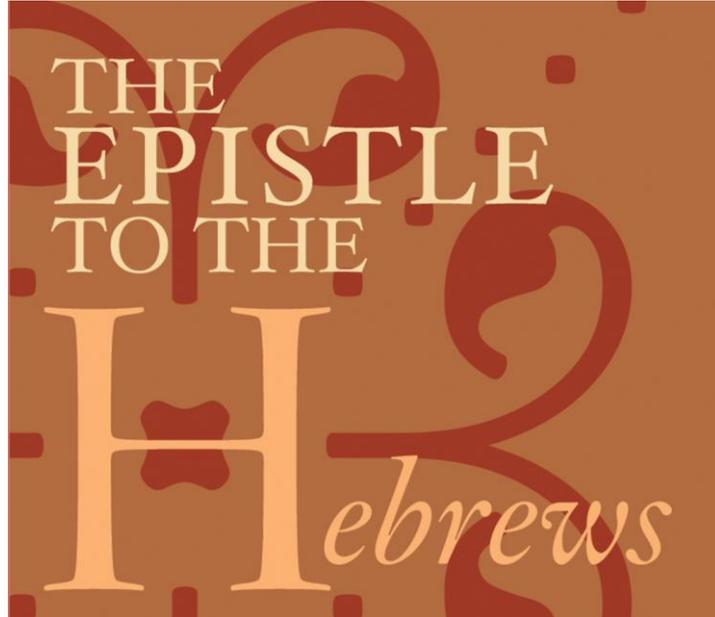


THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS



Hebrews 9:24 "Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands, a mere copy of the true one, but he entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf."

For our generation, 9/11 was a crucial event that changed how we looked at the world. We suddenly felt much less safe. We created the TSA and then changed how we boarded airplanes. We invaded one country, Afghanistan, and then another, Iraq, in this new War on Terrorism, that doesn't ever seem to end. We looked at immigrants differently, suspiciously, and questioned their faith. This tragedy has defined the world for my children.

For my parents' generation, it was Pearl Harbor that changed their lives. I remember as a child listening to my father recount the horror as his family listened to the live radio broadcasts about that

attack on Sunday morning, December 7th, 1941, and how he and all his friends went straight down to enlist in the United States armed forces, the first thing the next morning. For their world and their futures had changed forever by that attack.

For every generation, there are traumatic events like these, which affect how we look at life and how we respond to one another, that often create a language of their own that defines our experiences and our hopes. For the first generation of Christians, that defining event was the shocking destruction of the Jewish Temple and the leveling of the ancient city of Jerusalem by the Roman army in the year 70 of the Common Era. A Jewish revolt had begun by political Zealots a few years earlier in 66 C.E. Jewish defenders of the faith eventually locked themselves in the ancient city, barred the gates against the foreign usurpers, hoping to overthrow Roman rule the way the Maccabees overthrew the Greeks years before. Meanwhile the Roman army under the command of General Titus, who would later become Emperor because of his handling of this revolt, laid siege to the ancient citadel and after 4 long years broke through the walls, during which fire completely destroyed the beloved City of David. The destruction of the Temple is still mourned today annually as the Jewish fast of Tisha B'Av, regarded as the saddest day in the Jewish calendar. And the Arch of Titus, celebrating the Roman sack of Jerusalem and the Temple, still stands in Rome, so historic were these events.

As you may know, some of the surviving Jews of that revolt escaped through hidden underground tunnels, while the Roman soldiers pursued them; and this whole futile Jewish rebellion did not really end until the horrific massacre at Masada, King Herod's fort near the Dead Sea. Meanwhile, the ancient city of Jerusalem was literally taken down stone by stone by the conquering Romans. All that survived was the Western Wall of the Temple, the so-called Wailing Wall, referring to the practice of Jews weeping at the site over the destruction of the Temple, now the holiest place where Jews are permitted to pray. The first century Jewish historian Josephus recorded that more than a million people perished in that siege of Jerusalem and about 100,000 were carried away into slavery. A new Roman city was eventually built upon the ruins of the ancient citadel by Emperor Hadrian, called *Aelia Capitolina*, where Jews were forbidden to even enter the city by penalty of death. It was not until almost 600 years later, in 638 C.E., that the Arabs conquered that city and that the Jews were free to return to this ancient site.

The Temple in Jerusalem had been the center of religious life and activity for the Jews for more than 500 years. Pilgrims dispersed around the world returned there annually for the sacred festivals and feasts, as we can see in the life of Jesus as recorded in the New Testament itself, who himself though a Galilean regularly went to Jerusalem for Passover and the High Holy days. So how could this destruction have been allowed to happen? Why did God permit this

