

Hebrews and Eschatology: The Challenge of a Realistic Future

ANTHONY BUZZARD, M.A. (Oxon.), M.A.Th.

The Jewish environment in which the Christian documents came to birth presents formidable difficulties for later readers of Scripture. A post-biblical orientation to Greek ways of thinking hinders readers of the Bible from grasping the full intention of those early writers. Nowhere, perhaps, is this more true than in the matter of eschatology as presented by the author of Hebrews. This book frequently draws on the common stock of Old Testament Messianic anticipations, and uses eschatology as a prime motivation to encourage believers not to abandon their quest for the Kingdom. It is preoccupied, as one of its principal themes, with what yet lies ahead for the believer. The reason for this is not difficult to see. The recipients of the letter were in danger of slipping away from the faith. How appropriate, then, to spur them on by reinforcing the greatness of the goal which lay before them. That goal, indeed, had been communicated to them when first they were exposed to the Gospel of the Kingdom (Heb. 2:3-5).¹ The Gospel itself, therefore, implies a strong orientation to what lies in the future for the believer.

The invaluable place occupied by biblical eschatology is less appreciated once the New Testament's stress on endurance until the Coming of Christ as a real event of the future is diminished. Traditional Christianity

¹Hope laid up in heaven is likewise an essential part of the Gospel as preached by Paul (Col. 1:5, 6). Throughout the New Testament expectation is directed towards the manifestation of the Kingdom of God on earth at the *parousia*.

has tended to replace the realistic and corporate hope for the Kingdom to come at the *parousia* with departure at death to "heaven" as the individual goal of the believer. It is then all too easy to suppose that the writer to the Hebrews saw things the way we customarily do and to read into his language our own transformed understanding of eschatological hope. Signs of this tendency occur whenever commentators try to diminish the future in favor of the present.² Since the writer to the Hebrews is at pains to restate the glory of the Christian objective for purposes of encouragement, it is important that we ascertain what that hope is, so that we may take full advantage of our author's exhortation.

The future in Hebrews is laid out before us in characteristically Jewish terminology. We must not fall into the trap of thinking that its Jewishness detracts in any way from its position as biblically orthodox Christianity. Many key phrases involve us immediately in the future: It is "the inhabited earth of the future about which we are speaking" (Heb. 2:5), and the discourse in question is the section introduced in 1:6: "When he again shall have introduced the firstborn into the inhabited earth . . ."—i.e. at the *parousia*. There is a greater "rest" awaiting the faithful, of which the rest offered to Israel by Joshua was only a type (4:8, 9). The future is further marked by a number of eschatological terms sharing the modifiers "heavenly" or "eternal," words which tempt us to hear our own conception of post-mortem survival in "heaven."³ Above all, the writer is concerned to impress on us the hope of Abraham that he would eventually enter "the land," which is equivalent to the acquisition of the Kingdom which we are destined to receive (12:28).

For our writer the prize is supremely worth the struggle now (cp. Acts 14:22). To make his point he rehearses the great promises made to the patriarchs and offered to Israel. Neither Israel nor Abraham actually

²Cp. Montefiore, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, London: Black, 1964, on 2:5: "The world to come is a way of referring to this salvation about which he has just been speaking and which is described later as 'the age to come' (6:5) and 'the city to come' (13:14). This does not mean the Christian life in general, or the Christian's foretaste of eternity, or the world of ultimate reality which breaks through the transience of the physical world. It is a Jewish eschatological phrase which signifies the new world order which comes into being at the end of this age. . . . The use of the word *oikoumene* for world shows that our author thought of this salvation in corporate and social terms." If this is what this Christian writer of Scripture believed, why is it not universally embraced by the Church?

³The unfortunate mistranslation of *aion* as "world" rather than "age" (Matt. 24:3, etc.) likewise tends to veil the Jewish eschatological framework within which the New Testament is set.

gained possession of what was promised to them. Israel failed to enter God's rest under Joshua, and Abraham was among the heroes of faith who "died without receiving what was promised" (11:39). Since the promise is still the object of hope, our author emphasizes the glory of the future in order to rekindle his audience's failing zeal. But how does he understand these promises? How does he envisage the Christian reward?

