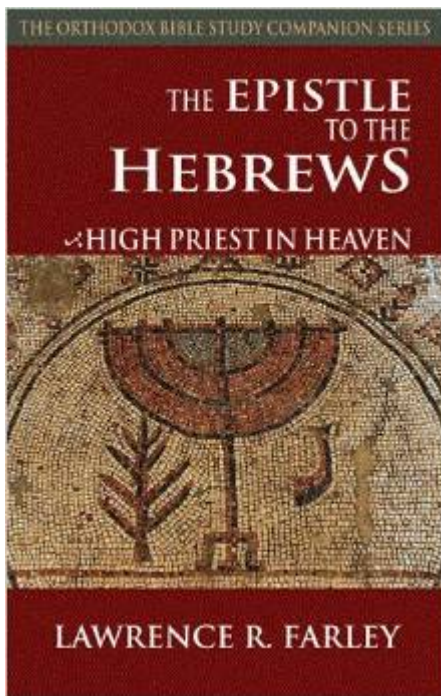


Lawrence R. Farley, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: High Priest in Heaven*. The Orthodox Bible Study Series. Chesterton, IN: Ancient Faith Publishing, 2014. ISBN-10: 1936270749, ISBN-13: 978-1936270743



By Dn. Lasha Tchantouridzé

The Epistle to the Hebrews is probably the most analyzed book in the New Testament. Much discussion throughout centuries has been generated by the issue of authorship of the epistle: it seems to be missing its opening passage, in which according to the ancient customs, the writer would identify both himself and the recipient(s). Also, nowhere in the text of the epistle it is stated that the recipients are “Hebrews” – this can only be established from the context of the epistle and its theological message. Finally, although the epistle is missing the identity of its author, it is clear that he possesses much knowledge and authority, and communicates the message with utmost conviction and certainty. Although written in Greek, the author appears to be a Jew as the text of the letter demonstrates excellent knowledge of the Torah and the Prophets.

The author of the present commentary, Archpriest Lawrence Farley is the pastor of the St. Herman of Alaska Orthodox Parish in Langley, British Columbia. A former Anglican priest, he joined the Orthodox Church in 1985, and studied two

years in St. Tikhon's Orthodox Christian Seminary in Pennsylvania. A parish priest of St. Herman of Alaska church in Langley, British Columbia, Father Lawrence is the author of a number of books and essays on various subjects of Christian theology. He has written this commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews as part of the Orthodox Bible Study Companion series. His stated objective has been to answer some of the most common questions Orthodox clergy would get from laypeople about the meaning and message of the epistle. Father Lawrence is deeply knowledgeable of his subject, but most importantly, he demonstrates an outstanding skill at clarifying and explaining the most complicated aspects of the epistle.

Traditionally, authorship of the Epistle to the Hebrews is ascribed to St. Paul; however, since ancient times his authorship has been disputed. Disputes about authorship arose as early II-III centuries. Tertullian suggested Apostle Barnabas as the author. Origen in the third century remarked that the Epistle to the Hebrews had been handed down as authored by St. Paul, but the true author was known only to God. Various apostles other than St. Paul have been suggested throughout centuries, but nothing has been proven conclusively. Currently, there are two opinions in the Orthodox Church regarding authorship of the Epistle to the Hebrews: one older view ascribes it to St. Paul – this view is dominant in older Orthodox countries, especially in Russia. The second view ascribes authorship to another apostle – this view is more widespread in Orthodox churches in the West, and among many historians of Christianity. Father Lawrence accepts the latter opinion, and he argues that “the epistle was written by an otherwise unknown and anonymous Christian teacher of the second generation [of Christians following Christ and His apostles].” In his commentary, Fr. Lawrence refers to the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews simply as “the author.”

The epistle is written to a Christian Hebrew community, most likely in Jerusalem. By AD 67-70, Christianity was widely spread in the Roman Empire, on the other hand, Palestine had experienced a growth in pagan population, and historical lands of Israel were ruled directly from Rome often by corrupt and violent men. Dissatisfaction with the Roman rule was much more profound than during Jesus' earthly ministry, and tensions between Hebrews and pagans would

often erupt in violent clashes. Jews seized control of Jerusalem in AD 66, but in AD 70 Roman legions under Titus re-captured the city and literally razed it to the ground. Almost all of its population was either killed or enslaved. The Epistle to the Hebrews had to predate the destruction of Jerusalem as nothing remained intact after it. Whoever survived the siege likely dispersed throughout the Middle East without benefits of communal protection and lifestyle enjoyed in Jerusalem.

