the manner of St. Paul, who, in more than one passage, teaches that through the fall of Israel salvation is come unto the Gentiles, the writer of this Epistle also argues that the promise of rest still remains, because it was not fulfilled under the Old Testament in consequence of Israel's unbelief. The word of promise was a gospel⁴⁷ to them, as it is to us. But it did not profit them, because they did not assimilate⁴⁸ the promise by faith. Their history from the beginning consists of continued renewals of the promise on the part of God and persistent rejections on the part of Israel, ending in the hardening of their hearts. Every time the promise is renewed, it is presented in a higher and more spiritual form. Every rejection inevitably leads to grosser views and more hopeless unbelief. So entirely false is the fable of the Sibyl! God does not burn some of the leaves when His promises have been rejected, and come back with fewer offers

⁴⁷ εὐηγγελισμένοι (iv. 2).

⁴⁸ Reading συγκεκρασμένος.

at a higher price. His method is to offer more and better on the same conditions. But it is the nature of unbelief to cause the heart to wax gross, to blind the spiritual vision, until in the end the rich, spiritual promises of God and the earthly, dark unbelief of the sinner stand in extremest contrast.

At first the promise is presented in the negative form of rest from labour. Even the Creator condescended thus to rest. But what *such* rest can be to God it were vain for man to try to conceive. We know that, as soon as the foundations of the world were laid and the work of creation was ended, God ceased from this form of activity. But when this negative rest had been attained, it was far from realising God's idea of rest either for Himself or for man. For, though these works of God, the material universe, were finished from the laying of the world's foundations to the crowning of the edifice,⁴⁹ God still speaks of another rest, and threatens to shut some men out for their unbelief. Our Lord told the Pharisees, whose notion of the Sabbath was the negative one, that He desired His Sabbath rest to be like that of His Father, Who "worketh hitherto." The Jewish Sabbath, it appears, therefore, is the most crude and elementary form of God's promised rest.

The promise is next presented as the rest of Canaan.⁵⁰ This is a stage in advance in the development of the idea. It is not mere abstention from secular labour, and the consecration of

⁴⁹ Chap. iv. 3.

⁵⁰ Chap. iv. 8.

inactivity. The rest now consists in the enjoyment of material prosperity, the proud consciousness of national power, the growth of a peculiar civilization, the rise of great men and eminent saints, and all this won by Israel under the leadership of their Jesus, who was in this respect a type of ours. But even in this second garden of Eden Israel did not attain unto God's rest. Worldliness became their snare.

But God still called to them by the mouth of the Psalmist, long after they had entered on the possession of Canaan. This only proves that the true rest was still unattained, and God's promise not yet fulfilled. The form which the rest of God now assumed is not expressly stated in our passage. But we have not far to go in search of it. The first Psalm, which is the introduction to all the Psalms, declares the blessedness of contemplation. The Sabbath is seldom mentioned by the Psalmist. Its place is taken by the sanctuary, in which rest of soul is found in meditating on God's law and beholding the Lord's beauty.⁵¹ The call is at last urgent. "To-day!" It is the last invitation. It lingers in the ears in ever fainter voice of prophet after prophet, until the prophet's face turns towards the east to announce the break of dawn and the coming of the perfect rest in Jesus Christ. God's promise was never fulfilled to Israel, because of their unbelief. But shall their unbelief make the faithfulness of God of none effect? God forbid. The gifts and calling of God are without repentance. The promise that has failed of fulfilment in the lower

⁵¹ Ps. xxvii. 4.

form must find its accomplishment in the higher. Even a prayer is the more heard for every delay. God's mill grinds slowly, but for that reason grinds small. What is the inference? Surely it is that the Sabbath rest still remains for the true people of God. This Sabbath rest St. Paul prayed that the true Israel, who glory, not in their circumcision, but in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, might receive: "*Peace* be upon them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God."⁵²

The faithfulness of God to fulfil His promise in its higher form is proved by His having accomplished it in its more elementary forms to every one that believed. "For he that entered into God's rest did actually rest from his works"⁵³— that is to say, received the blessings of the Sabbath — as truly as God rested from the work of creation. The Apostle's practical inference is couched in language almost paradoxical: "Let us *strive* to enter into God's *rest*" — not indeed into the rest of the Old Testament, but into the better rest which God now offers in His Son.

The oneness of the dispensations has been proved. They are one in their design, in their threatenings, in their promises. If we seek the fundamental ground of this threefold unity, we shall find it in the fact that both dispensations are parts of a Divine revelation. God has spoken, and the word of God does not pass away. "Think not," said our Lord, "that I came to destroy the Law or the prophets; I came not to destroy, but to fulfil. For

⁵² Gal. vi. 16.