At the outset we should recognize the central importance of Psalm 110 for our writer. We may even say that the whole book is a *midrash* on that psalm.⁴ There is a solid tradition behind this use of Psalm 110 (quoted in the NT more than any other OT passage). Jesus and the Jewish scribes had understood the psalm messianically (Matt. 22:41-45). Furthermore, it contains just those themes which concern our writer: The Lord Messiah as an anointed King (*Adoni*—"my lord," Psa. 110:1)⁵ acting as the One God's agent, now exalted to a place of authority in heaven as high priest like Melchizedek, but waiting until his enemies are made his footstool (Psa. 110:1; Heb. 10:13; cp. Acts 3:21). This is precisely the situation envisaged by Hebrews. Combining Psalm 110:1 with the evidence of Psalm 8, also read messianically of Jesus as the representative of mankind who was from Genesis on destined ultimately to dominate the earth, our author recognizes that though Jesus has been glorified, He has "not yet" attained to the rulership of the world which is His destiny. Since the Christians are incorporated in the Son of Man, as His fellows (*metochoi*), it follows that the greatness of the coming salvation lies in the fact that the "inhabited world of the future" (2:5) is not to be subject to angels but to Christ and His brethren, the Church. No price is too high to pay for the privilege of administering a new order on earth when the Messiah returns. We will see how this recurring theme is worked out by the author of Hebrews.

"Every prophet prophesied for the days of the Messiah." With that rabbinical axiom our author agrees, since he begins with a florilegium of Messianic texts which he expects to be fulfilled in the future world-order

⁴George Wesley Buchanan, *To the Hebrews*, Anchor Bible, New York: Doubleday and Co., 1972, xix.

⁵Astonishingly, a number of authorities misstate the facts about the Hebrew word for "lord" in Psalm 110:1, claiming it is *Adonai*, rather than *Adoni*. It would be utterly impossible for Yahweh to speak to *Adonai*! But Yahweh here addresses David's "Lord Messiah" (cp. Luke 2:11, *Christos Kurios*). This misreading or ignoring of Psalm 110:1 underlies a great deal of confusion over biblical Christology. *Adoni* is a title of address to superiors other than God.

(1:6; 2:5). With Westcott,⁶ Delitzsch,⁷ and the NASB we read, "When He again [at the *parousia*] brings the firstborn into the world, He says. . . ." We are immediately directed toward the yet unfulfilled future hope. That hope contains a "great salvation" which at all costs we must not neglect. . . . "For it was not to angels that God subjected the world-order to come which is our theme" (2:3, 5). The definition of the "great salvation," introduced by the explicative conjunction "for" (*gar*) is obscured by an unfortunate break introduced into many Bibles between 2:4 and 2:5. The point is that the coming world will be under the administration of the Messiah and the Church. Therein lies the greatness of salvation. The argument is developed by the reference to the promise of world dominion given in Psalm 8. The author does not need to tell his audience that if the Son of Man is to receive this dominion, then Christians will receive it with Him (cp. Son of Man as representative of the saints in Daniel 7:13, 27). The theme that the saints are to rule the world is a common one in the NT (Matt. 19:28; Luke 22:28-30; Rom. 5:17; 1 Cor. 6:2; 2 Tim. 2:12; Rev. 2:26; 3:21; 5:10; 20:1-6). Possession of the "inhabited earth to come" defines the "glory" to which God is in the process of bringing the faithful (2:10). "Glory," after all, is only a synonym for "Kingdom" viewed eschatologically (Heb. 12:28; cp. Matt. 20:21 with Mark 10:37, where "Kingdom" and "glory" are exchangeable terms).

The goal to which Christians are called is further described by the author as "rest." If Joshua had given rest to Israel, why did God, through David, speak of a yet future "rest"? There is only one possible explanation. That "rest" in its ultimate sense must still lie in the future. It is the great "sabbatism" (4:9) to be celebrated at the *parousia*.⁸ It was the rest typified by God's rest at creation (4:4). Furthermore, that "rest" is the subject of the Gospel message which was preached to Israel of old and now to the Church. There is to be a time when the faithful will rest from their labors as God did at the creation, when His seventh-day rest typified the Christian goal. Similarly, the Jubilee prefigured the great celebration to be enjoyed when the Kingdom comes in power.

