

Article of the Month – October 2012

Missiological Observations in the NT (13) – Hebrews

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The Hebrews letter is full of missiology. The historic *missiological significance* is seen in the subtle encouragement to break with Judaism.¹ The road, inaugurated by Stephen, has ended now. This first martyr died after radically rejecting Judaism.² Only after his death³ the Gospel spread beyond Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria⁴ and later to the ends of the earth.⁵ Since that time the chasm between Judaism and Christianity became ever deeper, as we also see in Paul's letters. The missiological breach, initiated

by Stephen, finds *theological validation* in Hebrews, written about 30-32 years after his death.

Formerly God spoke through sent ones,⁶ but in the last days through His Son, also called 'apostle'.⁷ He occupies the Throne with God,⁸ and will continually send out missionaries until God's plans are accomplished.⁹ But the Hebrews were not ready to be sent:

Hebrews addresses 2nd generation Christians.¹⁰ This is consistent with the time frame of about 30 years between Jesus' earthly ministry and the writing of Hebrews. This helps us understand why they, although they were 'old' Christians, had insufficiently matured.¹¹ They were well-acquainted with Judaism and the author continuously reminds them that Christ supersedes all and everything. This shows that some contemplated leaving Christ in favor of Judaism ('falling away'). Their thinking was syncretistic. They were far away from being the teachers they should have been by that time. When they were not able to teach, they were not sending or being sent as missionaries either. Churches with conflicting worldviews will not sacrificially set aside funds and send people for missionary purposes.

The signs and miracles that accompanied Jesus' ministry,¹² Paul described as apostolic¹³ – i.e. belonging to missionary work – and based on gifts of the Spirit.¹⁴

¹ Heb. 13:13

² Acts 7:51-53

³ 7:54-60

⁴ Acts 8 & 10

⁵ From Acts 13 onwards

⁶ Heb. 1:1 (prophets)

⁷ 1:2; 3:1

⁸ 1:3b; Rev. 3:21

⁹ Heb. 1:13; John 20:21b

¹⁰ Heb. 2:3b

¹¹ 5:11-13

¹² 2:4

¹³ See 2 Cor. 12:12

¹⁴ See 1 Cor. 12:7-11

If even the greatest Missionary needed ‘perfect[ion] through suffering’,¹⁵ it is wishful thinking to assume that today’s missionaries can have an easy life. Either one is a true missionary, suffering biblically for the expansion of God’s Kingdom, or one is a fake.

We see a beautiful picture of how Jesus crossed over from heavenly to earthly culture,¹⁶ taking on humanity with all the suffering that accompanies it. He had to be made like His brothers, just like missionaries have to become like their target people¹⁷ – in order to remove all foreignness from the Gospel they preach. Christ laid down His life for the humanity He sought to save; missionaries should do the same for the people they seek to reach.

‘Therefore ... brothers who *share in the heavenly calling* fix your thoughts on Jesus, the *apostle ...*’¹⁸ In other words: because you have the same calling, follow His example, be a sent one like He was. Be as faithful in accomplishing your calling to the nations as He was.¹⁹

Missionary or evangelistic success is not just bringing people to the *beginning* of faith – making converts – but encouraging them to continue unto the *end* – making disciples.²⁰ Converts may fall but disciples will stand. Not the Israelites who *started* the journey from Egypt reached the Promised Land but the few who *continued*, like Joshua and Caleb who *finished* it. This message is repeated often.²¹

Disciples need to learn that nothing is hidden from God and that all have to account for what they do in life.²² Therefore we should live holy lives.²³ Paul brought ‘the Gentiles to the *obedience* that comes from faith’.²⁴ Discipleship without obedience is worthless.

Hebrews has a great message for all who think that they need to bring animal sacrifices or pray to ancestors to intercede for them. Jesus stood on our side, reconciling us once for all with God. *With Him* we have nothing to fear.²⁵ *Without Him* we cannot *enter* heaven;²⁶ *with Him* we cannot *miss* it. Jesus is God’s Way; with *Him* we need nothing else for salvation. Christ is sufficient; anything we add to Him will draw us away from Him.

