



CATHOLIC SCRIPTURE STUDY

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SERIES V

WISDOM LITERATURE AND NEW TESTAMENT LETTERS

Lesson 25 Commentary Hebrews 1-6

Lesson 26 Questions Hebrews 7-13

GOD'S WHOLE PLAN OF SALVATION

Hebrews 1-6

INTRODUCTION

Unlike other New Testament letters, this one was not directed to an area church, but to a people. "Hebrews" was an earlier term for the descendants of Abraham. Isaac, his son, was the father of Jacob, who was given a new name by God, "Israel"—one who contended with God. Jacob or Israel had twelve sons, one of them Juda. All were Hebrews, but Juda's sons, from whom came Jesus, became known as Judeans, "Jews." So the people to whom this was addressed were also known as Israelites, and today, Jews.

From the earliest times, the authorship of Hebrews was debated. The Eastern Church hesitated, with many reservations about its literary style and vocabulary, before accepting it as Pauline. The Western Church with Italy and Roman Empire North and around it, denied at first that Paul had written it, but eventually accepted it. Even if Paul did not compose the letter to the Hebrews, it was surely someone whom Paul had influenced; some say Barnabas, or Silas, or Aristion. The most likely would have been Apollos, the Jew from the scholarly town of Alexandria in Egypt, whom

Luke in his Acts of the Apostles praises so highly. The language of Hebrews even suggests the culture of Alexandria. Also, the argument of the letter is very much founded on the Old Testament, in which the intellectual Apollos (Acts 18:24-28) would likely be well-versed.

The letter has some clues as to when and where it was written: "God's holy people in Italy send you greetings" (Hebrews 13:24), and the reference to the Temple: "There are others who make the offerings prescribed by the Law" (Hebrews 8:4). This dates Hebrews before 70 A.D. when the Temple of Jerusalem was destroyed by the Roman army, never to be rebuilt.

Since the quotes are from Paul's letters in prison and familiar to the writer, he wrote after 63 A.D. If the crisis he speaks of in the letter (Hebrews 10:25) is the first threat of the Jewish war with the Romans, the letter could be dated 67 A.D. Paul was martyred about that time by the Romans in Rome.

Only in the second century was the title "To the Hebrews" given to the article, because of the

frequent reference to the Old Covenant and its public worship and ceremonies. The Christian Hebrews seem to have left Jerusalem and gone to a coastal town like Caesarea on the coast of Samaria. They seem tired in exile, longing for the beauty of Temple worship, and discouraged by the persecution of Christians, even thinking of going back to Judaism. Hebrews was written to prevent this (Hebrews 10:19-29). The author presents Christian life as in an Exodus to the Promised Land, marching to the place of rest, guided by Christ, an incomparably superior leader than Moses (Hebrews 3:1-6).

Christ replaces the old priesthood and the sacrifices of that temple worship (Hebrews 8:1-10). As leader and priest, He is higher than all the angels, and He rules all things (Hebrews 1 and 2). The major themes are the heavenly Jerusalem, and the glorious future of Christ's followers in our Promised Land. The result shows how the earliest Christians saw the harmony of Old and New Testaments, and the redemptive work of Jesus in God's whole plan. With its profound intuitions of the main points of Christian belief, this unsigned document is one of the most important books of the New Testament.

It also points to Christ's taking up the burden of our humanity together with all its defects and limitations except sin, and that He bore that burden until death, confident of the great triumph that God would give Him. He promises us the same.

The letter closes with encouragement to continue all Christian qualities and virtues. Chapter 13 has one of the most beautiful blessings in the New Testament (Hebrews 13:20-21).

PROLOGUE (Hebrews 1:1-14, John 1:18, Acts 2:23-36).

