

# *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*

by  
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## Excerpt from Introduction

### "Destination of the Letter to the Hebrews"

I have now examined all the objections against the opinion that the epistle to the Hebrews was directed to Palestine with which I have met and which seem to be of sufficient magnitude to deserve attention. I am unable to perceive that they are very weighty, and surely they come quite short of being *conclusive*. On the other hand, the positive proof, I acknowledge, is only of a circumstantial nature and falls short of the weight which direct and unequivocal testimony in the epistle itself would possess.

But uniting the whole of it together--considering the intimate knowledge of Jewish rites, the strong attachment to their ritual and the special danger of defection from Christianity in consequence of it, which the whole texture of the epistle necessarily supposes, and combining these things with the other circumstances above discussed--I cannot resist the impression that the universal opinion of the ancient church respecting the persons to whom our epistle was addressed was well founded, being built upon early tradition and the contents of the epistle; and that the doubts and difficulties thrown in the way by modern and recent critics are not of sufficient importance to justify us in relinquishing the belief that Palestine Christians were addressed by the epistle to the Hebrews. Thousands of facts pertaining to criticism and to history are believed and treated as realities, which have less support than the opinion that has now been examined.

There remains but one question more, relative to the original destination of this epistle, concerning which inquiry is now to be made. *Was it directed to ALL the churches in Palestine or only to ONE? And if only to one, was this the church at Jerusalem or at some other place?*

This question cannot be answered, as is sufficiently evident from what has been already said, by adducing any *direct* testimony concerning it. *Probability* made out from circumstantial evidence is all, at the most, which criticism can achieve. Perhaps it may fail even in respect to this.

While engaged in the investigations necessary to complete the views above presented, it often occurred to me as not improbable that the epistle to the Hebrews was originally directed to the church at Cesarea. The reasons of this I will now briefly state.

Cesarea, *Καισάρεια παράλιος*, *Cesarea by the sea*, was built by Herod the Great in a most splendid manner and named by him in honour of the Roman emperor Augustus. Previously to this it was an insignificant village called *Στάπωνος πύργος*, *the tower of Strato*. Although it lay out of the district of Judea (as *anciently* defined by the Jews) and within the borders of Phenicia, yet it was within the Roman procuratorship of Judea and was the capital of the Roman prefects or procurators. Josephus calls it "the greatest city of *Judea*," and says (as has been already mentioned) that *the majority of the inhabitants were Greeks* (Bell. Jud. iii. 14, p. 854, edit. Colon).

Here Cornelius, the first convert to the Christian faith from the Gentiles, was stationed. On occasion of his conversion a church was gathered here and the miraculous gifts of the Spirit imparted to it (Acts 10:44-48). This was the earliest church that was gathered out of the ancient limits of Judea.

Paul had repeated opportunities for acquaintance with Christians here. After his first journey to Jerusalem, he returned to Tarsus through Cesarea (Acts 9:30). After preaching at Corinth and on going to revisit the churches in Asia, Paul landed here (Acts 18:22). On his fourth visit to Palestine he lodged here at the house of Philip the Evangelist, one of the seven deacons named in Acts 6. Here he abode *many days*, *ἡμέρας πλείους* (Acts 21:8-10). Here, at the time just mentioned, when Agabus had predicted that in case Paul went to Jerusalem he would be bound as a culprit there and delivered up to the heathen tribunals, the men of the place (*οἱ ἐντόπιοι*) as well as his own travelling companions besought him with tears and strong entreaties to refrain from going thither (Acts 21:12, 13). When, after this, he had been up to Jerusalem and was sent away under a guard of Roman soldiers, he was brought again to Cesarea, where he remained *two whole years* a kind of prisoner at large, none of his friends being forbidden to approach or assist him (Acts 24:23, 27).

