



Wandering But Not Lost

STANLEY N. OLSON

Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota

Many of the greatest themes of this age of Christianity are world-centered. Issues of justice and peace focus the concerns of those who work toward a tangible experience of God's love for all people and insist that the church itself should reflect this goal. Liberals and evangelicals alike seek to have governments further their perceptions of God's earthly will for humanity. The church's long standing concern for counseling and social service ministries moves it increasingly into all areas of daily living.

Christian commitments ought to be aimed toward understanding and faith in the everyday world. This emphasis has not been carried too far; rather, we have a long way to go toward full acknowledgement and appreciation of our doctrines of creation, incarnation and redemption. Since the focus on this present life is both vital and neglected, one raises contrary biblical themes with some reticence, lest they feed unfriendly fires. Nevertheless, there are such themes. And, perhaps, a Christian should listen most attentively to those texts which seem most apt to question favored emphases.

Hebrews contains many texts to challenge a narrow focus on life in this world. The author of Hebrews insists on a broad view, indeed one which contrasts this life with a far greater reality. Certainly the writer does not lose interest in present existence, but this world in all of its manifestations is seen to be inferior to the things of God.

Nearly forty years ago as a young pastor Ernest Käsemann spent a month in jail for his outspoken objections to the Nazi government. Käsemann used

*This essay is based on a discussion of the epistle texts for the twenty-second through twenty-fifth Sundays after Pentecost in the second year of the ecumenical lectionary. Participants with the author were Pastor Robert R. Bjornlund of Luther Memorial Church in Minneapolis, Bishop Herbert W. Chilstrom of the Minnesota Synod, LCA, and Prof. Roy A. Harrisville of Luther Northwestern Seminary (who served as exegete).

Chilstrom is the author of *Hebrews, A New and Better Way* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984). Harrisville, with Irving L. Sandberg, translated *The Wandering People of God, An Investigation of the Letter to the Hebrews*, by Ernst Käsemann (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984).

those days to begin a book on Hebrews called *The Wandering People of God*. The book reflected his conviction that neither the “thousand year Reich” nor any other government could claim to be God's rule in the world. Yet, Käsemann's response to this awareness was not withdrawal from the world but resistance to the arrogant claimants. Those concerned for this world may still dare to listen to Hebrews—both to be reminded of the goal and of its contrast with our earthly situation.

Another story from those war years highlights the same theme. On the altar of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's small seminary in Finkenwalde concentration camp there was the single word *hapax* (once). Forms of that word appear several times in Hebrews to assert the absolute significance of Jesus' death. In the midst of a concentration camp, symbol of human evil, the altar word staked a claim. All reality was changed in the moment of Christ's death. The absolute occurred in that time and space. All the rest of human history was made relative to that event, which thus reveals the true status of any oppressive government—and also, of course, of any resistance or reform movement. This world is God's, and ought to reflect that because the cross dignified all of life. Nevertheless, the standard of God's will can never be found in the present world.

I. THEMES OF HEBREWS

Hebrews is dominated by two great themes. The under-theme is the one identified by Käsemann: the wandering people of God. Especially in chapters three and four the author evokes the image of the Israelites in the wilderness and urges Christians to steadfastness and hope. The failures of the chosen people are used as a warning: "Today, when you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness..." (3:7-8). *Wandering* is doubly appropriate to describe the Christian. On the one hand, we are prone to wander from the path, to err in our direction and depart from God's way, to refuse to acknowledge God. On the other hand, we are not at home in this world. We are aliens here, pilgrims. To acknowledge God means to accept this status as aliens. Not all who wander are lost, but one may be both.

The wandering theme is complemented by the promise of rest. The pilgrim Israelites were denied rest in the promised land because they wandered from their trust in God. Hebrews twice quotes Psalm 95:11, "As I swore in my wrath, they shall never enter my rest" (Heb 3:11 and 4:5). However, the offer of rest is renewed, "Today, when you hear my voice..." (Ps 95:7, Heb 3:7, 15). This hope is held out to us both as pilgrims in an alien land and as those who have left God's way for our own paths.

Wandering is the under-theme, the theme of need in Hebrews. The overtheme, the theme of resolution, is Christ the enthroned Son, the great high priest. The author establishes Christ's God-given superiority to the prophets, to the angels, and to Moses himself (1:1-3:6). Because of Christ's righteousness and faithfulness, God granted to him the promise of Psalm 110:1, "Sit at my right hand..." He is granted God's power and authority. Through the image of Christ the high priest, Hebrews explores the relevance for humanity of Christ's status. Christ is the hope of the wanderer because by him we enter rest. He has

not only made expiation for our sin in this life, but also draws us on through this foreign existence toward our home with God.