God spoke through the prophets to "our ancestors," but "now, in the final days, we have the words of His Son, the heir of all creation, through whom he made the ages" (Hebrews 1:1-2). The

writer reflects on "God's own glory and God's own Being" as found in the Son, who as God also sustains all things by His powerful command. Their heir, God the Son, Himself, came to earth, uniting our nature with His divine nature. By accepting an undeserved punishment, death, for our redemption, He was rewarded by God with His rising from the dead and taking a seat at the right hand of the Most High (Hebrews 1:3-4). This can be a wonderful incentive for us to suffer unjustly or otherwise, in peace and charity, accepting it for the salvation of others or for peace and justice for others.

I. THE SON GREATER THAN THE ANGELS (Hebrews 1:1-14, Philippians 2:9-11)

Using several Old Testament passages about the Son's infinite greatness above the angels, the writer presents the uniqueness of Jesus and His infinite greatness.

To which of the angels has God ever said, "You are my Son, today I have fathered you" (2 Samuel 7:14, Psalm 2:7). "Take your seat at my right hand" (Psalm 110:1). God himself confirmed the witness of those who heard Jesus on earth by signs and miracles of all kinds, and by giving the various gifts of the Holy Spirit (Hebrews 2:5-8). Christ did not take on an angel's nature, but that of "the line of Abraham" (Hebrews 2:16-17).

As a Hebrew with the Hebrew law and religion, this great leader "became so like his brothers that he could become a compassionate and trustworthy high priest for their relationship to God, able to expiate the sins of the people" (Hebrews 2:17).

II. JESUS, FAITHFUL AND MERCIFUL HIGH PRIEST (Hebrews 3:1-5, 10; 4:1-11).

A. Comparison to Moses (Hebrews 3:1-6, 2 Corinthians 3:12-18). Moses was head of "God's household" (Hebrews 3:2) and trustworthy as a servant, but Christ is trustworthy as a Son in

God's household (Hebrews 3:5-6). We are also in the household and are much loved by the Son and His Father.

B. Hard Hearts (Hebrews 3:7-19). Suddenly, the writer brings us from Moses and Christ to ourselves. "We are his household as long as we fearlessly maintain the hope in which we glory" (John 8:35, Ephesians 2:19).

"If only you would listen to him today!" (Hebrews 3:7). In this technical, advanced world, sophisticated and self-sustaining, these words are meant for us. "If only" suggests a last chance which is now; later is too late. "Do not harden your hearts" making them indifferent to God and to living whole-heartedly the faith and the teaching of the Son. He is always present among us, through the teaching of the Church, through the Sacraments that Jesus gave us and through the whole of the Scriptures which the Old Testament believers never had. Are you learning all that the Scriptures have to say to you, to bring you growth and light, strength of faith and character? Do you accept the invitation "Come to me—I am the Bread of Life" (John 6:48), "I am the living bread which came down from heaven... and the bread that I will give is my flesh, for the life of the world" (John 6:51).

Through the apostles and followers he gave us the Gospel, inspired by God and speaking to us of Jesus. It is God that speaks all these books of the Bible. It is God's word to each of us.

C. Israel's Response to Jesus, a New High Priest for Them (Hebrews 3:7)

"Harden not your hearts today" (Psalm 95:8).

"They have always been of erring hearts and they do not know my ways" (Psalm 95:12).

1. A Listening Heart. "Take care," writes the Hebrews author, "that none of you have an evil and unfaithful heart, so that you forsake the living God" (Hebrews 3:12). We know the results of Israel's rejection of the very Israelite who

"came from God and was God." Only in the last days will the Jews accept Christ, one of the prophecies says. Think of the nearly 2,000 years that these people of God's first choice have lived outside His plan for all the human race, including them. All the people of earth have now been brought the "God's Spel" as old-English people called it and has now come to be called "Gospel." The author of Hebrews sadly says of the Chosen Jews, "They were not united in faith with those who listened" (Hebrews 4:2b). "If only you would listen to him today!" (Psalm 95:7). Are you listening to him today? Our today?