At Cesarea dwelt a rich and powerful body of Jews. In the time of Felix these Cesarean Jews, boasting of their riches and of Herod as the founder of the city, treated with contempt the Syrian part of the population. This raised a tumult, and at last occasioned mutual assaults in which the Syrians were worsted. Felix was obliged to check the overbearing power of the Jewish party by commissioning the Roman soldiery to kill and plunder them (Antiq. Jud. xx. 6, p. 695, edit. Colon).

The Jews here, it appears also, were strong zealots for the temple worship. Herod Agrippa, while king of Judea, very probably (in order to ingratiate himself with the rich men of this his capital as well as with those of Jerusalem) pretended a very strong zeal for Judaism. This he exhibited by causing James the brother of John to be slain with the sword, by imprisoning Peter, and vexing others of the church (Acts xii. 1, seq.). Now considering that Cesarea was his capital and that to ingratiate himself with the Jews there, who were rich and powerful, would be a great object for a prince so wholly devoted as he was to the

interests of ambition, is it probable that his vexations of the church were limited to Jerusalem?

Let us now put all these facts together and compare them with the contents of our epistle, on the supposition that Paul wrote it.

From the epistle to the Hebrews it nowhere appears that the *writer* was the *first* teacher of the church whom he addresses, but the contrary is plainly implied. Now history tells us that Peter planted the church at Cesarea and not Paul (Acts 10). The teachers of the church addressed in the epistle to the Hebrews are applauded without any exception as to their doctrine or behaviour; and so this might well be, for the first teachers at Cesarea were apostles and primitive evangelists. Philip the evangelist was stationed there when Paul made his last visit to Jerusalem (Acts 21:8, seq.), and this Philip had four daughters who were prophetesses, i.e. teachers of the Christian religion. Does not this show a flourishing state of the church there?

The persons to whom the epistle to the Hebrews is addressed had often bestowed charity to relieve the necessities of Christians, and particularly of those who were imprisoned (Heb. 10:34, 6:10). How aptly this fits the circumstances of Paul among the Cesareans it is easy to perceive. He was a prisoner among them for the space of two years. Well might he say, "Ye had compassion τοῖς δεσμοῖς μου, *on my bonds*," as the common text reads, or (which comes after all to the same thing) τοῖς δεσμίαις, *on the imprisoned*. Paul's gratitude for this probably led him to speak of it repeatedly; and so it stands in the epistle to the Hebrews. The eulogy which the writer of that epistle bestows on those whom he addresses certainly becomes very significant on supposition that it was written by Paul under such circumstances.

The Hebrews addressed in our epistle had been early made converts to Christianity (5:12, 10:32). The church at Cesarea was the first gathered out of the ancient limits of Judea. Its first converts, indeed, were Gentile proselytes (Acts 10), but it cannot with any probability be supposed that, flourishing as it was when Paul paid his last visit to it before his imprisonment (Acts 21:8, seq.), there were no Jews who belonged to it; for Cesarea contained (as we have seen) a large number of Hebrew residents.

Herod Agrippa persecuted the church in A.D. 44, which was some twenty years before the epistle to the Hebrews was written, and Cesarea was Herod's capital. May not the Christians in it have suffered at that time? The Hebrews, in our epistle, had lost their property in some early persecution and had been imprisoned (10:32, seq.); and the persecuting Herod, who had the power of life and death, had also the power of confiscation and imprisonment, for he was made a *sovereign* by the Roman emperor. Under him the church at Cesarea may have experienced, and very probably did experience, such vexations. Certainly the church at Jerusalem experienced them at this time (Acts 12:1,

seq.).

The epistle to the Hebrews presents images drawn from the Grecian games and public shows (10:32, 12:1, seq.). At Cesarea, Herod the Great had instituted all the Grecian games and built a splendid theatre, so that such allusions would be very forcible and pertinent if addressed to those who lived there.

The writer of our epistle mentions Timothy, to the church whom he addresses, as his special friend and one in whom they would feel a deep interest. And as Timothy, it cannot well be doubted, was at Cesarea with Paul more or less of the time that he was a prisoner there for two years, the church at that place must have been well acquainted with him.