To gain this "great salvation," "full assurance" and "boasting" of hope

⁶*Epistle to the Hebrews*, Eerdmans, 21-23.

⁷*Commentary on Hebrews*, Eerdmans, 1952, I, 66, 67.

⁸Here again we see the strong eschatological dimension of the gospel message, an emphasis largely lost because of popular "once saved, always saved" theology and the restriction of the gospel message to the death and resurrection of Jesus, contrary to Luke 4:43, etc., and Acts 8:12; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31, where the Kingdom is always the principal element in the gospel.

must be maintained "to the end." "Seizing the hope" provides just that "strong encouragement" necessary for final victory in the Christian fight. The nature of the promised goal is spelled out in clearer detail in Hebrews 11:8-16.

Our author does not allow us to forget that we are currently at that period of time in which the continuing "today" still bids us not to harden our hearts, and Jesus, though He has sat down at the right hand of God, is still "waiting until his enemies are made his footstool" (10:13). Evidently the hope grows brighter as "we see the Day drawing near" (10:25). There awaits the faithful believer "a better possession and an abiding one" (10:34), "a great reward" (10:35). The reward is to be gained at the *parousia*, not at death, for "yet a little while and the coming one shall come and shall not tarry" (10:37). But what, precisely, may the believer expect at that Day?

The key to our writer's understanding of the nature of the Christian objective is found in his remarks about Abraham. Hebrews 11:8-10 reads: "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance; and he went out not knowing where he was to go. By faith he sojourned in the land of the promise, as in a foreign land . . . , for he looked forward to the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God." With Isaac and Jacob, Abraham was "reaching out for a better fatherland, that is a *heavenly one* . . . [v. 16]. Isaac blessed Jacob concerning *things to come*" [v. 20]. None of these heroes of the faith gained possession of what had been promised, for "according to faith all these died, not having acquired [the fulfillment of] the promises, but they saw and greeted them from a distance and confessed that they were strangers and wanderers in the land" (11:13). We note that the "heavenly" hope was not a hope of going to heaven but of partaking in "things to come." We encounter once again the prospect of future life in "the inhabited world to come about which we are speaking" (2:5).

We are confronted here with a territorial realism which may initially sound strange by comparison with our own traditional perception of the Christian reward. Our writer is convinced that Abraham lived in the "land of the promise" (cp. "the land of life," Psalms 116:9; 142:5). He actually resided in the territory which was promised him as a permanent inheritance, yet during his lifetime he enjoyed the status only of a "resident alien"—a kind of spiritual tourist. We should not miss our author's point: Abraham was called out to the place which he was later to receive as his inheritance. That place was the land of Canaan. That, for our author, is the

possession he has not yet inherited. It is "the land of the promise [made to Abraham]" (Gen. 13:14; 17:8). All the patriarchs were strangers and wanderers in "the land" (Heb. 11:13). Our versions have tended to translate *ge* as "earth," suggesting a contrast between earth and heaven. However, the writer to the Hebrews insists that the land of Canaan is still the promised land. The land of Canaan is the "better fatherland" which will one day contain the "city to come" (13:14). That city is "heavenly" because, like all eschatological realities, it is prepared in heaven and will be manifested on earth at the *parousia*.⁹ The land of Canaan renewed is the treasure stored up in heaven. All the faithful dead will take possession of the promised land when "He who comes [the returning Messiah] shall come" (10:36, 37). When that moment arrives the Jerusalem of the future will provide a happy residence for the faithful in the company of Jesus who will then subdue his enemies, as promised by Psalm 110:1. Until that day Jesus is waiting, as the living Christians are also waiting, "until [Jesus'] enemies are made his footstool" (10:13).

