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The Mother of Jesus and the Authorship of the Epistle to the Hebrews¹

J. Massynberde Ford

One of the books of the New Testament which shows a profound and original insight into the Old Testament is the *Epistle to the Hebrews*. There are approximately thirty-seven quotations and seventy citations in it.² It has been suggested that this book is based on a long homily on Ps. 110³ which combines kingship and priesthood according to Melchizedek.

The author of Hebrews is unknown and the first attribution comes from Clement of Alexandria cited by Eusebius (*H.E.* 6:14) who thought that Paul wrote it in Hebrew and that Luke translated it into Greek. Nowadays few scholars would accept the Pauline authorship and other candidates proffered are Stephen, Philip, Peter, Silas, Aristion, Jude, Apollos and last but not least from Prisca (or Priscilla). The author of this work must have been one who had a clear grasp (1) on the divine Sonship of Jesus; (2) of His Davidic kingship because of use of the royal psalms especially Ps. 2 and 110; (3) she or he must have had not only a firm conviction about His humanity but even an intimacy with him as a person, for we gain glimpses of Jesus' character which do not appear elsewhere in the New Testament—qualities, we may add which would be especially appealing to a woman, those of compassion, gentleness and understanding of human weakness. No New Testament writing exhibits such a unique and delicate poise between the human and divine nature of Jesus or expresses so clearly His role as high priest as does the *Epistle to the Hebrews*. Lastly, the author must have been profoundly interested in a spiritual cult such as we find mentioned in John 4, Jesus' discourse with the Samaritan woman, and at Qumran where they expected a temple composed of human beings offering spiritual sacrifices.

The epistle must have been written early for the author omits the most arresting argument for his or her thesis, namely, the cessation of the Jewish sacrificial system with the Fall of Jerusalem to the Romans in 70 A.D. Further she employs the present tense when speaking of the cult at Jerusalem.⁴ The work seems to have been written for Jewish Christians, although some argue for a Gentile audience, and the title appears to be a later addition.⁵ The work is written in an elegant Greek style complete with inclusions and chiasms⁶ but we have already alluded to the comment of Clement of Alexandria that it was translated from Hebrew to Greek. However, it is not impossible that a Palestinian was acquainted with Greek, firstly, in Palestine where this was the commercial language and then in Asia Minor, e.g. Ephesus if her or she migrated to that city.

Now there are three characteristics which would suggest that the homily was composed by one who had not the advantage of a formal education. Firstly, the author does not give references for his or her Biblical quotations or citations but at times is reduced to the strange expression "Somewhere it says . . ." (e.g. Hebrews 2:6) or "again" (e.g. 2:13). Secondly, he shows no knowledge of the rules of Rabbinic Biblical interpretation and, thirdly, he does not employ the allegorizing method of Philo. In fact his or her interpretation of Scripture is a literal one. In short, the author knew and understood Scripture, as did the person or persons from whom Luke obtained material for his Infancy Narratives, but he does not seem to have had a formal Biblical education. Priscilla's and Aquila's candidacy for the authorship has been suggested—by no less a person than Harnack⁷ in the early part of this century. I should like to suggest that another lady might also be eligible. I venture to put forward the hypothesis that the content, if not the style, of the work comes from Mary, the Mother of Jesus. It is her meditation on the Old Testament wherein she exercised the role of prophet⁸ in the later sense of the word, namely, the reinterpretation of Scripture through prayer and meditation, as Daniel (Dan. 9:1-27) and the Teacher of Righteousness at Qumran (1 Hab 2:8-9) and, naturally, the New Testament writers, such as, Matthew.

