

THE FIRST READERS OF HEBREWS

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It is the contention of this paper that the readers of the Epistle to the Hebrews, whatever their geographical location, were Jewish Christians who were in danger, not of lapsing into Judaism, nor of merely being slack in their Christian devotion, but of embracing a version of Christianity characterized by serious error.¹ Because relapse into Judaism is the most common view of the danger threatening the readers of the epistle, we shall devote major attention to a refutation of that view.

The view that the epistle was written to a group in danger of falling into paganism founders on the fact that the author can assume that the OT is authoritative for his readers and, indeed, is so fully accepted as true that it can provide the basis for his argument at almost every turn. Moreover, his asseveration that "the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intents of the heart" (4:12) gains its cogency from the fact that it accords with what the readers themselves most surely believed. The warning against "fall(ing) away from the living God" in 3:12 may sound like a warning against lapse into paganism, but it should be remembered that those holding seriously heretical views concerning Christ may be described in NT times as people who do not "have God" (2 John 7-9; cf. 1 John 2:22-23; 4:2-3; also note Gal 5:4, "You are severed from Christ"). It is therefore unnecessary to see a reference to lapse into paganism in Heb 3:12.

It is exceedingly improbable that the readers of the epistle were Christians, either Jew or Gentile, who were merely in danger of becoming slack in their Christian devotion or of failing to go on to Christian maturity. It is clear that they were being motivated by a desire to avoid persecution (10:32 ff.; 12:3 ff.; 13:13). It is also true that they were spiritually stunted (5:11 ff.). It must be admitted, moreover, that the arguments concerning Christ's person and work that make up a considerable portion of the epistle have a part to play in developing the kind of convictions that are fundamental to steadfastness in trial and to advancement toward maturity. However, if it were only a matter of so doing, the extent of the comparison with the Mosaic dispensation, the detail with which it is elaborated and the urgency with which it is argued would be unwarranted. Indeed, if such were the case it would surely be unnecessary to emphasize that the first covenant is "obsolete and growing old (and so) ready to vanish away" (8:13) and that God's

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¹T. J. Weedon, *Mark—Traditions in Conflict*, p. 25, thinks that Mark was written with a group in view that had a defective understanding of Christ's death.

"will" is for "sanctification through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (10:9-10; *ephapax* is emphasized by being placed at the end of the clause). This is to say nothing of the appropriateness of the constant emphasis that what we have in Christ is "better" than the provisions under the old order, an emphasis that is quite overdone if the only concern is for the steadfastness and maturation of the readers. The first covenant and its sacrificial system are more than a means whereby the new covenant and the sacrifice of Christ may be illuminated; they provide an attraction that must be combatted.

The only difficulty this statement poses is that the tabernacle in the wilderness rather than the temple in Jerusalem is a major center of attention. We know, however, that there were sectarian Jews who were disenchanted with the priests and the priestly ministry in the temple and who were enamored with the ancient ways in the wilderness. But more important, in our view, is the fact that the author has a penchant for making his case by way of Biblical exegesis. (Note the exegesis of Ps 95 in chaps. 3 and 4; cf. the treatment of Ps 8 in chap. 2, of Gen 14 and Ps 110 in chap. 7, etc.) He really believes that there is no other sword as sharp as "the word of God" (Heb 4:12), and so uses it wherever it is at all appropriate. But if the sacrificial ritual of the Jews is to be exegetically considered, this must be done in terms of the wilderness tabernacle, because the Biblical material concerning the matter is in relation to it. (The reference to the tabernacle in 13:10 poses no serious problem for this view because of the references to it in earlier chapters. If it is understood that "we have an altar" means "there is a sacrifice [in the levitical prescriptions]" it provides no problem whatever.)

That the readers are not Gentile Christians attracted to Judaism or to a Judaistic kind of Christianity is evident from the fact that circumcision is not mentioned. Since it was the distinguishing mark of Jews in NT times, circumcision was the crucial question for any Gentile attracted to Judaism or to a Judaistic kind of Christianity, as Acts 15 and the Epistle to the Galatians make abundantly clear. The complete lack of any reference to the subject rules out the possibility of such an attraction to Gentile Christians.