Traditional theology thinks differently from our author. Protests by leading New Testament scholars that "heaven in the Bible is, in fact, no where the destination of the dying"¹⁰ have done little to disturb cherished understandings. The perceptive commentator in the *Anchor Bible* on Hebrews can help us to share our author's view of the Christian's future:

The author of Hebrews confessed that [the patriarchs] were "strangers and wanderers in the land" even after they were established on the land (1 Chron. 29:15). "The promises" about [*sic*] which the author was interested in involved entering "the rest" (4:1), being blessed, and becoming a great and numerous people to whom others would defer (Gen. 22:17-19; Josh. 21:43-45; Heb. 6:13-20), or receiving "the land of the promise" (11:9). These are all related to the reestablishment of the land of Palestine under the control of the chosen people, as an exalted nation. . . . The author of Hebrews was the only author in the Bible who called the land of Canaan "the land of the promise," so he was the only one to call it a "heavenly land" (11:16), but it is clear in both instances that Palestine was the land intended.¹¹

This is fundamental to biblical faith since under the terms of the Abrahamic covenant, the Lord had declared, "I am the LORD who brought

⁹Paul speaks similarly of the "Jerusalem above" in Galatians 4:26. In so doing he cites Psalm 87:5 (LXX), where the reference is to geographical Jerusalem as "the mother of us all." Paul also looked for the restoration of the land.

¹⁰J. A. T. Robinson, *In the End God*, London: Fontana, 1968, 104, 105.

¹¹*To the Hebrews*, 188-193.

you out of Ur of the Chaldees to give you this land to possess it" (Gen. 15:7). "And I will give to you and to your descendants after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God" (17:8). "All the land which you see, I will give it to you and your descendants forever" (13:15). Yet Abraham has not received a square yard of his promised inheritance (Acts 7:5).

Palestine renewed and restored is the subject of the prophets' message of hope. Our author shares this expectation with tremendous conviction. Indeed the Kingdom, the subject of the gospel proclaimed by Jesus and the apostles (Luke 4:43; Acts 8:12; 19:6; 20:25; 28:23, 31), was inextricably bound up with the reestablishment of sound government in Palestine, with its effects extending across the earth. The capital city of "the land of the promise" would be Jerusalem, "heavenly" indeed, not because it would be located away from the earth, but because it was prepared in heaven and about to be revealed on the earth at the "end of the days" (*be acharit hayamim*, Isaiah 2:1). As Wesley Buchanan says,

The "heavenly fatherland" would not be located in heaven, but it would be the divine land of Canaan—divine because Messiah would be located there. Thus Jacob is told, "the land whereon you sleep I will give to you."¹²

The influence of tradition has prevented many commentators from grasping our author's real intentions.

Moffatt erroneously concluded that the words *epi tes ges*, "upon the earth," or "upon the land," start the inference (vv. 14-16) that the true home of these confessors was in heaven. . . . Moffatt reached these conclusions by ignoring the immediate contexts of the Old Testament references he quoted, accepting "heavenly" as a place description, and overlooking the major theme of the author of the Hebrews. . . .

Another expositor, Michel, was mistaken in his belief that apocalyptic hopes did not anticipate the restoration of Jerusalem to a geographic position. In this way the transcendent city would be brought down to the earth when Israel was restored.¹³

This is exactly the point of the disciples' question in Acts 1:6: "Is this the time that you are going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" There is no hint from Jesus that the expectation was ill-founded.

Our author insists on the contrast between the future "city which has foundations" and the temporary existence of the patriarchs "in tents."

Many scholars, finding this eschatology uncongenial, "spiritualize" "the city which has foundations," forcing into the text a contrast between Canaan and heaven. Buchanan notes that Delitzsch

was so much impressed by the similarity between the description given in Hebrews and other descriptions of Jerusalem that he had to admit that it was tempting to consider the city that had the foundations to be Jerusalem, but his theology required him to deny their identity.¹⁴

It is an unfortunate denial which has permeated the theology of the past eighteen hundred years, with a resulting confusion over eschatology and thus over the nature of the Kingdom which is the principal subject matter of Messiah's gospel (Luke 4:43, etc.).