Firstly, there is no necessity to conceive of Mary as an ignorant or unreflecting woman, no less than Prisca, Lydia or Phoebe, who is described as authoritative leader of many (cf. Rom. 16:2).⁹ Rather as Professor David Flusser¹⁰ has suggested Jesus may have been more educated than Paul, if this is so then Mary found herself in a "Biblically well-read" society and one which was privileged to receive visions and prophecies, Mary herself being the recipient of these (Luke 1-2). Further, accepting as we do the Immaculate Conception, we can also postulate that no sin impeded the spiritual insight of Mary. Thus even before the birth of Jesus she was among those who entertained a lively messianic expectation and were profoundly interested in the Jewish cult. Further, if as some scholars aver, the family of John the Baptist, Mary's kinsfolk, and even Jesus Himself were associated with the covenanters at Qumran near the Dead Sea, they might anticipate two Messiahs, one priestly and one kingly. One of these was expected to be "begotten by God" as we read in the *Appendix to the Rule of the Community* 2:11-12:

[Concerning the mee]ting of the men of renown [called] to assemble for the Council of the Community when [Adonai] will have begotten the Messiah among them.

Although this text is much disputed, we look forward to the publication of another text which may throw light on it, namely, a fragment to be printed by Dr. Milik which is very close to Luke 2:32-35. Further the covenanters of Qumran had a high opinion of Melchizedek as shown in the fragment 11 Q *Melchizedek*, which portrays him as a quasi-supernatural figure who will bring release, freedom and atonement for the sons of light. In this text are mentioned a year of good favour for Melchizedek and a reign of judgment for the holy ones and the covenant established by those who turn

away from walking in the path of the people.¹¹ Further the Qumran people, like Matthew, interpreted Scripture in the light of contemporary events. It is important to note that on two occasions the New Testament records that Mary “pondered these things in her heart” (*diatero* Luke 2:19-21). In the LXX the word is used only of Jacob’s reflecting on Joseph’s dream (Gen. 37:11) and Daniel’s trying to understand the vision of the four kingdoms and one like a son of man (Dan. 7:2-8). To express it more clearly, the special Greek word would seem to suggest ruminating on spiritual truths. Is *Hebrews* a product of those reflections? Mary, supposedly, had the companionship of her Son for thirty years, the Son who commanded such respect from the doctors at the Temple even at the age of twelve. It would be surprising if Jesus did not discuss Scripture and its interpretation with his parents. Later Mary was present at His first miracle at Cana and seemed to have some intuition of the power of her Son (John 2:12-12). She accompanied Him in His public ministry (Luke 8:1-3) and was present at the cross: perhaps the reason why she was able to stay with John while the rest of the disciples fled was that she began to realize the full import of Jesus’ sacrifice, a theme which she develops in *Hebrews*. Luke reports that she was among the disciples in the upper room as they awaited the arrival of the Holy Spirit. This time, according to Jewish custom at Pentecost, would be spent in prayer and study of Scripture. The Risen Lord had explained Scripture to His disciples (cf. Luke 24). Persons like Mary would be a veritable fount of information for those who wished to learn more clearly concerning the meaning of the Christian message. Further the Gospel of John reports (John 19:26-27) that Mary was given into the care of John the evangelist. This might mean that there was a mutual exchange of ideas concerning the Lord especially with regard to Jesus’ Body as the New Temple (John 2:21; cf. Stephen’s speech in Acts 7:48), the sacrificial aspect of his death and his capacity as priest (cf. the High Priestly prayers and Jesus’ coat without a seam which would seem to symbolize the high priest’s robe). *Hebrews* expands some of these Johannine themes and John’s Gospel in its completed form represents Jesus’ replacement of some of the Jewish Feasts, such as, Passover, Tabernacles and Hannukah.

Let us, therefore, proceed through the *Epistle to the Hebrews* and see what affinity we can find between this writing and the passages, few though they may be (but more than those devoted to Apollos) concerning Mary in the Gospels.