2. Our Sabbath Rest (Hebrews 4:1-11, Revelations 21:1-4). Yet, "A Sabbath rest still remains for the people of God" (Hebrews 4:9) and it does for us today, for our promised land is not of earth as we know it, but of a "new heaven and a new earth" (Revelations 21:31). Think of it! We are told in the last chapter of Revelation, that "a new Jerusalem will come out of heaven from God" (Revelation 21:2). This chapter is truly a magnificent description of the new heaven and the new earth. Only those who have triumphed over the sin and guilt before God will be there.

There is an eternal and never-ending place for those who rejected God. Another revelation which the Church has always realized is that all human beings, who do not reject God but serve Him somewhat and who did sin in His eyes, will be cleansed and come to a state of readiness for complete unity with God. We call this cleaning and changing the time of Purgatory.

3. A Two-Edged Sword (Hebrews 4:12-13). The writer of Hebrews, a strong and inspired Christian, gives us a comment on "God's Spel," our gospel, as a remarkable two-edged sword, "sharper than any other. It is living and effective and judges the reflections and thoughts of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12). To be living in you, God's Word must be fed by the Holy Scriptures daily, its special meaning for you from the Holy Spirit, marked and/or memorized. Have recourse again and again to a passage that brought light to

you. It is amazing that the same passage, in some years' time, speaks then a new message for the reality of our life. Give the Word of God precious time daily from the twenty-four hours He has given you. It must not be said that "Catholics do not believe in the Bible." It is our generation that must convince other Christians that we do. Study especially Church history, for the Bible has the same history.

III. FULFILLMENT OF THE PRIESTHOOD IN JESUS (Hebrews 4:14-16, 5:1-10)

A. The Compassionate Priest (Hebrews 4:14-16). Jesus is called here a "great high priest." We are not used to calling Jesus a priest, yet it is He who instituted the Catholic priesthood. Paul (it was surely his teaching) had already established that Jesus was higher than the angels, yet in His human life He "was made for a little while lower than the angels" to bring many to glorify God (Hebrews 2:9-10). Next, Jesus is presented as an "apostle and high priest" and one more worthy of honor than Moses, who was "faithful in God's house," while Jesus was the Son placed over God's house (Hebrews 3:2-3).

Jesus as great high priest had also "passed through the heavens" after He had been tempted and "tried in every way, yet never sinned" (Hebrews 4:15). It is because of Him that we can "hold fast to our profession of faith" (Hebrews 4:14-15). This high priest is able to sympathize with our weakness, for He accepted temptations as a man, yet never sinned. So we can approach Him on His throne of grace and receive mercy, favor and help. That is what every high priest does; he is a representative before God for his people, "to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins" (Hebrews 5:1). But Christ did not take the honor of high priest on Himself, but only when called by God as Aaron was. He also received it from God who said to Him: "You are my son; today I have begotten you," and later, "You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek" (Psalm 2:7 and 110:4).

B. The Spiritual Renewal Needed by These Hebrew Christians (Hebrews 6:1-20). Paul laments that these converts should by that time be teaching others, but instead they needed milk, not solid food, and announces that he is going to go beyond the initial teaching about Christ, the foundation of their faith. He then lists those initial teachings which is good information for us, being a description of our own foundation as a Christian: "repentance from dead works, faith in God, instruction about Baptism, and the laying on of hands (our own Baptism and Confirmation), resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment" (Hebrews 6:4).

Have we experienced the next descriptions that come to "those once enlightened" (Hebrews 6:4) who "have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become sharers in the Holy Spirit; have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come"? Some think that this list of Christian foundations came from the Qumran community, others from Jewish ceremonial washing and does not refer to Christian sacraments such as the Holy Eucharist, or Baptism and Confirmation. "Sharers of the Holy Spirit" is interpreted as a guarantee, a first installment of the full possession in the after-life of heaven's holiness and joys. Some scholars think that "tasted the powers of the age to come" mean what some of the Jews thought: reserved only to such as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This last of the list, however, is not speaking of a chosen few, but of the common experience of all Christians, yet not in its fullness.