That the readers were not in danger of giving up their allegiance to Christ completely and returning to Judaism is evident first of all from the way in which the author refers to Jesus as Christ. He has to argue a variety of things concerning him, but he never argues his messiahship. He takes it for granted that his readers have no doubt that he is the one whose coming was expected by the Jews.

The first occurrence of "Christ," in Heb 3:6, is especially significant. The designation occurs without the article, so that though the messiahship of Jesus is indicated attention is not drawn to it. Probably the fact that the author is drawing attention to Jesus' faithfulness "over God's house as a son" led him to use "Christ" here, because he understood Ps 2 with its reference to "my son" to be messianic. (In 5:5 he speaks of "the Christ" as the one to whom Ps 2:7 was addressed.) Never-

theless it appears that he might just as well have repeated the name "Jesus," which he had used in 3:1. Indeed, that he is not self-conscious about using "Christ" here as an alternative for "Jesus" is proven by the usage "Jesus, the Son of God" in 4:14, where the "then" refers at least to what was stated in 3:1-6.

In the second occurrence of "Christ," in 3:14—"we share in Christ, if only we hold our first confidence firm to the end"—attention is drawn to the messianic hope of Israel and to the fulfilment of that hope by the use of the article with "Christ." Are the readers being exhorted to maintain their confidence in Jesus because, contrary to what they are in danger of believing, he really is the Messiah? Or are they being exhorted to maintain their first confidence in him because, contrary to what they are in danger of believing, a different kind of confidence in him means being unrelated to him whom they know to be the Messiah? That the latter alternative is the correct one is evident from the following considerations: (1) The question of the messiahship of Jesus is not specifically considered anywhere in the epistle; (2) "sharers" (*metochoi*), not "the Christ," is in the emphatic position at the beginning of the sentence; and (3) it is not "confidence (in Christ)" that is to be held "firm to the end," but "our first confidence (in Christ)." Indeed, "first" (*tēn archēn*) is in the emphatic position at the beginning of the respective clause. It is evident that our author can assume that his readers are not in danger of giving up their confidence in Jesus as the Christ.

The next occurrence of "Christ" is in 5:5. Here again the usage is articular, indicating that the one awaited by Israel is in view. Moreover, this usage is probably prompted by the fact that the author is about to quote from two messianic Psalms (2 and 110). However, the theme of the passage is the high priesthood of the one whom the author specifically calls "Jesus" (4:14). Without apology and without any evidence of self-consciousness, he can use "the Christ" as an alternative to the designation "Jesus."

In 6:1 we have reference to "the elementary doctrines of the Christ." Since what follows apparently refers to basic Christian instruction, again it appears that our author can assume that his readers identify "Jesus" with "the Christ." That he can assume this is especially evident when it is noted that, in the "elementary doctrines" set forth in the succeeding material, there is no specific reference to Jesus, whether by that name or in any other way.

Other uses of "Christ" and "the Christ" in the epistle likewise assume that the readers identify him with Jesus. In this connection it may be noted that the messiahship of Jesus was fundamental to Jewish Christianity at a period when it still seems to hold that Jewish ceremonies are essential (see Mark 8:29; Acts 2:36; 3:18; 4:10; 5:42; 10:14; 11:3; 21:20-21). It may also be noted that the Judaizing Galatians can be addressed in such a way as to imply that they did not doubt the messiahship of Jesus. Note the reference to "Christ" with the definite article in Gal 1:7; 5:24; 6:2 and the use of the phrase "Christ Jesus" in 2:4,

16 (twice); 3:26, 28; 4:14; 5:6, 24. It is not without significance, moreover, that the pseudo-Clementine literature, in which Christ's death seems to have no soteriological significance, strongly emphasizes that Jesus is the Christ (e. g., *Clem. Hom.* 2:17; *Clem. Recog.* 2.42, 44, 45, 68, 69).