Affinity with the Infancy Narratives

Firstly, the epistle commences with one of the clearest affirmations which we find in the New Testament, concerning the divine sonship of Jesus and this sonship and/or Lordship appears to be associated, not with Jesus’ resurrection and ascension as in Acts 2:36 or Phil. 2:9-10, but with his birth. There appear to be several features which are common to the beginning of *Hebrews* and the Lucan Infancy Narratives. Firstly, the appearance of Jesus is seen as the climax of the sending of the prophets (*Hebrews* 1:1; cf. Luke 1:76) through whom God spoke to the fathers (almost the same words are used in *Hebrews* 1:1 and Luke 1:55). Secondly, *Hebrews* 1:8 says:

About the Son, however, God said: 'Your throne,
O God, will last for ever and ever':

at the Annunciation Mary is told emphatically that her Son's reign will have no end (Luke 1:33). Thirdly, Hebrews 1:4 insists that the name of the Son is greater than the angels and Mary is told specifically that Jesus will be called the Son of the Highest: this is a name which no angel bore (Hebrews 1:4, cf. Luke 1:35). Fourthly, Hebrews 1:5 indicates the Davidic dynasty by alluding to the promise of God to David recorded in 1 Sam. 7 and 1 Chron. 17:13; Luke 1:33 speaks of the throne of David his father. Fifthly, both Luke and Matthew report that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit and the power of God. Hebrews does not use this terminology but it quotes Ps. 2:7:

You are my Son;
Today have I become your father

and applies this not to the baptism or ascension of Jesus (cf. Acts 2:32-36) but to his birth or incarnation. Elizabeth greets Mary as the Mother of her Lord (Luke 1:43). Sixthly, Hebrews 1:6 says

When God was about to send his first-born son into the world, he also said,
'All of God's angels must worship Him'.

The Lucan Infancy Narratives record the apparition of the angels praising God when the Saviour came into the world (Luke 2:8-20) whereas other New Testament texts mention angels or supernatural beings associated with other events in Christ's life, e.g. the resurrection and ascension (cf. Phil. 2:9-10, 1 Tim. 3:16). Seventhly, whereas angelic apparitions are a feature of the Infancy Narratives, there is no suggestion that Jesus was an angel or conceived by an angel—a point which Hebrews stresses. Finally, but a minor point, Mary (or Elizabeth) prophesies that her Son will cast the mighty from their seats (Luke 1:52): Hebrews 1:13 expresses a similar sentiment,

... Sit here at my right hand until I put your enemies as a footstool under your feet.

Affinity to the Matthaean Infancy Narratives

If Hebrews is a homily on Ps. 110, as Professor Buchanan suggests, it is interesting to observe that almost the only kingship mentioned during Jesus' earthly life is in the Infancy Narratives. We have remarked this in Luke. It is implicit in Matthew in his genealogy dividing history into the rise, fall and "resurrection" of the Davidic kingdom. Further the wise men come to worship Christ bringing gold, frankincense and myrrh, the symbolism might suggest kingship, priesthood and suffering, three themes elucidated by Hebrews.

Jesus' Human Nature

Even though the writer of *Hebrews* stresses the divinity of Jesus, she also shows a profound, if not intimate, firsthand knowledge of the humanity of Jesus. She realizes

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fully that Jesus is truly a brother to mankind (cf. the genealogy of Luke 3 which traces Jesus' descent back to Adam), that he was like them and shared their human nature (*Hebrews* 2:11-18), in order to emphasize this she quotes Ps. 22, part of which Jesus uttered on the cross:

I will speak about you, O God, to my brothers, I will sing hymns to you
before the whole gathering (v. 22),

and Isaiah 8:18

Here I am with the children that God has given me.

Mary must have remembered vividly Jesus' teaching about his true relatives (cf. Matt. 12:46-50; Mark 3:31-35 and Luke 8:19-21) on the occasion when Jesus, knowing that his Mother and cousins were present said, "My mother and brothers are those who hear the word of God and obey it." It is singularly interesting that the *Epistle of the Hebrews* like the above pericopes dwells emphatically upon the importance of hearing the word of God, encouraging the readers or hearers not to be like the Israelites in the desert, deaf to God's voice and consequently failing to attain the "rest" that he had prepared for them (Heb. 3:7-4:13). The Old Testament quotations here are from Psalm 95:7-11, Exod. 17:7 and Numbers 20:2-5 and 14:21-23. This long exhortation is concluded by the dramatic passage about the Word of God as follows:

For the word of God is alive and active. It is sharper than any double-edged sword. It cuts all the way through, to where soul and spirit meet, to where joints and marrow come together. It judges the desires and thoughts of men's hearts. There is nothing that can be hid from God. Everything in all creation is exposed and lies open before his eyes, and it is to him that we must all give account of ourselves (*Hebrews* 4:12-13).

