

*TWO NEW TESTAMENT PROBLEMS.*

II.

"THE RIDDLE OF THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS."

PROFESSOR JOHN DICKIE, of Dunedin, in the April number of this Magazine raises afresh the "literary riddle of the Epistle to the Hebrews," and invites comments upon his suggestions. May I be allowed to state my large measure of agreement with his conception of the character of the Epistle and its readers, and try to carry the matter a little farther towards a more probable identification of the exact locality of those readers, the authorship of the letter, and its date? I can do this the more briefly that Professor Dickie, and any whom it may concern, can find a fuller exposition of these points elsewhere in print.<sup>1</sup>

I accept, then, in the main his statement as to the spiritual condition of the readers, "Hebrews" or Jewish Christians, whose immediate danger was drifting "away from all vital religion" (though I believe the writer saw present also the danger of apostasy from Christianity in any distinctive sense); also the view that they formed a "house-church" amid a larger local Christian community (cf. xiii. 24, "Salute *all* them that have the rule over you, and *all* the saints"); and that they were a homogeneous group as regards superior social status and that idealistic culture which is known as "Alexandrine" Judaism. But I do not think it probable that they are to be sought in Rome. The Epistle's early use by Clement of Rome does not prove this any more than do the words "they of Italy salute you." This clause may equally well, to say the least, point to the

<sup>1</sup> In the article "Hebrews, Epistle to," in the last edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*.

writer's presence in Italy at the time of writing, as I believe to have been the case.

Our best clue seems to be the reference to Timothy (xiii. 23) as having just been set at liberty, and as possibly soon to join the writer himself; in which case he hopes that Timothy will accompany him when he comes, with as little delay as circumstances allow, to advise his readers in person in the critical situation which had suddenly arisen. Now where was Timothy most likely to go after release from imprisonment, in Italy as it seems? Where but to Ephesus? And where, more than in Ephesus, should we be prepared for the exact state of affairs presupposed in the Epistle? When we put it into the background which Acts xix. suggests, it seems to take on new life and actuality. Not only do we find there traces of a non-Pauline type of Jewish Christians, knowing originally only John the Baptist's baptism, like Apollos in the section immediately preceding; but we may infer also from Paul's having to "separate the disciples" from all connexion with the synagogue (xix. 9), owing to the strength of Jewish feeling which he encountered, that there probably continued to exist a rather conservative type of Jewish Christians in Ephesus, such as Apollos had appealed to on his first coming thither (xviii. 25). When Apollos returned from his mission to Corinth, would he not be likely to give his special attention to such, in view of his distinctive gifts? Accordingly, we may well imagine that there was at Ephesus a sort of Apollos group, analogous to the "party" that gloried in him at Corinth, though it continued in communion with the Pauline group in the one local Christian Community, under its one set of "elders" (Acts xx. 17) or "leaders" (Heb. xiii. 7, 24). Yet Paul's address to these elders at Miletus suggests that he saw special dangers ahead (xx. 29 f.), possibly mainly owing to the persistence of a strongly Judaic type of local

piety. This is what 1 Timothy i. 5 ff. (cf. Titus i. 14 f.) seems to me also to imply. Thus a recrudescence of Judaic tendencies, owing to a faith that was not spiritually vital and morally progressive, would be very likely to occur in some such Ephesian "house-church," especially under the stress of the growing trials and dangers incident to the success of the Jewish attack upon Christianity in the person of Paul in 62 A.D., the very date when it had been able to break out into lawless violence against James and others in Jerusalem itself.

Now this is just the epoch to which the reference to Timothy in Heb. xiii. 23 points, if we infer, as is most natural, that he had become involved in Paul's case on coming to Rome in obedience to 2 Timothy iv. 9. Perhaps "Alexander the coppersmith" (2 Tim. iv. 14 f.), probably the same as the Ephesian Jew of that name (Acts xix. 33 f.), had achieved this, but had been unable to secure the death of a relatively minor "troubler of the peace" in Roman eyes. If this be so, we should date the Epistle (which no doubt works up the substance of many a spoken address on such themes) c. 62, a date which would allow it or its author to influence 1 Peter (e.g. i. 2, "sprinkling of the blood of Christ"), if that be considered probable. Thus, the persecution of some sort implied as having begun before Heb. xiii. 2 was penned, may well be part of the same reflex action of the Jewish successes against leading Christians first referred to, as appears at a somewhat later stage (c. 63-64) in 1 Peter (e.g., i. 6, iv. 1, 12 ff.).

If this line of suggestion be in substance correct, a most probable authorship will already have suggested itself to our minds. If Apollos worked specially among the Jewish Christian wing of the Ephesian Church, who so likely as he to write to a "house-church" of this type in Ephesus, promising to bring with him Timothy, should he reach his side in time

to start from the place in Italy where the writer himself expected to set out, say Brindisi? But is there any trace of Apollos ever having been in Italy? There is, unless a most self-authenticating personal notice in Titus iii. 13 be set aside. If, then, Apollos had been once with Paul in Rome, why should he not have returned after carrying out the mission with which he was no doubt intrusted by the Apostle? Thus we have a situation, soon after Paul's martyrdom c. 62 A.D., which seems in all respects to clear up the "literary riddle" of this great epistle. I have responded to Professor Dickie's invitation to continue the discussion he has so usefully opened; and shall be glad if he will return to it with any further comments he has to offer.

VERNON BARTLET.