⁵³ Chap. iv. 10.

verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass away from the Law till all things be accomplished.”⁵⁴ On another occasion He says, “Heaven and earth shall pass away, but My words shall not pass away.”⁵⁵ These passages teach us that the words of God through Moses and in the Son are equally immutable. Many features of the old covenant may be transient; but, if it is a word of God, it abides in its essential nature through all changes. For “the word of God is living,”⁵⁶ because He Who speaks the word is the living God. It acts with mighty energy,⁵⁷ like the silent laws of nature, which destroy or save alive according as men obey or disobey them. It cuts like a sword whetted on each side of the blade, piercing through to the place where the natural life of the soul divides⁵⁸ from, or passes into, the supernatural life of the spirit. For it is revelation that has made known to man his possession of the spiritual faculty. The word “spirit” is used by heathen writers. But in their books it means only the air we breathe. The very conception of the spiritual is enshrined in the bosom of God’s word. Revelation has separated between the life of heathenism and the life of the Church, between the natural man and the spiritual, between the darkness that comprehended

⁵⁴ Matt. v. 17, 18.

⁵⁵ Matt. xxiv. 35.

⁵⁶ Chap. iv. 12.

⁵⁷ ἐνεργής.

⁵⁸ μερισμοῦ.

it not and the children of the light who received it and thus became children of God. Further, the word of God pierces to the joints that connect the natural and the supernatural.⁵⁹ It does not ignore the former. On the contrary, it addresses itself to man's reason and conscience, in order to erect the supernatural upon nature. Where reason stops short, the word of God appeals to the supernatural faculty of faith; and when conscience grows blunt, the word makes conscience, like itself, sharper than any two-edged sword. Once more, the word of God pierces to the marrow.⁶⁰ It reveals to man the innermost meaning of his own nature and of the supernatural planted within him. The truest morality and the highest spirituality are both the direct product of God's revelation.

But all this is true in its practical application to every man individually. The power of the word of God to create distinct dispensations and yet maintain their fundamental unity, to distinguish between masses of men and yet cause all the separate threads of human history to converge and at last meet, is the same power which judges the inmost thoughts and inmost purposes of the heart. These it surveys with critical judgment.⁶¹ If its eye is keen, its range of vision is also wide. No created thing but is seen and manifest. The surface is bared, and the depth within is opened up before it. As the upturned neck of the sacrificial beast

⁵⁹ ἄρμῶν.

⁶⁰ μυελῶν.

⁶¹ κριτικός.

lay bare to the eye of God,⁶² so are we exposed to the eye of Him to Whom we have to give our account.⁶³

⁶² τετραηλισμένα (iv. 13).

⁶³ ὁ λόγος.

CHAPTER IV

THE GREAT HIGH-PRIEST

“Having then a great High-priest, Who hath passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we have not a high-priest that cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but One that hath been in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore draw near with boldness unto the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy, and may find grace to help us in time of need. For every high-priest, being taken from among men, is appointed for men in things pertaining to God, that he may offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins: who can bear gently with the ignorant and erring, for that he himself also is compassed with infirmity; and by reason thereof is bound, as for the people, so also for himself, to offer for sins. And no man taketh the honour unto himself, but when he is called of God, even as was Aaron. So Christ also glorified not Himself to be made a High-priest, but He that spake unto Him,

Thou art My Son,
This day have I begotten Thee:

as He saith also in another place,

Thou art a Priest for ever
After the order of Melchizedek.

Who in the days of His flesh, having offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto Him that was able to save Him from death, and having been heard for His godly fear, though He was a Son, yet learned obedience by the things which He suffered; and having been made perfect, He became unto all them that obey Him the Author of eternal salvation; named of God a High-priest after the order of Melchizedek.” – Heb. iv. 14–v. 10 (R.V.)

The results already gained are such as these: that the Son, through Whom God has spoken unto us, is a greater Person than the angels; that Jesus, Whom the Apostle and the Hebrew Christians acknowledge to be Son of God, is the representative Man, endowed, as such, with kingly authority; that the Son of God became man in order that He might be constituted High-priest to make reconciliation for sin; and, finally, that all the purposes of God revealed in the Old Testament, though they have hitherto been accomplished but partially, will not fall to the ground, and will remain in higher forms under the Gospel.