tragedy to befall the Jews? And what would become of them? And what could replace the Temple as the center of their religious life? The temple priests had been massacred. The Sadducees, the group that maintained the Temple, became extinct soon after its destruction. The Essenes, that mystical Jewish sect made famous by the Dead Sea Scrolls, fled across the River Jordan and disappeared from the scene. The Herodians continued until 92 C.E., when the last Herodian monarch died, and Rome assumed full power over the region. Only the Pharisees survived among the former Jewish leadership, and thus the early Jewish Christians famously disputed with the Pharisees over the future of Judaism. The center of worship for Jews moved from the now destroyed Temple in Jerusalem to the local synagogues, and the grain offerings and the animal sacrifices required at the Temple, which they could no longer keep, was replaced by the reading and study of the Torah. And so was slowly born modern rabbinic Judaism which has continued in this way to our day. And although there are some Jews who still dream of rebuilding the Temple, which is a politically insensitive idea, since there has been a mosque on the Temple Mount for the last 1,400 years, most Jews do not really imagine going back to the days of animal sacrifices, and do not long for a new class of temple priests to replace their rabbis, their local religious leaders and teachers. Some synagogues no longer even pray the traditional prayer at the end of the Sabbath service for the restoration of the Temple. For the past is past.

Christians back in the first century, on the other hand, moved Judaism in another direction, with Jesus at the center. And soon these early Jewish Christians interpreted the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem as a punishment by God for the failure of Jews to accept Jesus as the Messiah. Here was all the proof you needed that God was on our side, Christians said again and again! Since Jewish Christians did not play a significant role in the defense of the Temple in the rebellion of 70 C.E., there was a lot of newfound hatred towards the Christians, who began to be barred from the synagogues, cursed in official prayers, and who went off increasingly to form House Churches that were filled now more with Gentiles than Jews. Still the Church appropriated the language of the Temple in its ritual and practices. The Church had its own priests and altars, and its own talk about the sacrifice of the Mass, and the blood of the lamb that was shed for us.

And this theology of the time can be seen developing in many places of the Christian Scripture. Think, for instance, of the Parable of the Great Banquet, that is repeated in several different places in the Gospels, where those invited to the feast refused to come, and where the servants were ordered by the master to go out into the highways and byways and invite in the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. In Matthew's famous re-telling of this story, the king is so enraged that his friends had declined the invitation to his son's wedding banquet that he is said to have sent

out his troops, killed those who refused his invitations, and burned their city to the ground, a clear allusion and addition, think historians, to the destruction of Jerusalem. Think of the Parable of the Wicked Tenants, who refused to pay their due to the Landlord's servants when they came to collect it and beat up those servants like the prophets of old, such that the Landlord, we are told, sent his only son, surely, they would respect my son, he said. And what did the wicked tenants do, they threw the son out of the vineyard and killed him. Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, Jesus asked, what will he do to those tenants? And the disciples said to him, 'He will put those wretches to a miserable death and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him his due at harvest time.' The clear suggestion in these stories is that God rejected the Jews with the destruction of the Temple and that Christians took their place in the vineyard. This is the beginning of the 'displacement theory' that many branches of Christianity will later hold as doctrine, and will eventually lead Christians to massacre Jews again and again as rejected by God. Edward I drove them out of England in the early 14th century. They were driven from Spain and Portugal in 1492, then persecuted in France, and massacred by the Crusaders. They have been hunted and tormented right into our own day, hated by Christians for rejecting Jesus. For it is our generation that tried what was called the "Final Solution" to the ancient problem of the Jews; systematic

extermination. Six million of them were killed by the Nazis in gas ovens and firing ditches.

And no book from the New Testament dealt more directly with the development of this new religious reality than the anonymous Epistle to the Hebrews, which we have been reading for the last several weeks and will continue to do so until the Feast of Christ the King. The Epistle to the Hebrews suggested that God didn't need the Temple anymore, because Jesus' death, once for all upon the cross, fulfilled the demands of the ancient sacrificial offerings that used to be made at the Temple. The author of Hebrews even imagines a New Jerusalem and a new Temple, not made by human hands, but in heaven, where Jesus serves as our Great High Priest, entering the real Holy of Holies and not just a mere copy of it, and pleading with God there on our behalf. Here Jesus' death replaces the need of the Yom Kippur sacrifices at the Temple, because Jesus is the Lamb of God that has taken away the sin of the world. Christ is our Passover sacrificed for us.

Christianity, however, soon became dominated by Hellenistic influences, and as the years passed cared less and less about the foreign Jewish Temple and its rituals, and more and more about the Son of God now in human flesh, like some Greek God of old. Most Christians today, like modern Jews, do not see a need to rebuild the Temple or return to animal sacrifices. So, while the Epistle to the Hebrews was very popular in the first generations of the Christian

Church, it is less well known these days, less often read or studied, and maybe even less relevant in today's world, less important than it was to those early Jewish Christians in those terrible days after the destruction of the Temple and the leveling of the beloved City of David.

Though this Epistle may not matter much to us, it mattered greatly to those early Jewish Christians. It helped them make religious sense of this tragedy in their lives, not only of the death of Jesus but also the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem. So let us not forget how those early Christians were comforted by an understanding of Jesus's death as a fulfilment of the Temple, and their hope for a New Jerusalem, where God would wipe away every tear from our eyes, where death would be no more; where mourning and crying and pain would cease, and there would only be life everlasting with God in a heavenly Jerusalem, for the first things have passed away. Amen.