"They are crucifying and mocking the Son of God (Hebrews 6:6). They have put Jesus out of their life... he is dead to them." Such people who renounce their faith are called apostates. These are like, the author says, ground which receives abundant rain but produces only thorns and thistles. This verse must have had a sobering effect on the weakening, doubting Christians. As apostate emperor Julian of Rome tried to return to official pa-

ganism, it is said that he died in disgrace, saying, “Galilean, you have conquered.”

These last lines of Hebrews 6:6 are severe and foretell disaster, especially, “and then have fallen away. It is impossible to make them repent again.” Such a view of apostasy does not square too well with the belief of the Church that while on earth, a sinner is always a possibility of conversion.

The writer’s next word, “Beloved” (My dear friends in one translation), certainly sounds like Paul’s of the other epistles. “God is not unjust.” On the contrary, he remembers and “does not forget all the good we have done, all the love we have shown him and his holy people” (Hebrews 6:10). We, as the Christian Hebrews who read these words first, need one more important thing: “Show the same zeal to the end, fully assured of that for which you hope.” As we read recently in 2 Timothy where Paul humbly and joyfully writes

his friend and calls him his “child in God” and tells him, “I have finished the race, I have fought the good fight; I have kept the faith. A merited crown awaits me” (2 Timothy 4:7-8). We too, will rejoice over living the Faith to the end.

The author of Hebrews ends his severe and also loving corrections to the wavering Christian Jews by assuring them that God made an oath to the heirs of His promise through Abraham, and that “Like a sure firm anchor, hope extends beyond the veil between us and Jesus our forerunner,” “for he entered it before us on our behalf.” He is now our high priest forever, for His sacrifice offered to God has obtained all graces for the world (Hebrews 6:20). We could not feel safer and more confident, as if the owner of a bank sends his son to call you to a reward for being “best customer.” Let none of us in CSS fall away from One who suffered so greatly to win for us eternal joys.

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QUESTIONS FOR LESSON 26
Hebrews 7-13

Day 1 Read the Notes.

- a. Did the notes or the lecture help you in any way? Share it briefly below.

Day 2 Read Hebrews 7:1-28, Genesis 14:17-20.

- a. In the meeting of Abraham and Melchizedek, what meanings told in this event in Genesis 14:17-20 and in Hebrews 7:1-17 are there for us?
 - b. What can we learn for our lives from Hebrews 7:2, 4-5?
 - c. In what way does the teaching of Hebrews 7:11-17 apply to the Catholic priesthood?
 - d. Who is offered on our altars day after day (Hebrews 7:27)? Can you explain this faith from scripture?

Day 3 Read Hebrews 8:1-13 and 9:1-10; 1 Timothy 2:5; Matthew 20:28.

- a. Explain Hebrews 8:10b-12 as fulfilled in John 20:22-23.
 - b. Why was the Old Testament sacrifice by the high priest only a symbol of the New Testament sacrifice?

Day 4 Read Hebrews 9:11 - 10:39, Psalm 40:7-9, 1 Samuel 15:22.

- a. How does Hebrews 9:14 help or instruct you?

- b. What does Hebrews 9:27-28 promise? To whom?

Day 5 Read Hebrews 10:1-18; 1 Samuel 15:22; Isaiah 1:10-20.

- a. In the quotation from Psalm 40 (Hebrews 10:5) what does it tell us about God? About Jesus?

- b. How does it apply to us?

- c. How does Hebrews 10:19-23 confirm the faith of the uncertain Hebrew Christians?

- d. What important reason is given in Hebrews 10:25 and 38 for faithfulness to the Christian “assembly”?

Day 6 Hebrews 11 reminds the Old Testament heroes of their Faith and a definition of Faith, verse 1, ending in a “better plan which included us,” described in Chapter 12.

- a. What encouragement is given to the readers and to us in Hebrews 12:1-15?

- b. How does Hebrews 12:22-24 help you?

- c. Read Hebrews 13:1-21. Quote one verse that is important for you.