The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews demonstrates excellent knowledge of Christian theology and mastery of Greek language. He compares and contrasts the Old Covenant with the New, explores the person of Jesus Christ and His divinity, discusses earthly and heavenly ministries of priesthood, addresses the issue of God's rest, reviews biblical history of the Hebrews, and urges the addressees to be chaste, vigilant, and faithful to God. The scope of the doctrinal issues discussed is truly remarkable, as the author was unlikely to have more than one of the Gospels to go by, and probably had very little authoritative theological writing to cite.

Christians of the second and third generations, especially those in Palestine, were under considerable pressure to abandon the faith. Father Lawrence points out that the Epistle to the Hebrews was written between AD 67 and 70, likely closer to AD 70. This is the period in church's history when it becomes clear that Christianity can no longer remain within the confines of the old Hebrew religion. The Christians of Israel of the first century were good Jews and good Christians – they did not see a contradiction between the two – they celebrated both old and new feasts. But as political tensions increased in Palestine, especially in and around Jerusalem, the Christians came under pressure by followers of the old faith to abandon Christ. After taking control of Jerusalem, the old congregations were probably seeking more uniformity and compliance to ancient traditions as well as a clarification of the most important issue in both Old and New Covenants: the question of Messiah – is Jesus of Nazareth the Messiah or not? Hebrew Christians became isolated from their society and some were tempted to abandon Christ – the author of the Epistle insists they persevere and remain with Messiah, who stands higher than anyone known by Hebrews from the Torah and the Prophets. For this reason, Hebrew Christians had to be ready to leave aside the Old Covenant and “go forth to Him,

outside the camp, bearing His reproach” (Heb. 13:13). The epistle contrasts earthly and heavenly ministries of priesthood, the latter exemplified by Melchizedek and fulfilled by Christ.

The Epistle to the Hebrews is often read in liturgical services and some of its verses are incorporated in hymns and prayers of the Divine Liturgy. As such, this epistle would naturally create many questions among the lay members of the church, such as the eternal Sonship of Christ, the person of Melchizedek, the office of high priests, the wrath of God, overcoming of the Old Covenant, ancient Hebrew Christians of Palestine, interpretation of various passages from the Epistle to the Hebrews and relevant Old Testament books. Father Lawrence does an excellent job of structuring his commentary around every single important point in the Epistle to the Hebrews, and clarifying issues by citing corresponding Biblical passages.

Another fascinating aspect of the Epistle to the Hebrews is its systematic insistence that Hebrew Christians change their thinking and re-orient their worldview around Christ. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews argues that although Christianity emerged out of the old faith of Hebrews, it is entirely a new phenomenon. The Christian Church exploded from the very first decades of its history, and this explosion cannot be ascribed to Judaism spreading beyond historical boundaries of Israel or to Hellenistic efforts to preach the old Hebrew faith to new audiences. It was the person of Jesus Christ that made this explosive growth possible, and the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews does not miss this fact. Father Lawrence notes the author’s constant reference to Christ as a historical figure and the Messiah, present in the background of all church interactions.

The Epistle to the Hebrews unequivocally insists on the ontological primacy of Christ – there is no question in author’s mind that Christ is the God incarnate. To the author of the Epistle, Jesus Christ is the revelation of Divine Truth that transcends history and cultural aspects of the first century Palestine. However, paradoxically, Christianity and its message depend entirely upon historical events and processes: Christ’s life, His ministry, death and resurrection is a fulfillment of old Hebrew prophecies recorded throughout Hebrew history. The author of the

Epistle stresses historicity of the faith in Christ, but states that “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever” (Heb. 13:8).

Father Lawrence explores the question of Melchizedek, his place in the Old Testament, and his contextual relationship with Christ. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews refers to Christ as “a High Priest,” “Jesus Son of God,” “called by God as High Priest ‘according to the order of Melchizedek’” (4:14, 5:10). As the Epistle to the Hebrews builds a logical and natural bridge between the Old and New Covenants, the extensive references to the person of Melchizedek, the mysterious royal high priest of Salem, who blessed Abraham and his God with bread and wine, is the most appropriate. Melchizedek’s legacy and his priestly order are explored nowhere else in the New Testament books. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews describes Melchizedek, who “remains a priest continually” as being “without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but made like the Son of God” (Heb. 7:3) – in this the high priest of Salem prefigures Christ, but is not identical with Him.

The present commentary to the Book of the Hebrews is very well written and organized – Father Lawrence has intended the commentary for general readership, but it will serve members of the clergy as well. The publisher has made *The Epistle to the Hebrews: The High Priest in Heaven* available both in traditional print and electronic book forms – the latter being compatible with the Amazon *Kindle* book reader. The readers will enjoy helpful arrangement and formatting of the text; the volume is very reasonably priced and is available from Amazon and other booksellers.

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