The nature of God is the foundation for both these themes in Hebrews. God's faithfulness undergirds the promise of rest and the provision of the high priest, but it also explains the ominous consequences of rejecting the promise and continuing in errant wanderings. God's role is stressed throughout. It is God who created this world, who invited the people to rest, and who enthroned Jesus, exalting him to the office of high priest, once for all. It is God who establishes a

new and lasting covenant (chaps. 8-9). It is faith in God which makes chapter eleven's surprising list of Old Testament figures useful models for today's wanderers. In chapter 12, the body of the book ends with a restatement of the admonition to endurance and faith and reinforces this with reference to the wrath of God. The invitation of God offers a fateful choice—rest or fire. The letter-like conclusion (chap. 13) sums up the exhortations and their basis in God's work in Christ. God is faithful to the promise, and, therefore, it is possible to choose rest. That faithfulness is wrath for those who turn away.

II. LANGUAGE AND STRUCTURE

The author of Hebrews reaches in two directions for images and ideas to communicate the gospel to his audience. The one is toward Old Testament ritual and law. Hebrews is filled not only with numerous and extensive quotations of the Hebrew Scriptures but also draws heavily on its central images, particularly the language of worship and sacrifice. The other direction is toward a type of speculative philosophy known to us from Philo and ancient Alexandria. This language approaches that of Platonism and gnosticism.

The author uses both resources, but his preference is clearly for the first. The Old Testament concern for sin, guilt, redemption, and atonement is congenial and appropriate to his purpose of explaining and presenting the meaning of Christ. The other resource inclines toward a preoccupation with existence beyond death, with denial or escape from this world. That is not what our author has in mind. Well into the twentieth century, scholars often suggested that Hebrews was heavily influenced by Platonism and/or a gnostic myth of the redeemed redeemer,¹ but few would argue that today. Growing knowledge of the origins of gnosticism and further study of the texts has shown that there are more satisfactory analogs for Hebrews within Hellenistic Judaism.

More importantly, the gospel fractures all conceptual systems the author adopts, whatever their origins and original implications. Neither Jewish imagery nor Hellenistic philosophy is able to bear the full weight of the claims made for Jesus as High priest and Son enthroned. Hellenism's myths are challenged by the absolute claim of redemption within history, in space and time. The Jewish legal and cultic imagery is exploded by the parallel insistence that Christ has

¹Käsemann makes this assumption in his book and, for that reason, was long reluctant to have it reprinted or translated. However, his insights into the themes of Hebrews and their relevance to the modern world do not depend upon his now outdated understandings of gnostic materials.

offered himself as sacrifice, once for all. The gospel remains in control of these concepts. They are useful, but they do not overpower the kerygma. The threads are linked together to serve a new purpose.

Hebrews has been compared to an intricate crocheted piece which picks up a new thread again and again, but then carries all the threads through the piece, weaving them into the pattern. Thus, to take hold of one thread is to have hold of the whole piece. Those schooled in the ways of Western literature and seeking an ordered progression of ideas will seek in vain in Hebrews. What is always true of the Bible is emphatically true here: texts must be read in context. The interpreter will do well to be familiar with the entire work before handling an individual text. The

compilers of the lectionary have given us an opportunity to explore much of Hebrews by giving us a sequence of eight texts at the end of the Pentecost season in the second year of the cycle. The middle four, for the twenty-second through twenty-fifth Sundays after Pentecost, suggest sermons which focus on the chief themes and patterns of this book.

III. THE LESSONS

Hebrews 4:9-16, The Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost. This pericope carries the two great themes of Hebrews. The first part speaks of the rest which is still offered to God's wandering people. Beginning with verse 14, the topic is Jesus' high priestly role. Further, the fundamental note of God's constancy is at the center of the text, vv. 12-13. Texts for the two preceding Sundays have dealt with Jesus becoming human, one with us, to destroy the power of death (2:9-11 [12-18]), and have used Jesus' faithful superiority to Moses as the basis for a call to confident hope (3:1-6). The themes of wandering and rest have not yet appeared in the lectionary and could be helpfully explored on the twenty-second Sunday of Pentecost. For study, and perhaps for liturgical reading, the theme begins at 3:6 and concludes at 4:13. The high priest theme of 4:14-16 should be taken with the pericope for the following Sunday.

The author of Hebrews is rather direct in moving the promise of rest to his or her own time. The good news was announced, but the wandering Israelites did not benefit, through lack of faith. The Psalmist had proclaimed the promise anew. Hebrews takes those words to itself, "Today, when you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts." We may do the same. The promise of God for a sabbath rest has not yet been fulfilled. It lies open to us who are also wandering. We are exhorted to believe the promise and not harden our hearts.

