



The Epistle to the Hebrews

Hebrews 12:1-13:24: Approaching the Heavenly Zion with Hope and Love

The Inaugurator of Patient Faith: Hebrews 12:1-13

Once again our section begins with the resounding “Therefore.” Everything that follows is built on what has gone before. Most immediately the readers discover that the host of forerunners in the faith not only depend on the present Christians to complete their task, they surround the company of the faithful as they run their race.

The first language of this section is drawn largely from the world of athletics—races, prizes. This most imagistic of New Testament writers finds a whole new set of images to illumine the shape of the faithful pilgrimage. Jesus is pioneer and perfecter of faith because he has first of all entered into the heavenly places (pioneer) and because he brings and will bring the faithful into that blessed realm with him. This may be one other place where our author implicitly compares the new Jesus/Joshua to the old, who also led the way into the Promised Land and then brought his people to dwell with him there.

Again we are not certain what the actual circumstances of the readers may have been in relationship to suffering and persecution. The suggestion of 12:4 is that while there have been struggles aplenty no Christian from this community has become a martyr. The catena of martyred forebears in Hebrews 11:32-38 must surely serve as a warning that present persecution may turn worse yet.

In the quotation from Proverbs 3:11-12 our homilist again finds an Old Testament verse which he believes directly addresses the new covenant. Here, however the passage is not read as pertaining to Jesus but as pertaining to Christian believers. The citation from Proverbs leads to a typical rhetorical device in Hebrews—if this, then how much more that. Here the claim is that if earthly parents use discipline for the strengthening of their children, how much more does God as parent provide the chastisements that discipline God’s children toward maturity. Indeed, suggests our author, the very trials that the people undergo is proof that they are truly God’s own children. They will have their reward, perhaps in the full enjoyment of their status as God’s children, certainly in their place in the world to come.

The final exhortation of this little homily in 12:12-13 seems to draw somewhat obliquely on the metaphor of the race again. Christians are exhorted to muster strength enough to follow Jesus, pioneer, first runner in the sacred race.

A Final Warning: Hebrews 12:14-29

Three biblical allusions underline our author's exhortation to his readers/hearers to persevere in faithfulness. The first provides a warning example; the second allusions, by way of contrast, illustrate and illumine the great promise of Christian hope.

The first allusion is to the story of Esau (Genesis 25, 27) who sold his birthright, and according to our author, despite great remorse was not allowed to repent and be reconciled to his brother or to God. We have no idea what particular examples of immorality and greed our homilist may have in mind, but he makes clear enough that like Esau those who follow these practices stand in danger of losing the inheritance of faith.

The next two allusions point out what the inheritance of faith looks like for Hebrews. It is not like Sinai; it is like Zion.

Our homilist has treated Moses somewhat ambivalently throughout our epistle. In the preceding chapter Moses is a great example of faith. In another other passage, 3:1-6 Moses is contrasted to Jesus as his inferior. Throughout our letter Moses is implicitly associated with the old and inadequate covenant, which is passing away. Here (vv 18-21), drawing on passages from Deuteronomy our preacher does not deny that Moses had true access to God on Mount Sinai. But the God Moses represented was a fearful God; to see his face was to risk death.

Contrasted to the fearful Sinai is the joyful Zion (vv 22-24). The contrast between the wilderness and the city, between wandering and home, between Moses and Jesus is a contrast between the God who terrifies and the God who blesses. Zion is probably here because it provides another mountain in contrast to Sinai. It is here because it is the home of the Davidic King, and Hebrews has several times used royal imagery to portray Jesus (Psalm 110 in particular.) Zion is perhaps also because the earthly Zion is the home of the temple where the High Priest enters through the veil on Yom Kippur, year after year after year. The heavenly Zion is home of the temple where Jesus, the High Priest according to the order of Mechizedek, enters once and for all, bringing his own self as sacrifice.

Hebrews always lives both under the sign of a Godly realm that is both spatial and temporal. At this time, in God's place, the heavenly Christ has gone to sit in triumph. In some future time that same Christ will establish the New Jerusalem on earth (compare Revelation 21).

Note that both the story of Esau and the contrast between Sinai and Zion are drawn in the service of exhortation. Those who hear this sermon are to pursue peace with one another and to persevere in faithfulness despite trials and tribulations. For such faithful people God has prepared a city.

Final Exhortations and Greetings: Hebrews 13:1-25

Rather like Paul at the end of 1 Thessalonians (5:12-22) our author piles on a list of ethical commandments for the readers/hearers. In a large sense these exhortations surely suggest specific ways in which to encourage the brothers and sisters to hold fast in the face of tribulation. Yet the list seems more helpful as a clue to the ideal life of early Christians than as a careful explication of the moral implications of the great celebration of Christ and the Christian pilgrimage that has marked our letter: faithfulness in marriage, integrity in the managing of money, loyalty to true faith, and a warning against heresy. As is so often the case in early Christian writings, the content of the dangerous teachings that Christians are to avoid is never made precisely clear—and the exhortation may be more in the line of good advice than of specific correction.

However, in another context and with new connotations, the readers are invited to look to Jesus, the pioneer of their faith, in vv 12-13. Now Jesus leads not to the promised land nor to the Sabbath rest nor to the heavenly temple. He leads outside the camp. The first century import of the exhortation is not altogether clear. At the very least, it encourages members of this faith community to accept their status as “aliens and sojourners,” people who have a critical distance from familiar but inimical social networks. The twenty-first century import may be that it is by engaging in the sufferings of Christ at the hands of a godless world (Dieterich Bonhoeffer) that we finally enter into his peace and his rest. Even the heavenly sanctuary does not provide service enough.

In 13:14-16, however, the readers are called again to a kind of liturgical service, inside the gate. But the gate that counts is the gate of the heavenly Jerusalem, and the sacrifices that count start with prayerful confession of faith in the Son of God, the True High Priest. The sacrifices then include mutual care and generosity in the community.

Beginning with Hebrews 13:17 our letter sounds more and more like a letter and less like a sermon. There is the plea for church order without any specificity about what that order looked like. There is the appeal for mutual prayer and concern between readers and writer, and the hope that he (whoever he may be) may be restored to them soon.

The benediction is rich in liturgical nuance but also reprises some of the themes of our letter and homily. The blood of the eternal covenant, a people complete in faith, working out the will of God.

The final exhortations and greetings suggest how the author understands his work, “a word of exhortation.” The term can refer to consolation, to calls to obedience, and to instruction. Our letter has provided all three. The phrase may also indicate that our author affirms what we have suspected, that this is more a homily than an epistle. That it is “brief” perhaps suggests the lengths to which our author could have gone, given world enough and time.

There is no reason to doubt that the Timothy our author mentions is the Timothy of the Pauline letters. Those from Italy who send greetings may now be in Italy (with our author?) or may be Italian expatriates elsewhere.

Though the final salutation, “grace” may not sum up adequately the rich and varied comforts of the book of Hebrews, it suggests quite rightly that in his own unique combination of exposition, imagery and exhortation our author has presented gospel, good news.

Yale Divinity School, 409 Prospect Street, New Haven, CT 06511

www.yalebiblestudy.org