This passage is strikingly reminiscent of the words of Simeon to Mary on the occasion of Jesus' presentation in the temple when Simeon foretold that Jesus would be a sign of contradiction to many and that a sword would also pierce Mary's heart. The word "also" implies that the sword will pierce the hearts of others as well as Mary. In a former paper I have suggested that the sword¹² which pierces Mary's heart is the prophetic word which reveals to her the dire destiny of her son; and Father George Montague reminds me that Jeremiah and Ezekiel were affected by the word of God in the same painful way. The only "sword" pericope, other than the ones in *Hebrews* and Luke 2:35, is found in *Revelation* 19, which in my own research I have attributed to the "school" or "circle" of John the Baptist.¹³ If Mary is responsible for this striking passage then she may have taken the idea of "rest" mentioned in *Hebrews* 4 from the teaching of her Son in the Song of Jubilation (cf. Matt. 11:25-30 and Luke 10:21-22) "Come to me, all of you who are tired from carrying your heavy loads, and I will give you rest . . .," a passage which also mentions the gentleness and humility of Jesus as does *Hebrews*.

The sword passage is followed by the section about Jesus, the High Priest, who was tempted in every way like ourselves but did not sin (*Hebrews* 4:15, cf. 2:18). This

statement seems to imply that Jesus' temptations lasted throughout his life in contrast to the Synoptic tradition which implies that Jesus underwent severe temptation at the beginning of his ministry and after that the devil left him for a time. Who more than his mother, Mary, would know about his life-long temptations and who else could have witnessed so constantly his compassion, gentleness and understanding of human weakness (*Hebrews* 4:14-5:3)? Further, although *Hebrews* 5:7-9 ("In His life on earth Jesus made his prayers and requests with loud cries and tears to God . . . Because he was humble and devoted God heard him. But even though he was God's Son he learned to be obedient by means of his sufferings . . .") is taken to be a picture of Jesus' agony in the garden, the phrase "in His life," literally "in the days of His flesh," would seem to suggest more than one occasion. That Jesus learned obedience even though he was God's Son reminds one of the Findings in the Temple where Jesus declared His divine parentage but left the Temple and was obedient to his parents (Luke 2:51). Moreover, *Hebrews* expresses through Old Testament quotations the Lucan and Johannine aspirations about Jesus' attitude to His Ministry. Luke 2:49 places these words in Jesus' mouth "Do you not know that I am to be about my Father's business (or in His house)?" and John reports that Jesus said that His meat and drink was to do the will of Him Who Sent him (*John* 4:34). *Hebrews* expresses this sentiment by quoting Ps. 40:6-8:

Here am I, O God, to do what you want Me to—Just as it is written of Me in the book of the Law (*Hebrews* 10:7).

The author of *Hebrews* can speak eloquently of the faithfulness of Jesus and His superseding Moses as a "Son in charge of God's house" (*Hebrews* 3:6). The recipients of the letter are told that they are God's house if they keep courage and confidence in what they hope for (3:6). Now "house" seems to be used in the sense of "dynasty" or "family." Mary could think in such terms as she knew her Son carried on the dynasty of David and that He had handed on "his children" in the person of the beloved disciple on the cross (cf. *Hebrews* 2:13). St. John's Gospel also uses the term "children" (*tekna* 13:33) for Jesus' disciples (cf. *Hebrews* 2:14 where *paidia* is used). Mary could not only endorse the faithfulness of Jesus in the care of God's house but she must have known in the deepest sense possible the trial of faith herself. Elizabeth compliments her for this faith. Mary shows it at Cana but she manifests it even more at Calvary. I can think of no other Biblical character in whose mouth the eulogy on faith which we find in *Hebrews* 11:1-12:2 would be more appropriate. The long line of faithful people includes not only Biblical characters but also non-Biblical heroes and heroines, a combination less likely from one who knew Scripture formally and might separate the two categories. The list culminates in Jesus as the pioneer of faith.