Paul requests their prayers that he himself may be restored to them (13:19), and the frequent visits which he had made the Cesareans, the strong attachment they had manifested to him, and the long residence he had made among them correspond well with a request so plainly founded in their affectionate regard for him, and in him for them.

Again, Cesarea was only two days' journey from Jerusalem, and the Jews there were zealots for the traditions of their fathers. Resistance to the Roman power, which finally brought on the destruction of the Jewish commonwealth, first began here from the wounded spirit of Jewish pride and national feeling. These facts render it probable that the Jews there had a full and intimate acquaintance with all the Mosaic ritual, and that the Christian Jews must (from the power, wealth, and overbearing spirit of the others) have been hard pressed by persecution on the one hand and the imposing pomp of the temple service on the other to make defection from the Christian religion.

Finally, as the majority of the inhabitants here were Greeks, and of course the current language in this splendid capital was Greek, this may account for it that our epistle was written in Greek instead of the Palestine dialect. From this place it could not fail to be circulated abroad, as there must have been comers and goers to and from this place from all parts of Palestine. For Paul to subscribe his name to this epistle was not *necessary*, in case he sent it by a friend, as doubtless he must have done. And besides this, the circumstances mentioned in it--of being restored to them and of coming to them with Timothy--would be sufficient of themselves to disclose the author to the Cesarean Christians. And designed as the letter in all probability was, to be a circular among the Jews, they who were abroad, reading it without the name of the author, could not so readily have those prejudices awakened which had lately shown themselves to be very violent among the Jews who were zealous for the honour of the Mosaic law whenever Paul had made his appearance among them.

I grant at once that all this is *supposition*. But in the absence of all positive testimony, if a supposition can be presented which contains nothing improbable in itself and explains a variety of characteristic passages in our epistle and accords well with the facts which

history has recorded, may it not be received at least as a *probability* until the fallacy of it be exposed or a more probable one is advanced?

The points of coincidence just recited forced themselves upon me unsought and unexpected in the course of my investigation. They are not offered from the love of novelty nor with any overweening confidence as to the approbation which others may give them.

One objection to the view here given seems to be that the church at Cesarea in the time of Origen and Eusebius (both of whom lived there) do not appear to have retained a tradition that our epistle was directed to them. At least neither of these fathers, so far as I know, make mention of such a tradition, which they probably might have done had it existed in their times. Still, if our epistle was designed to be a *circular*, and for that reason a direction to any particular church was omitted in it, the Cesarean church, if they were the *first* who received it, might not have considered it appropriately theirs in the same manner as the Corinthians, Galatians, and others did the letters addressed to them.

Another objection to the idea that our epistle was directed to the church at Cesarea may be drawn from the probability that the church there must have consisted in fact of Gentiles, especially as Greeks constituted a majority of the population of that city. What was really fact, however, in regard to this at the time when the epistle was written we have no historical means of ascertaining. It is certainly a very possible case that, at the time when the epistle to the Hebrews was written, the church at Cesarea might have been principally made up of Jews or at least have contained a majority of members who were Hebrews. Or there may have been more than one church at Cesarea (a thing altogether probable) and the Jews there, who were such uncommon zealots for the law, might have established a religious community of their own separate from that of the Gentile Christians, whom the former would regard with an eye of jealousy if not of distrust. If the author of our epistle designed it for the good of the Hebrews in *general*, he would have written just in the manner which he has adopted whether the church whom he addressed contained some Gentiles or not.

Upon the whole it is a plain case, that confident and positive assertions in regard to any one particular church cannot be made with propriety. The most which I would say here is that more reasons seem to offer themselves in favour of the supposition that our epistle was originally sent to the church at Cesarea than in favour of any other place. I cannot, therefore, but regard it as a *probable* event.

This excerpt is from the Introduction in *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* by Moses Stuart, 3rd ed. (Andover: Warren F. Draper, 1854). **Note:** The text has not been modified, except that punctuation has been modernized and long paragraphs have been divided.