Here we sense the full tension between God's present and God's future, between the earthly and the heavenly. There was and is a present, earthly experience of God's love and wrath. Though the author denies that the ancients had faith to enter the promised rest, chapters 11-12 nevertheless use the people of that time as models of faith. They were certainly blessed, and yet the promise remained unfulfilled. The hortatory sections of Hebrews make it clear that the call to steadfastness is intended to have significant earthly consequences, but the promised rest is still beyond us. We may helpfully distinguish the two aspects of wandering. To fail to look only to God in Christ is to wander. From that error we may and must be freed now, by faith. The Christian remains, however, a

stranger in a strange land. The church for which this book was written might have comfortably heard the old lines, "I am but a pilgrim here, heaven is my home."

In distinguishing two sorts of wandering, we must be careful not to understand the one simply in ethical terms. Hebrews does speak extensively about good works and contrasts those with empty ritual, but the central admonitions focus on steadfastness. The call is to look to Jesus, to live in faith. With that understanding, the two aspects of God's invitation clearly belong together. We can live here and now in confidence of rest by looking to Jesus, and our hope for perfect rest is also tied to God in Jesus. Christ is not only the one by whom we are redeemed and liberated, he is also the means to the final goal.

Christian existence is a wandering and a freedom from wandering. We live by faith in God now, but we are not at home. Life is a journey, a sojourn, but we are on the way toward a

known goal. We sense both the certainty and the wandering, the rest and the restlessness. The ultimate, the heavenly, the godly, the parousia seems so far from our daily lives. The science and technology by which we all live have no room for the claim that the death of Jesus of Nazareth is the turning point of reality. We feel torn. Our efforts to work God's will in our lives and our world meet with such little success. Hebrews would tell each of us, "Yes, you are a stranger, a wanderer. But, you know the way to walk within that world. Hold fast to the promise of God."

This Sunday will be celebrated as Reformation Sunday in many churches. A different set of texts is assigned for that day, but Hebrews also offers a strong Reformation theme—the word of God, sharper than a two-edged sword (4:12). In this text, "word" certainly refers to the promise of rest for those who believe. Faith in the God of the promise means to be on the highway home. Those without faith experience only God's rejection. Without faith there is only the overwhelming sense of strangeness wherever we turn. The world is an alien place. Trust is the only way to walk in God's world. By it we know God as gracious and faithful, and we know ourselves headed toward God's rest.

Hebrews 5:1-10, The Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost. This will be All Saints Sunday in most churches and here too the lectionary suggests other texts. Again, the Hebrews text offers a theme appropriate and essential to the day. The focus is on Christ, the high priest. The saints we honor on this day are simply persons who acknowledged Christ. The high priest theme illumines the significance of Christ for those who confidently drew near to the throne of grace to receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need (4:16). The theme of the wandering people of God describes our human need. The motif of the high priest presents the solution—the Son enthroned by God. The other texts for this twenty-third Sunday of Pentecost use similar images to speak of God's saving work. Jeremiah 31:7-9 promises that Yahweh will bring back the exiles. Mark 10:46-52 is the story of Bartimaeus who is healed by Jesus and "follows in the way." Psalm 126 celebrates restoration, "Whoever goes forth weeping...shall come home with shouts of joy..." (v. 6).

Three things must be said about the high priest theme in 4:14-5:10. First, it is God who appoints Jesus as high priest, makes him perfect, and enthrones him

as Son (the terms are nearly synonymous for the author of Hebrews). This move comes from the throne of grace.

Second, this priesthood is not something Jesus claims by right, "One does not take the honor upon himself" (5:4). Jesus is Son, but the enthronement at the right hand of power is the result of Jesus' obedience, his godly fear. This obedience is not simply moral rectitude. The point is that Jesus was not deflected from God's purpose, even though it meant becoming human, suffering and dying. He did not wander but was faithful to God and was thus made high priest, the enthroned Son. The meaning is very similar to that of the Christ hymn Paul quotes in Philippians 2:6-11—for his obedience Jesus is exalted.

However, and this is the third point, the exaltation of Jesus is not merely a reward with no intrinsic relation to Jesus' obedience. It is also an opportunity provided by Jesus' fidelity. This obedience in becoming one with humanity, tempted as we, suffering and dying as we, made it possible for Jesus to become the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him (5:9). The

incarnation and death are essential to Hebrews' understanding of Christ the high priest. They represent Christ's total obedience to God's will and are also the means by which God works.

Jesus is the source of salvation to all who obey him. In his total oneness with humanity he was never deflected from God's purpose. This is his obedience. Our obedience is to place our trust in him as the only one who can be priest for us. He is both the sacrificer and the sacrificed. He not only calls but draws. He is both the goal and the means; both the pioneer and the perfecter of our faith. Jesus is the hope of the wandering people of God. He is the way to God's rest. By him, we are made saints.