The writer gathers these threads to a head in chap. iv. 14. The high-priest still remains. If we have the high-priest, we have all that is of lasting worth in the old covenant. For the idea of the covenant is reconciliation with God, and this is embodied and symbolised in the high-priest, inasmuch as he alone entered

within the veil on the day of atonement. Having the high-priest in a greater Person, we have all the blessings of the covenant restored to us in a better form. The Epistle to the Hebrews is intended to encourage and comfort men who have lost their all. Judaism was in its death-throes. National independence had already ceased. When the Apostle was writing, the eagles were gathering around the carcase. But when all is lost, all is regained if we “have” the High-priest.

The secret of His abiding for ever is His own greatness. He is a *great* High-priest; for He has entered into the immediate presence of God, not through the Temple veil, but through the very heavens. In chap. viii. 1 the Apostle declares this to be the head and front of all he has said: “We have *such* an High-priest” as He must be “Who is set on the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens.” He is a great High-priest because He is a Priest on a throne. As the representative Man, Jesus is crowned. His glory is kingly. But the glory bestowed on the Man as King has brought Him into the audience-chamber of God as High-priest. The kingship of Jesus, to Whom all creation is subjected, and Who sits above all creation, has made His priestly service effectual. His exaltation is much more than a reward for His redemptive sufferings. He entered the heaven of God as the sanctuary of which He is Minister. For if He were on earth, He would not be a Priest at all, seeing that He is not of the order of Aaron, to which the earthly priesthood belongs according to the

Law.⁶⁴ But Christ is not entered into the holy place made with hands, but into the very heaven, now to be manifested before the face of God for us.⁶⁵ The Apostle has said that Christ is Son over the house of God. He is also High-priest over the house of God, having authority over it in virtue of His priesthood for it, and administering His priestly functions effectually through His kingship.⁶⁶

The entire structure of the Apostle's inferences rests on the twofold argument of the first two chapters. Jesus Christ is a great High-priest; that is, King and High-priest in one, because He unites in His own person Son of God and Son of man.

One is tempted to find an intentional antithesis between the awe-inspiring description of the word of God in the previous verse and the tender language of the verse that follows. Is the word a living, energising power? The High-priest too is living and powerful, great and dwelling above the heavens. Does the word pierce to our innermost being? The High-priest sympathises with our weaknesses, or, in the beautiful paraphrase of the English Version, "is touched with a feeling of our infirmities." Does the word judge? The High-priest can be equitable, inasmuch as He has been tempted like as we are tempted, and that without sin.⁶⁷

On the last-mentioned point much might be said. He was

⁶⁴ Chap. viii. 4.

⁶⁵ Chap. ix. 24.

⁶⁶ Cf. chap. x. 21.

⁶⁷ Chap. iv. 15.

tempted to sin, but withstood the temptation. He had true and complete humanity, and human nature, as such and alone, is capable of sin. Shall we, therefore, admit that Jesus was capable of sin? But He was Son of God. Christ was Man, but not a human Person. He was a Divine Person, and therefore absolutely and eternally incapable of sin; for sin is the act and property of a person, not of a mere nature apart from the persons who have that nature. Having assumed humanity, the Divine person of the Son of God was truly tempted, like as we are. He felt the power of the temptation, which appealed in every case, not to a sinful lust, but to a sinless want and natural desire. But to have yielded to Satan and satisfied a sinless appetite at his suggestion would have been a sin. It would argue want of faith in God. Moreover, He strove against the tempter with the weapons of prayer and the word of God. He conquered by His faith. Far from lessening the force of the trial, His being Son of God rendered His humanity capable of being tempted to the very utmost limit of all temptation. We dare not say that mere man would certainly have yielded to the sore trials that beset Jesus. But we do say that mere man would never have felt the temptation so keenly. Neither did His Divine greatness lessen His sympathy. Holy men have a wellspring of pity in their hearts, to which ordinary men are total strangers. The infinitely holy Son of God had infinite pity. These are the sources of His power to succour the tempted, – the reality of His temptations as He was Son of man, the intensity of them as He was Son of God, and the compassion of One Who was both Son

of God and Son of man.

Our author is wont to break off suddenly and intersperse his arguments with affectionate words of exhortation. He does so here. It is still the same urgent command: Do not let go the anchor. Hold fast your profession of Christ as Son of God and Son of man, as Priest and King. Let us draw nearer, and that boldly, unto this great High-priest, Who is enthroned on the mercy-seat, that we may obtain the pity which, in our sense of utter helplessness, we seek, and *find* more than we seek or hope for, even His grace to help us. Only linger not till it be too late. His aid must be sought in time.⁶⁸ “To-day” is still the call.