In accord with the unselfconscious use of "Christ" and "the Christ" is the use of "the firstborn" in Heb 1:6. It is introduced without any explanation and assumed to be a term with which the readers will be familiar. Indeed, it is found in Ps 89:27 in a context eloquent concerning the covenant with David and, therefore, no doubt a well-known designation of the Messiah (cf. Rom 8:29; Col 1:15, 18; Rev 1:5). That such a name for the Messiah can be introduced without any attempt at justifying its use supports our view that the readers of Hebrews were not questioning the messiahship of Jesus.

In the next place we contend that, when our author speaks of Jesus as "the Son" or "the Son of God," he is not saying anything his readers had doubts about. Rather he is only stating what they accept without hesitation and is thereby enabled to present a watertight argument against distressing tendencies manifesting themselves in those to whom he is writing.

That his readers do not doubt that Jesus is the Son of God is intimated in the way the epistle opens. To contend that in 1:2-4 our author is challenging a tendency to depart from the conviction that Jesus is the Son of God is highly improbable. If that was his intention, it is surprising that he does not use the name "Jesus" until 2:9. Moreover, it is surprising that "Son" is used without the article and/or without explicit indication as to whose Son he is. But what is convincing is the fact that nowhere in the epistle does he argue that Jesus is the Son of God.

The writer is not arguing that Jesus is the Son of God in 1:5-13. This is indicated by the opening words of 1:8, "But of the Son he says. . . ." If he were about to quote an OT verse to prove that Jesus is the Son, as angels are not, he might have said, "But of Jesus, he says. . . ." but he would hardly have assumed his conclusion in his opening words. (Note that 4:14 proves that he can speak of "Jesus" as "the Son of God.") But what is even more convincing is the fact that the OT quotations he brings forward, at least as he uses them, would have been completely useless as arguments for the proposition that Jesus is the Son of God. The attempt to use them for such a purpose in the way he does would have elicited a response such as, "But we doubt that these verses have anything to do with Jesus." The NT writers are not so naive as to suppose that the use of such OT quotations as we have here would convince anyone that Jesus was the Son of God. The quotations used are used precisely because readers of the epistle would have no doubt that they referred to Jesus. Whether any of these particular verses were familiar to them as prophecies of Jesus Christ is immaterial, though the widespread use of 2 Sam 7, Ps 2 and Ps 110 as such in the primitive Church makes it probable that at least some of them had such significance for them. Because they would not doubt

that all of them referred to Jesus, these quotations were powerful arguments that Christ was indeed "superior to angels" and that therefore it was imperative to pay even more attention to the salvation "declared . . . by the Lord" than to the "message declared by angels," as they were tending to do. It is clear, then, that the readers of the epistle did not need to be convinced that Jesus is the Son of God. They only needed to understand what the implications of that faith are.

A number of the remaining occurrences of the designation of Jesus as "Son" of God—4:14; 5:5, 8; 6:6; 7:3, 28; 10:29—will be treated in other contexts. But we may note that, in some instances at least, what the author says would have had a powerful effect on his readers only if he had demonstrated that Jesus is the Son of God, or if it were true—as we contend it is—that they did not doubt that divine sonship. This is especially the case with 4:14, "Since then we have a great high priest . . . , Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession"; 6:6, "They crucify the Son of God on their own account"; 7:3, "The law appoints men . . . as high priests, but the word of the oath . . . appoints a Son"; and 10:29, "How much worse punishment do you think will be deserved by the man who has spurned the Son of God?"

Before leaving this topic it may be noted that though the divine sonship of Christ is not affirmed in Acts until 9:20, where it is stated that Paul "proclaimed Jesus, saying, 'He is the Son of God,'" Paul seems to refer to the divine sonship of Jesus in writing to the Galatians—see Gal 1:16; 2:20; 4:4, 6—in a way that suggests that the influence of the Judaizers on them was not such as to call that sonship into question. (Note that in Clem. *Recog.* 1.7, 63, 69; 2.47; 3.48; etc., Jesus is described as the Son of God.)