Throughout his exhortation the writer to the Hebrews presents evidence of a solid, realistic expectation of the glory which will return to Palestine when Messiah reappears. His eschatology is Jewish, but not therefore unchristian! A less-than-accurate translation of *aionios* as "eternal" in our versions helps to hide the Hebrew orientation of his hope for the future. Thus "eternal" should properly be rendered "pertaining to the coming age." *Aionios* is used customarily in this epistle to denote that which belongs to "the world to come."¹⁵ The point is well made also by Nigel Turner in *Christian Words*:

"Aionios" acquired the sense in the Christian language "belonging to the 'olam.'" The dispensation intended in this special sense was that of the future, the Kingdom of Christ, the reign of Messiah. The "aionios" Gospel is not therefore in Christian language the "everlasting" Gospel. Christians do not suppose that the Gospel lasts for ever. Rather it is the Gospel concerning the Kingdom-age (Rev. 14:6).¹⁶

Elsewhere he says,

The "aion" to come is not therefore eternity as opposed to "time," and we must free ourselves from the philosophical concepts, "in time" and "out of time." . . . [It is] misleading to translate the "aion" as "eternity," for the "aion" is still a period of time. It is no less imprecise to render "aionios life" as "eternal life."¹⁷

The meaning is "life in the coming age." Thus it is that Jesus is

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 189.

¹⁵*Epistle to the Hebrews*, 100.

¹⁶Nigel Turner, *Christian Words*, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1980, 456.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 452.

¹²*Ibid.*, 192, 193.

¹³*Ibid.*, 189, 193.

appointed a priest "for the age" (5:6).¹⁸ Our writer's insistence on the future age comes to light when this Jewish language is allowed to be heard. The framework within which his thinking is set is summarized by Emil Schurer:

All the benefits of the future world come down from above, from heaven, where they had preexisted from eternity. They are kept there for the saints as an "inheritance" which will one day be bestowed on them. In particular does the perfect, the glorious new Jerusalem which will at the time of the consummation of all things descend to the earth in the place of the old, exist there already.¹⁹

Applying this insight to Hebrews we find that the "coming age" of the Kingdom is constantly in view. There is the "salvation of the coming age" (5:9), "judgment [or perhaps 'administration'] of the coming age" (6:2), "redemption pertaining to the coming age" (9:12), "the spirit of the coming age" (9:14), "inheritance of the coming age" (9:15), the latter being a synonym for the coming Kingdom. The prospect of a position in that Kingdom is the great incentive which should drive believers on to the end. Moreover, the "heavenly" calling (3:1) is really a calling to the age to come. The "heavenly" gift (6:4) is the same as the gift pertaining to the future age. The "heavenly" fatherland (11:16) is the possession of Canaan restored and renewed. And the "heavenly" Jerusalem (12:22) is the Jerusalem of the promised land as it will be when the faithful are resurrected to take their places in it. "Heavenly things" (8:5) are the things of the coming age prefigured by the "sketches" provided by Old Testament "types."²⁰ These "heavenly things," purified by a better sacrifice (9:23), are the things which relate to the promised salvation in the coming age.

The writer to the Hebrews is thoroughly convinced of the Messianic eschatology which he (and Jesus before him) had received from the Old Testament. This eschatology tends often to be evaded by commentators. Even Delitzsch, having admitted that "so far as the outward word went, the promise to the patriarchs related simply to future possession of the

¹⁸Cp. Luke 1:55, "He spoke to Abraham and his posterity in respect of the [coming] age"—*eis ton aiona*. He did not speak "for ever."

¹⁹*The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, Vol. II, 133.

²⁰The Book of Hebrews does not rely on a Platonic or philonic scheme for its eschatology. See L. D. Hurst, "How 'Platonic' Are Heb. 8:5 and 9:23ff.?" (JTS, Vol. 34, No. 1, 156-168.)

land of Canaan,"²¹ attempts to explain this away and replace it with "heaven" conceived as a region unrelated to the earth. Wesley Buchanan has done us a service by bringing us back to reality and insisting that we read the text for what it actually says. When Messianic eschatology is allowed its place as the framework not only of Hebrews but of the Scriptures as a whole, the meaning of Jesus' celebrated beatitude will be restored and the epistle to the Hebrews will affirm the same truth: "Blessed are the meek, for they shall *inherit the land*."²² To gain that great salvation no price is too high, and an awful penalty awaits those who neglect it.

²¹*Commentary on Hebrews*, 237.

²²Matt. 5:5