Pity and helping grace, sympathy and authority – in these two excellences all the qualifications of a high-priest are comprised. It was so under the old covenant. Every high-priest was taken from among men that he might sympathise, and was appointed by God that he might have authority to act on behalf of men.

1. The high-priest under the Law is himself beset by the infirmities of sinful human nature, the infirmities at least for which alone the Law provides a sacrifice, sins of ignorance and inadvertence.⁶⁹ Thus only can he form a fair and equitable judgment⁷⁰ when men go astray. The thought wears the appearance of novelty. No use is apparently made of it in the Old Testament. The notion of the high-priest’s Divine appointment

⁶⁸ εὐκαιρον (iv. 16).

⁶⁹ Chap. v. 1, 2.

⁷⁰ μετριοπαθεῖν.

overshadowed that of his human sympathy. His sinfulness is acknowledged, and Aaron is commanded to offer sacrifice for himself and for the sins of the people.⁷¹ But the author of this Epistle states the reason why a sinful man was made high-priest. He has told us that the Law was given through angels. But no angel interposed as high-priest between the sinner and God. Sympathy would be wanting to the angel. But the very infirmity that gave the high-priest his power of sympathy made sacrifice necessary for the high-priest himself. This was the fatal defect. How can he bestow forgiveness who must seek the like forgiveness?

In the case of the great High-priest, Jesus the Son of God, the end must be sought in another way. He is not so taken from the stock of humanity as to be stained with sin. He is not one of many men, any one of whom might have been chosen. On the contrary, He is holy, innocent, stainless, separated in character and position before God from the sinners around Him.⁷² He has no need to offer sacrifice for any sin of His own, but only for the sins of the people; and this He did once for all when He offered up Himself. For the Law makes mere men, beset with sinful infirmity, priests; but the word of the oath makes the Son Priest, Who has been perfected for His office for ever.⁷³ In this respect He bears no resemblance to Aaron. Yet God did

⁷¹ Lev. xvi. 6.

⁷² Chap. vii. 26.

⁷³ Chap. vii. 28.

not leave His people without a type of Jesus in this complete separateness. The Psalmist speaks of Him as a Priest after the order of Melchizedek, and concerning Christ as the Melchizedek Priest the Apostle has more to say hereafter.⁷⁴

The question returns, How, then, can the Son of God sympathise with sinful man? He can sympathise with our sinless infirmities because He is true Man. But that He, the sinless One, may be able to sympathise with sinful infirmities, He must be made sin for us and face death as a sin-offering. The High-priest Himself becomes the sacrifice which He offers. Special trials beset Him. His life on earth is pre-eminently “days of the flesh,”⁷⁵ so despised is He, a very Man of sorrows. When He could not acquire the power of sympathy by offering atonement for Himself, because He needed it not, He *offered* prayers and supplications with a strong cry and tears to Him Who was able to save Him out of death. But why the strong cries and bitter weeping? Can we suppose for a moment that He was only afraid of physical pain? Or did He dread the shame of the Cross? Our author elsewhere says that He despised it. Shall we say that Jesus Christ had less moral courage than Socrates or His own martyr-servant, St. Ignatius? At the same time, let us confine ourselves strictly to the words of Scripture, lest by any gloss of our own we ascribe to Christ’s death what is required by the exigencies of a ready-made theory. “Being in an agony, He

⁷⁴ Chap. v. 10, 11.

⁷⁵ Chap. v. 7.

prayed more earnestly; and His sweat became as it were great drops of blood falling down upon the ground.”⁷⁶ Is this the attitude of a martyr? The Apostle himself explains it. “Though He was a Son,” to Whom obedience to His Father’s command that He should lay down His life was natural and joyful, yet He learned His obedience, special and peculiar as it was, by the things which He suffered.⁷⁷ He was perfecting Himself to be our High-priest. By these acts of priestly offering He was rendering Himself fit to be the sacrifice offered. Because there was in His prayers and supplications, in His crying and weeping, this element of entire self-surrender to His Father’s will, which is the truest piety,⁷⁸ His prayers were heard. He prayed to be delivered out of His death. He prayed for the glory which He had with His Father before the world was. At the same time He piously resigned Himself to die as a sacrifice, and left it to God to decide whether He would raise Him from death or leave His soul in Hades. Because of this perfect self-abnegation, His sacrifice was complete; and, on the other hand, because of the same entire self-denial, God did deliver Him out of death and made Him an eternal Priest. His prayers were not only heard, but became the foundation and beginning of His priestly intercession on behalf of others.

2. The second essential qualification of a high-priest was

⁷⁶ Luke xxii. 44. The genuineness of the verse is not quite certain.