The author of *Hebrews* also knows about the ministry of Jesus. She remarks that the Lord first announced salvation (*Hebrews* 2:3). She refers to Him as the Shepherd (cf. *John* 10). Afterwards those who heard Him imparted the message assisted by

Ford: The Mother of Jesus and the Authorship of the Epistle to the Hebrews signs and wonders: we recall that Mary was present at Pentecost to see these (cf. Hebrews 2:4) and to witness that God bestowed the gifts of the Spirit according to His will (*ibid.*). She is conscious that Jesus put up with the hatred of sinful men even to the point of the cross (Hebrews 12:3f). Mary may have been present at Nazareth when Jesus was rejected (cf. Luke 4) and we are sure that she was present at the crucifixion. The author of *Hebrews* correctly states that Jesus died outside the city (Hebrews 13:2; contrast the parable of the Wicked Tenants as told by Mark 12:8). She also believes in the Ascent of the Son to the right hand of the Father (Hebrews 1:13, 8:1, etc.). We may compare this to the early speeches in Acts where the same text is quoted in Peter's Pentecost speech (Acts 2:35; cf. Hebrews 1:13). Mary would seem to be present on this occasion.

Thus I should suggest that as the author of *Hebrews* Mary offers her statements concerning the divinity and humanity of Jesus as the fulfillment of Old Testament Scripture, citing at length and at one place at least re-interpreting the text, namely, that of Ps. 40:6-8 (Hebrews 10:5). The psalm reads:

Sacrifice or oblation you wished not,
but ears open to obedience you gave me

but the author of *Hebrews* renders it:

You do not want the sacrifice and offering of animals,
But you have prepared a body for me (Hebrews 10:5).

Mary knew God had prepared a body for the Christ within herself. John portrays Jesus as the Paschal Lamb slain on the cross at the same time as the lambs for the observance of the Passover according to the lunar calendar were being slain in the Temple. Mary stood at the foot of the cross not unlike the Mother of the seven Maccabean martyrs (cf. 2 *Macc.* 7), whose deaths were seen as atoning sacrifice; the Mother is said to have built seven altars.¹⁴ If such a view could be taken of the martyrdom of the Maccabees, how much more might Mary have gradually realized the true significance of Jesus' death? She might have realized with John the evangelist that Jesus was speaking about His body when he said that the Temple would be destroyed and rebuilt in three days. In *Hebrews* Jesus' body is called "the curtain" (of the Holy of Holies, Hebrews 10:20). One might suggest that this term is used in the light of the gospels' recording that the veil of the temple was rent in two (Mark 15:38; Mt. 27:51). But over and above this, Mary might well have been acquainted with the theology of the Binding of Isaac (the *Akedah*) which she could have heard recited in the *targums* in the synagogue. By this theology Isaac was supposed to have offered himself as a voluntary, joyful sacrifice, to have shed one fourth of his blood, been resurrected and become the prototype of the martyr and the resurrected person as well as bringing innumerable blessings and sanctification for Israel. Mary could now see this fulfilled in her son who did really take his own blood (Hebrews 9:12) and offered himself through the eternal spirit (9:14). His blood made "our consciences clean from useless works, so that we may serve the living God" (Hebrews 9:14). He died once and for all (9:25-28) and arranged a new covenant (cf. Luke 1:72 "re-