Hebrews 7:23-28, The Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost. The absolute uniqueness of the great high priest's role is proclaimed in this pericope. In contrast to the endless repetition of sin offerings in worship forms under the law, Jesus offered himself once for all. Further, as eternal priest "he always lives to make intercession" (7:25). There is no longer any need for a string of earthly intercessors offering sacrifices for their own sins as well as those of others.

The priest-king Melchizedek who received a tenth of the spoils from one of Abram's battles (Gen 14:17-20) was a subject of some speculation in Judaism, both because of the respect paid him by Abram and because his death is never recorded. It came to be assumed that he had not died and thus remained forever a priest. The author of Hebrews picks up that idea in chapters 6-7 and uses it to clarify the work of Christ who became priest by the power of an indestructible life (7:16). The promise of Psalm 110:4 is applied to Jesus: "Thou art a priest for ever, after the order of Melchizedek." Hebrews takes a parallel theme from Psalm 110:1—the enthroned Son. God has made Jesus unique.

The rare word, *ephapax* (once for all), undoes any attempt to make too much of the gnostic, Platonic tone of much language in Hebrews. The work of God in Christ is tied to history. It never leaves the world of sense and time for the world of ideas or myths. Jesus' death is of absolute significance. God's redemptive activity has come to its consummation in space and time. Our author is really not a Platonist at all. He refers to the earthly tent and the heavenly sanctuary, to the holy of holies and the heavenly holy place (chaps. 8-9). This may

give the impression that we are being led away from the earthly, the fleshly, the palpable to the heavenly, the ideal, but the contrary is true. Hebrews ties revelation to the once for all death of Jesus. The historical and concrete is set against the myth, just as the never-to-be-repeated is set against the legal and the cultic.

There is perhaps some interpretatively useful tension between the themes of "once for all" and "always lives to make intercession." The time of Jesus was the center of all time. Reality is changed, absolutely. However, that message can be a word of despair for one whose experience indicates that life has not changed. Then the other word of hope remains—Christ lives to make intercession so that we may draw near to God. The opportunity is there for us. We have not come too late, despite appearances. The way is open now.

Christ's role is unique because it rests completely on God's unchangeable promise. The oath enthroning Christ came after the law with its provision for repeated atonement. Both covenants are grounded in the nature of God, but Jesus is the surety of a better covenant because his obedience was met by God's unchangeable promise.

Hebrews 9:24-28, The Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost. Here one might complain that the lectionary has given us a text which merely reiterates what has been said in the preceding ones—Christ’s once for all sacrifice contrasted with the repetition of the temple sacrifices. However, one note is new—Christ will appear a second time. Another note was not considered when it appeared before—Christ has entered into heaven itself, the true sanctuary (cf. 4:14).

Christ has passed through the heavens. Psalm 110:1, “Sit at my right hand...,” is alluded to several times in Hebrews. Clearly the author understands Christ as exercising his high priestly function in the very presence of God. The great qualitative difference between his place of interceding and that of the temple priests is emphasized here. But even here apocalyptic language ties his work to the temporal, “...he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself” (9:26). Jesus’ death is unambiguously central for this author. The unity of themes is similar to the strange and complex Johannine image of crucifixion, exaltation, and return to the Father. The cross is the doorway to God for Jesus and the believer.

Perhaps it is no coincidence that the phrase “not made with hands” echoes the words of a charge raised against Jesus at his trial (Mk 14:58). He was accused of threatening to destroy the temple and raise another not made with hands. The evangelists, of course, saw the accusation as an ironic misunderstanding of a resurrection prediction. But, they also saw Jesus as replacing the temple. This fits well with Hebrews’ imagery—Christ is both the true sacrifice and the true priest. His death does replace the temple, and by it he enters the greater temple, the very presence of God. Hebrews insists on tying together the earthly and the ultimate. The cross is the place of the knot.

“Christ will appear again to save those who are eagerly waiting for him” (9:28). This final verse of the text states a new idea but also suggests we might end where we began, by speaking of the dual sense of wandering. Christ has appeared, once for all, to deal with sin. The wandering of error, of being deflected from God’s purpose, can be behind us. By Christ’s intercession we are drawn toward God. We are on the way. We struggle with injustice and the problems of

our world. We strive to avoid sin ourselves and to encourage others. All this we do, looking to God, so that the world may not be so alien a place, and so that we may be on the way. And yet, we remain strangers, aliens, wanderers away from home. Hebrews shares with much of the rest of the New Testament the conviction that God’s purposes will not finally be done until we are with God. Christ will come again. The rest awaits. The experience of homecoming, of belonging, is not fully ours, but it will be. It will be, because God wills it so. The constant of our lives is not the wandering; it is God’s promise of rest. In the words of the Psalm of the day, “Whoever is wise...consider the steadfast love of the Lord “ (Ps 107:43).