Maturity and begetting offspring are linked.²⁷ Descendants in the physical and spiritual realms were promised to Abraham.²⁸ He became a father of his *own people* and of all believers, out of *the nations*. He was old when Isaac was born and also the church in the Developing World has come of age. Now is *their* time to beget spiritual sons among the nations. Can we paraphrase ‘teachers’ as ‘... by this time you, non-Westerners, ought to be *missionaries ...*’?²⁹ The next chapter preaches the same message.³⁰ The non-white church has been ‘rained upon’ for a long time and produced a *local* crop. God does not forget those results. Yet, it largely failed to produce a crop *among the nations*. In that respect it was mostly barren, which partially

¹⁵ Heb. 2:10; 5:8

¹⁶ 2:14-18. This passage is very similar in spirit to the one in Philip. 2:5-11

¹⁷ In missiology this is called ‘incarnational ministry’, literally being ‘born into the host-culture’ – as Jesus was

¹⁸ Heb. 3:1 (italics mine)

¹⁹ Luke 2:30-32; John 17:4

²⁰ Heb. 3:14-19

²¹ 4:2,6; 6:4-6

²² 5:13; 9:27

²³ 12:14; Matt. 5:8

²⁴ Rom 1:5 (italics mine)

²⁵ Heb. 4:15,16; 6:20; 8:6; 10:19-22

²⁶ John 14:6

²⁷ Compare Heb. 5:14 and 6:1 with 6:14

²⁸ 6:13; Gen. 12:1-3

²⁹ Heb. 5:12; especially so, since teaching belongs to the World Missions mandate, Matt. 28:20a

³⁰ Heb. 6:7-10

explains the poverty on some southern continents.³¹ Now is the Global South's time to engage in saving the people groups who never heard the Gospel.

In the OT Levites were entitled to take tithes from the people. In the NT the rule is: whoever serves the Gospel may live of it. This does not exempt people who are working for the Gospel from giving *their* tithes. They sometimes see themselves only as *receiving* party. Levites – who can be compared with today's full-time Christian personnel – also tithed.³²

Although all OT covenant rules, sacrifices and legislation were God-ordained, the author of Hebrews is clear about its present status: after Christ's earthly ministry, the law in its ritual application became 'obsolete ... and ... would disappear'.³³ The same applies to Tribal Religions – which were *not* God-ordained. None of its rituals and sacrifices can add anything to serving Christ. On the contrary: these will lead people away from Him and cannot take away fear of evil spirits or cleanse guilty consciences. Therefore, in preaching and practice, non-western Christianity should do away with every form of syncretism – which is idolatry – because Christ is all-sufficient and nothing besides Him is needed for salvation.³⁴

It is written that Christ came to do God's will.³⁵ God sent Him for that purpose. As God did for Jesus, He also designed good works for us. Before we were born, He specially designed our life's 'mission'. We need to ask Him what these plans are.³⁶ He will tell us, provided we obey as Jesus did.³⁷

Hebrews contains gems of missionary biography. With regard to missiological significance, there are major and minor characters. The *minor* characters are Abel and Enoch, Moses' parents, the people of Israel and Rahab.³⁸ The *major* characters are Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph and Moses.³⁹ All have their basis of faith in common.⁴⁰ Many lessons and examples can be drawn from their lives for today's missionaries.

The word 'therefore' links this chapter with the next. We are encouraged to behave like the characters mentioned before,⁴¹ all of whom had their *mission*. We must run the race marked out for us,⁴² fulfill our own mission and with perseverance look at Jesus, our missionary example, and be ready to suffer for our mission's completion as He did.

We learn from Esau⁴³ that, when people give in to their carnal cravings, they will forfeit their inheritance⁴⁴, i.e. their God-given missionary vocation.

To abandon the rituals and cultural habits of Tribal Religions is hard. It may mean: being cast out socially and relationally. It may bring shame and persecution from family-clan and people. Yet, the author argues that there is no other way. One needs to break with the old

³¹ Compare with Ps. 67

³² Heb. 7:6,9; compare with Numb. 18:26,28,29

³³ Heb. 8:13

³⁴ 9:8-10,15; 10:9; 12:22-24; 13:8,9

³⁵ 10:7 quoted from Ps. 40

³⁶ Eph. 2:10; Ps. 139:16,17

³⁷ Heb. 10:9a,35,36

³⁸ 11:4,5; 11:23; 11:29,30 and 11:31 respectively

³⁹ 11:7; 11:8-12; 11:20; 11:21; 11:22 and 11:24-28 respectively

⁴⁰ 11:1-3,6,13-16,33-40

⁴¹ 12:1-3

⁴² Note the similarity with how missionary Paul ran his race, 1 Cor. 9:24-27

⁴³ Heb. 12:16,17

⁴⁴ In Ps. 2:8 the nations are spoken of as inheritance for those that fulfill their mission to them

ways, 'go outside the camp' and 'bear the disgrace He bore'.⁴⁵ Life on earth is not heaven; our heavenly City is yet to come. As missionaries we encourage our disciples to keep this principle, and help them evangelize whole families rather than individuals.

⁴⁵ Heb. 13:13,14