As is the case with "Christ" and "Son (of God)," Jesus can be called "Lord" in Hebrews without explanation or elaboration. In 10:10-12 the author quotes Ps 102:25-27, a passage in which "the Lord," i. e., Yahweh, is addressed as Creator of the earth and the heavens, and assumes that he can interpret this "Lord" as Jesus without giving a reason. In 2:3 and 7:14 Jesus can be referred to as "the Lord" and "our Lord" respectively in a way that suggests that the readers will not question the designation. If "the Lord" in 12:14 refers to Jesus, the same is true of this occurrence. "Our Lord Jesus" in 13:20 may not be significant, since it is in a benediction and therefore may be more or less traditional terminology. On the other hand, if traditional terminology is not being reflected, our contention receives further support. It may be noted in this connection that Jesus is referred to as "Lord" in Acts 1:21; 2:34, 36; Gal 1:3, 19; 6:14, 18. Though the occurrences in this material are not frequent, they do support the contention that people who think the OT ceremonies are essential to salvation, or who are inclined to think so, may still think of Jesus as Lord (cf. *Gos. Eb.* and *Gos. Heb.*). Moreover, he is spoken of as "Lord" in Clem. *Recog.* 2.1; 2.33, 46; 4.4, a document in which Christ's death seems to have no saving significance.

It remains for us to inquire whether the exhortations and warnings

in the epistle are compatible with our view. The first passage that engages our attention is in the opening verses of chap. 2. It is to be noted that the writer does not warn against the "neglect" of "the Lord," but of the "salvation . . . declared at first by the Lord and . . . attested . . . by those who heard him." Being the climax of the first argument in the epistle, this exhortation may be expected to summarize the concern of the epistle as a whole, and indeed it may be argued that this is precisely what the body of the epistle is about—i. e., the great salvation that Christians knew about and the urgency of not neglecting it.

In accord with this it is to be noted that the exhortation in 3:1 is not to "consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession," as *RSV* has it, but to "consider the apostle and high priest of our confession, Jesus." There is no suggestion that the readers needed to consider Jesus; what they needed to consider was his apostleship and high priesthood. Evidently the danger of neglecting the salvation Christ provided involved neglect of his high priesthood, by virtue of which he provided salvation through the sacrifice of himself. In this connection it may be noted that the Jewish high priest was described as a *šālīḥ*, i. e., a messenger, an apostle of God, as he came forth on the day of atonement from the holy of holies, the place that symbolized the immediate presence of God. (The ritual of the day of atonement receives extended consideration in chap. 9 of Hebrews.) On the other hand, "apostle" in 3:1 probably refers to the fact that Jesus is the one who declared the message of salvation, according to 2:3.

For the most part the lengthy exhortation in 3:7-4:13 is of such a nature that it does not tell for or against our thesis. Two possible exceptions are in 3:12 and 3:14, but we have already shown that the former provides no problem for our thesis and that the latter actually supports it.

The exhortation in 4:14, "Let us hold fast our confession," is based on the fact that "we have a great high priest . . . , Jesus, the Son of God." Again, as in 3:1, it is not to Jesus but to his high priesthood that the readers are urged to hold fast. Indeed, the context produces arguments why the high priesthood of Jesus is not to be neglected, leading up to the statement that this high priesthood of his was foundational to his becoming "the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him" (5:9). It is to be noted that the climax of concern in this passage is the availability of "eternal salvation," just as in 2:3 the concern was that there be no neglect of "such a great salvation."