member his sacred covenant"). John realized that Jesus came to supersede the Jewish feasts. This supersession is shown vividly in the narrative of the first miracle at Cana at which Mary was present. *Hebrews* represents the correlary of this: Jesus supersedes the priesthood and the sacrificial system. John hinted at Jesus' priestly status by recording the High Priestly discourses or prayers and by mentioning the seamless robe which is thought to symbolize the high priestly robe. Luke may have insinuated a priestly role when he placed the words "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do," in the mouth of Jesus. As Professor Daube has shown, these are reminiscent of the prayer of the high priest on the Day of Atonement.¹⁵ The author of *Hebrews* sees Jesus called to the priesthood as Aaron was (5:5-6); but His priesthood is both associated with the humanity and the virtues pertaining to this (5:7-9) and with Melchizedek. Melchizedek is said to have no father or mother and even though Jewish speculation came to this conclusion because of the absence of any reference to Melchizedek's ancestry in the Bible, yet this argument would be significant to one who knew of the virginal birth, especially as a woman's active part in procreation was not known at that time. Mary might have thought of Jesus born through her rather than of her. *Hebrews* avers that the Son lives forever (7:3) and that He is priest by the power of life which has no end (7:16). He enters the real tent which is heaven (8:2) and this is not made by man (cf. Mary as the ark of the covenant). A priesthood according to the order of Melchizekek, though of as "supernatural figure" might not be foreign to Mary's family and relatives: P. Winter and the present speaker have both argued for a Maccabean background to the Infancy Narratives of Luke. The Maccabees adopted the idea of the priesthood of Melchizedek and Melchizedek being both king and priest they combined both offices.

Thus I conclude that Mary, perhaps in conjunction with John and Luke may have been responsible for the content of *Hebrews*. Another hand may have written the Greek style and the title added later. If this is so, we have a valuable treatise reflecting on the fulfillment of Old Testament texts coming from one who knew Jesus intimately and written before the Fall of the Temple.

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- ¹ A paper read at the thirtieth anniversary of the Marian Library in Dayton, Ohio, U.S.A.: the title given was "Mary and the Old Testament."
- ² H. W. MONTEFIORE, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, London, 1964, p. 4.
- ³ G. W. BUCHANAN, *To the Hebrews*, Anchor Bible Commentary, New York, 1972, p. xxvii.
- ⁴ E.g. Hebrews 9:6-10.
- ⁵ M. M. BOURKE, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, in the *Jerome Bible Commentary*, ed. by R. E. Brown, S.S., J. A. Fitzmyer, S.J., and R. E. Murphy, O. Carm., New Jersey, 1968, p. 382. The title is found for the first time in P. 46 (Chester Beatty ms. C3).
- ⁶ BUCHANAN *op. cit.*, pp. xxv-xxvii and especially A. Vanhoye, S.J. *La Structure Littéraire de l'Épître aux Hébreux*, Paris, 1962, pp. 53-58.
- ⁷ O. MICHEL, *Der Brief an die Hebraer*, Göttingen, 1966, p. 40.
- ⁸ See the author's paper, "Our Lady and the Ministry of Women in the Church," in *Marian Studies*, vol. 23 (1972), pp. 86-90.
- ⁹ She is called *prostatis*, the feminine of *prostatēs* which both in the Old Testament and Josephus is used of high officials.
- ¹⁰ David FLUSSER, *Jesus*, New York, 1969, p. 18. "Viewing Jesus' sayings against the background of contemporary Jewish learning, however, it is easy to observe that Jesus was far from uneducated. He was perfectly at home both in holy scripture, and in oral tradition, and knew how to apply this scholarly heritage. Jesus' Jewish education was incomparably superior to that of St. Paul."
- ¹¹ J. A. FITZMYER, S.J., *Further Light on Melchizedek from Qumran Cave 11*, in *J. B. L.* 86 (1, 1967), pp. 28-29.
- ¹² See note 8.
- ¹³ To be published as the Anchor Bible Commentary on the *Revelation of John*, late 1974 or early 1975.
- ¹⁴ According to Rabbinic tradition.
- ¹⁵ D. Daube, *For They Know Not What They Do*; Luke 23:24, in *Studia Patristica*, 4 (Part 2, 1961), pp. 58-70.