⁷⁷ Cf. John x. 18.

⁷⁸ ἀπὸ τῆς εὐλαβείας (v. 7).

authority to act for men in things pertaining to God, and in His name to absolve the penitent sinner. Prayer was free to all God's people and even to the stranger that came out of a far country for the sake of the God of Israel's name. But guilt, by its very nature, involves the need, not merely of reconciling the sinner, but primarily of reconciling God. Hence the necessity of a Divine appointment. For how can man bring his sacrifice to God or know that God has accepted it unless God Himself appoints the mediator and through him pronounces the sinner absolved? It is true, if man only is to be reconciled, a Divinely appointed prophet will be enough, who will declare God's fatherly love and so remove the sinner's unbelief and slay his enmity. But the Epistle to the Hebrews teaches that God appoints a high-priest. This of itself is fatal to the theory that God needs not to be reconciled. In the sense of having this Divine authorization, the priestly office is here said to be an honour, which no man takes upon himself, but accepts when called thereunto by God.⁷⁹

How does this apply to the great High-priest Who has passed through the heavens? He also glorified not Himself to become High-priest. The Apostle has changed the word.⁸⁰ To Aaron it was an honour to be high-priest. He was authorized to act for God and for men. But to Christ it was more than an honour, more than an external authority conferred upon Him. It was part of the glory inseparable from His Sonship. He Who said to Him, "Thou art

⁷⁹ Chap. v. 4.

⁸⁰ τιμήν (v. 4); ἐδόξασεν (v. 5).

My Son,” made Him thereby potentially High-priest. His office springs from His personality, and is not, as in the case of Aaron, a prerogative superadded. The author has cited the second Psalm in a previous passage⁸¹ to prove the kingly greatness of the Son, and here again he cites the same words to describe His priestly character. His priesthood is not “from men,” and, therefore, does not pass away from Him to others; and this eternal, independent priesthood of Christ is typified in the king-priest Melchizedek. Before He began to act in His priestly office God said to Him, “Thou art a Priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek.” When He has been perfected and learned His obedience⁸² by the things which He suffered, God still addresses Him as a High-priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

⁸¹ Chap. i. 5.

⁸² τὴν ὑπακοήν (v. 8).

CHAPTER V

THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF RENEWAL

“Of Whom we have many things to say, and hard of interpretation, seeing ye are become dull of hearing. For when by reason of the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need again that some one teach you the rudiments of the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of solid food. For every one that partaketh of milk is without experience of the word of righteousness; for he is a babe. But solid food is for full-grown men, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern good and evil. Wherefore let us cease to speak of the first principles of Christ, and press on unto perfection; not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith toward God, of the teaching of baptisms, and of laying on of hands, and of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment. And this will we do, if God permit. For as touching those who were once enlightened and tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, and tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the age to come, and then fell away, it is impossible to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put Him to an open shame. For the land which hath drunk the rain that cometh oft upon it, and bringeth forth herbs

meet for them for whose sake it is also tilled, receiveth blessing from God: but if it beareth thorns and thistles, it is rejected and nigh unto a curse; whose end is to be burned.” – Heb. v. 11–vi. 8 (R.V.).

In one of the greatest and most strange of human books the argument is sometimes said “to veil itself,” and the sustained image of a man battling with the waves betrays the writer’s hesitancy. When he has surmounted the first wave, he dreads the second. When he has escaped out of the second, he fears to take another step, lest the third wave may overwhelm him. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews has proved that Christ is Priest-King. But before he starts anew, he warns his readers that whoever will venture on must be prepared to hear a hard saying, which he himself will find difficult to interpret and few will receive. Hitherto he has only shown that whatever of lasting worth was contained in the old covenant remains and is exalted in Christ. Even this truth is an advance on the mere rudiments of Christian doctrine. But what if he attempts to prove that the covenant which God made with their fathers has waxed old and must vanish away to make room for a new and better one? For his part, he is eager to ascend to these higher truths. He has yet much to teach about Christ in the power of His heavenly life.⁸³ But his readers are dull of hearing and inexperienced in the word of righteousness.

The commentators are much divided and exercised on the

⁸³ Chap. v. 11.

question whether the Apostle means that the argument should advance or that his readers ought to make progress in spiritual character.⁸⁴ In a way he surely means both. What gives point to the whole section now to be considered is the connection between development of doctrine and a corresponding development of the moral nature. “For the time ye ought to be teachers.”⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Chap. vi. 1.

⁸⁵ Chap. v. 12.

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