The exhortation and warning of 5:11-6:12 are due to his readers' having become dull of hearing, the dullness evidenced by their not having gone beyond needing a ministry concerned with what the author calls in 5:12 "the first principles of God's word" and in 6:1 "the elementary doctrines of Christ." What these are is specified in 6:1-2. Their failure to go on to maturity has had as its concomitant that they "have become (*gegonate*) dull of hearing," which means that it is difficult for the writer to explain, so that they will grasp what he wants them to know concerning the high priesthood of Christ and, undoubtedly, the relation-

ship of that high priesthood to "eternal salvation" (cf. 5:10-11). Is there not an intimation here that the readers are in danger of becoming a sect for which Christ is important but for which his death has no soteriological significance? (Cf. Gal 2:21; 3:1; 5:2; 6:14; and the lack of reference to his death in such terms in Clem. *Hom.* and Clem. *Recog.*)

To be noted in this connection is the implication that to fail to go on to maturity means to "fall" (*parapesontas*) and that to fall means to "crucify the Son of God on their own account and hold him up to contempt" (6:6). Concerning this fall, the following are to be noted. (1) *Parapiptō* means "fall beside," "fall," not "fall away (from)" (TDNT 6, 171). It is therefore not the most appropriate word to express complete turning away from Christ. To express such a lapse *aphistēmi*, which occurs in 3:12, or *ekpiptō*, which occurs in Gal 5:4, would be more appropriate. It is, however, quite appropriate to express a fall that does not involve giving up all belief in Christ (cf. the use of *paraptōma* in Gal 6:1). (2) Nowhere is the fall described as a denial of Christ. In 6:12 it is described as being or becoming sluggish (*nōthroī genēsthe*) in contrast to being "imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises." The preceding verses suggest that they will be sluggish and fail to imitate those who inherit the promises if they do not manifest the same zeal they had formerly demonstrated by the "work and the love that (they) showed for his sake in serving the saints." With this may be compared the need to "stir up one another to love and good works" (10:24). Moreover, the "faith" they need is not faith in Christ but faith in God, as chap. 11 shows, and the longsuffering they need is because of persecution, as 12:1-4 shows. (3) Paul implies that there were Jews who rendered allegiance to the living God at the same time they were causing his name to be blasphemed (Rom 2:23-24). It is not hard to see how the readers might so conduct themselves in time of persecution as to bring contempt on Jesus even though they still believed he was the Christ. Lack of courage (*parrēsia*) could simply be the problem (Heb 10:35).² (4) If one can bring Christ into contempt even though one still believes in him, surely it is possible to "crucify" him while one still believes in him. (5) If the readers had been in danger of giving up all faith in Jesus, it would have been useless to warn them against crucifying the Son of God. The response would be, "But we doubt that Jesus is the Son of God."³

Heb 6:13 ff. intimates that involved in the danger of becoming sluggish and failing to have the necessary faith and longsuffering is a lack of perception concerning the significance of the promise to Abraham. But, as Gal 3:15-17 shows, this is quite consonant with a Christian profession. (In both passages it is emphasized, though with different sup-

²In our view this failure of courage is not the temporary weakness that may overtake one in a crisis but is a more deliberate matter, as indicated by *apobalēte*. Cf. *hekousiōs* in 10:26.

³G. W. Buchanan, *To the Hebrews*, p. 108, argues that the latter part of 6:6 means that for those who fail to be "restore(d) again to repentance" Christ would have to be crucified and put to an open shame all over again, a manifest impossibility. If his interpretation is correct, this part of the verse raises no questions relevant to our study.

porting arguments, that the fulfilment of the promise to Abraham can be counted on.)

Turning to the passage beginning at 10:19, we note that the exhortation to "hold fast the confession of our hope" (10:23) involves a reference to the promise of Abraham in which, as Christians, they could put their confidence. "He who promised is faithful" is an allusion to the argument in 6:13 ff. It seems that by failing to recognize the priestly office and work of Christ the readers were in danger of failing to rely on the promise to Abraham and were, rather, inclined to rely on the efficacy of Mosaic sacrifices. But, as Galatians shows, this does not necessarily imply complete denial of Christ. (Note that according to Acts 3:25-26 the idea that Christians were inheritors of the promise to Abraham was an emphasis in Jewish Christianity in the earliest days.)

The warning about sinning "deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth" (10:26) does not of itself imply complete rejection of Jesus. In the case of the readers, however, it is envisioned that such deliberate sinning would involve treading down the Son of God, considering his death of no more significance than that of any other man, and outraging the Spirit of grace (10:29). Of these the first is the most important for our study, because it could be interpreted as a complete turning away from Jesus Christ. But the context indicates a different interpretation.

The reason for this judgment is as follows: The *gar* in 10:26 implies that the deliberate sin the writer has particularly in mind is indicated in the preceding material. The immediately preceding injunction has to do with "love and good works" and with "not neglecting to meet together." If one willingly continues to fail in such matters—note that *hamartanontōn* is in the present tense—one is guilty of what is set forth in 10:26, 29 (cf. Jas 4:17). This becomes quite understandable when it is realized that "love and good works" and "meet(ing) together" involve identification with persecuted Christians, as is intimated by what is stated about "work and . . . love" in 6:10 (cf. 13:16) and is made perfectly clear by 10:32-39, which indicates that the readers will not "sin deliberately" if they are willing to undergo persecution and share the sufferings of persecuted Christians. To do so will require courage (*parrēsian*), steadfastness (*hypomonēs*) and faith, but it will mean "do(ing) the will of God." The alternative is to "shrink back and (be) destroyed" (10:39; note how the reference to "the day" in 10:25 is repeated in other terms in 10:37).

Further support for this interpretation is to be found in the material following 10:39. After setting forth the faith that his readers need in chap. 11, chap. 12 shows that the readers are in danger of "grow(ing) weary or fainthearted" (12:3) in the face of persecution. What is significant about all of this is that it nowhere suggests that Jesus himself is rejected. Indeed, the very opposite is suggested by 12:1-3. If the readers were really in danger of lapsing into Judaism (which is quite a different thing from letting it appear that they were so doing, as we think they may have been tempted to do), it would be useless to describe Christ's sufferings as the endurance of the hostility of sinners against

himself. If they had been really in danger of lapsing into Judaism they would have been tempted to think that Jesus was the sinner who deserved to be destroyed. Likewise it would be inappropriate to describe Jesus as "the pioneer and completer of *the faith*" (not "*our faith*").

Moreover, when carefully examined, 10:29 is fully in accord with our thesis. It is significant that the one they are in danger of spurning is referred to as "the Son of God." As we have seen, this appellation is one which the readers themselves unhesitatingly accorded to Jesus. But our author has made it clear that sonship, at least as incarnate (cf. 2:17), implies priesthood. This is the clear implication of his exegesis of Ps 2, 110 in 5:5-6, even though his primary interest in that passage is to show that "Christ did not exalt himself to be made a high priest." Moreover, it is to be noted that when he refers to Christ's sonship the context ordinarily contains a reference to his priesthood or his priestly work (see 1:2-3; 4:14; 5:8-10; 7:26-28; cf. 6:6; 7:3). Heb 3:6 is the only clear exception, the context of which shows why "son" is called for and why it is without priestly association. That priestly significance is to be understood in 10:29 is also suggested by the succeeding clause, which refers to the sacrificial significance of Christ's death. ("Blood" must be understood in the light of 9:11-14.) Of course, the relationship between Christ's priesthood and his death has been an important theme in the epistle (cf. 8:3; 9:11-14), and the two have just been brought into conjunction in 10:19-21. The readers were evidently in danger of justifying avoidance of persecution by holding that priestly and sacrificial significance is to be found in the levitical priests and offerings, and not recognizing such significance in the sonship and death of Christ. Prior to the time of Nero almost all persecution was at least instigated by Jews, who, moreover, seldom persecuted Christians unless they believed that the temple cultus and/or the law was being undermined, as is indicated by the charge against Stephen (Acts 6:13), the subsequent peace in the Jerusalem Church (Acts 9:31), and the intimation in Gal 5:11 that Paul would not have suffered persecution if he had supported the view that Christians must keep the law. It is therefore quite understandable how the readers could justify themselves without giving up all allegiance to Christ, especially since many Jewish Christians in the earliest days of the Church apparently considered participation in the Jewish ceremonies essential (cf. Acts 3:1; 21:20-26; cf. 10:14). But though understandable it was reprehensible, for they had been enlightened (cf. 10:26, "After receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins"), apparently in the first place by those who had initially brought them the gospel (2:3; 3:1, 14; 13:7-8) and most certainly and incontestably in the preceding portion of this epistle. Indeed, it is so reprehensible that it can only be described as is done in 10:29. Even though it may mean continuing to believe that Jesus is the Son of God, it is actually spurning the Son of God and considering his death no more significant than that of any other man.

The author adds that so doing also means "outrag(ing) the Spirit of grace." Though grace has not been a major theme of the epistle,

it is specifically connected with the death of Christ in 2:9 and, what comes to the same thing, with his high priesthood in 4:15-16. To fail to attribute priesthood and sacrifice to Christ is therefore sufficient to outrage "the Spirit of grace"—i. e., probably, "the Spirit who is the mediator of grace." In this connection it may be noted that the Galatian Christians were in danger of "nullify(ing) the grace of God" and thereby implying that "Christ died to no purpose" (Gal 2:21), even though they were not in danger of surrendering all allegiance to Jesus.

The exhortations and warnings in chap. 13 contain some matters significant for our study.

The warning against immorality and adultery in 13:4 (cf. 12:16) is strange if lapse into Judaism was the danger. As Rom 2:22 shows, Judaism strongly condemned adultery.

The emphasis in 13:8 on the changelessness of Jesus Christ is quite irrelevant if the danger was that of lapse into Judaism. It is relevant if the readers were in danger of accepting a view of Christ that differed from "the faith" of those leaders who had spoken to them "the word of God" (13:7; cf. 2 Cor 11:4; Gal 1:6-9). Indeed, it should be noted that the primary emphasis, as the Greek shows, is that Jesus is the same "yesterday and today"; that he is the same "forever" is added almost, if not altogether, as a relevant afterthought. "Yesterday" refers to the time when they first received the gospel and "today" to the time when the epistle is being written.

The warning against "strange teachings" in 13:9 has been thought by some to argue against the danger of lapse into Judaism, since Jewish teaching would not be "strange" to the readers.⁴ In our view, however, reference must be to Jewish teachings because the reference to "foods" in the latter part of the verse prompts the reference to a levitical sacrifice of which no one can eat in 13:10-11. (We hold that "we have an altar" in 13:10 means something like "there is a levitical sacrifice," because the syntax demands it. The use of *echō* with the meaning "to know of" is attested in non-Biblical Greek.)⁵ But if so, "strange" must mean "strange to Christianity," a meaning which, likewise, would not be most fitting if the danger were that of lapse into Judaism, since such a meaning suggests that the readers intend to continue being "Christians."

Our examination of the epistle supports our thesis at every point. It only remains to summarize what we have to say about the danger confronting the readers. They had become content with the most elementary level of Christian understanding. As a result they were in grave danger of succumbing to the temptation to a reprehensible avoidance of persecution, the justification of which involved putting confidence in the levitical priesthood and sacrifices instead of in the priesthood and sacrifice of Christ. Concomitant with such error, and helping to

⁴E. g., J. Moffatt, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, p. 233. He holds that this verse supports the view that the readers of Hebrews were in danger of lapse into paganism.

⁵LSJ³, p. 749b.

make it possible, was a defective view of Christ, or at least a tendency toward it, according to which Christ was not really considered to be superior to angels. Other concomitants included: (1) failure to see the significance of the incarnation (in view of 12:2-3 we do not think there was a tendency toward docetism); (2) failure to perceive the significance of the promise to Abraham; and (3) failure to perceive the importance of grace. There were other temptations, as chap. 13 makes clear, but these are the main ones.

