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Introduction to "Hebrews"

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Hebrews

Hebrews demonstrates that the gospel of Jesus Christ is a continuation of and fulfillment of the Hebrew Scriptures. It shows how the earthly temple and its priesthood are but shadows of a real and more magnificent place called heaven (9:24), and of a living high priest, the exalted Christ, who is the "brightness of His [God's] glory and the express image of His person" (1:3). The overarching theme throughout Hebrews is the superiority of Christ, through whom the eternal reality becomes accessible to humanity.

AUTHOR

The book of Hebrews is anonymous. It lacks a reference to an author in the salutation and a signature in the final greetings. One of the only indications of authorship in the epistle is Hebrews 2:3, in which the author seems to include himself among those who were not first-hand witnesses of Jesus. Questions of actual authorship go all the way back to the early church fathers. Clement of Alexandria suggested that Paul originally wrote the letter in Hebrew, and then Luke translated it. Some scholars, based on linguistic and thematic similarities to Acts, go further to suggest that Luke himself composed it. But such a theory is not convincing. Origen proposed that one of Paul's followers produced it. The Western church resisted the authorship of Paul until the fourth century: the Muratorian fragment, Irenaeus, and Hippolytus of Rome all agree it was not Paul. Tertullian, in the second century, believed that Barnabas authored the epistle. Centuries later, Luther suggested that Apollos was its writer, a hypothesis some scholars support even today. Since we have no confirmed documents by Barnabas and Apollos available to compare language and style, we have no evidence to evaluate such suggestions.

Still, a Pauline authorship has considerable support. Hebrews has thematic and linguistic similarities to other Pauline epistles. The ending of the letter has a striking resemblance to the postscripts in the apostle's other letters (Heb. 13:20-25; cf. Rom. 16:17-27; 1 Cor. 16:15-24; etc.). The earliest manuscript containing Hebrews (early third century) has it appearing right after Romans among the letters of Paul. Early church fathers such as Eusebius and Clement of Alexandria acknowledge Pauline authorship, although they recognize difficulties with it. Finally, Hebrews became universally accepted as of Pauline authorship in the fourth century, even though it was placed at the end of the Pauline corpus in the New Testament canon. One of Paul's secretaries possibly wrote Hebrews, which would explain the stylistic and linguistic differences from the apostle's other epistles. In the end, although only God knows who wrote the letter (Origen, *H. E.* 6.25.14), as Jerome said, Hebrews was widely read and accepted in the churches, indicating that the author was respected.



Date of writing
probably written
between AD 45 and 70

DATE

Because of the centrality of the temple and its priesthood in the book of Hebrews, it is highly unlikely that the author would not have mentioned the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, had it already happened. Therefore, it seems probable that Hebrews came into being before AD 70, and that the sacrifices in the temple were still going on (cf. Heb. 8:7-13; 10:1, 2). Also, the readers of the epistle seem to have been facing persecution (12:4), perhaps Emperor Nero's targeting of Christians during the 60s. The earliest external evidence of Hebrews is *1 Clement*, which continually refers to the book. Scholars usually date *1 Clement* to the AD 90s; therefore, Hebrews would have already been circulating at that time. It seems most likely that Hebrews appeared in the AD 60s.

AUDIENCE

The style of Hebrews—theology followed by exhortations—indicates that it could have been initially a sermon that the author rewrote into a letter. The book lacks the typical introductory greeting of letters, but the ending resembles that of other letters (13:20-25). That, along with the number of references to the experiences of its readers, indicates that its author wrote with a specific group in mind (cf. 10:32-34). Some suggest that it addresses Jewish-Christian believers in Palestine or Jerusalem since the temple is so central. The heading “To the Hebrews,” though added later, would support such a view. The epistle is written in polished Greek and uses the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, which could indicate that the readers were Greek-speaking Jews. One can interpret the reference to “those from Italy” (13:24) in two ways: either the author was in Italy, and those with him were sending their greetings, or people who had left Italy were sending greetings back to their home church. In this case, Hebrews could have been intended for Jewish believers in Rome, which is also where *1 Clement*, the oldest source to cite Hebrews, was written.

PURPOSE AND MAIN THEMES

Hebrews is a “letter of exhortation” (13:22) to a congregation struggling with discouragement. While they had stood firm in their faith in the past despite persecution, abuse, and ridicule (10:32-35), they are now beginning to lose heart little by little (2:1, 2). Believers continue to face ridicule (13:13). Some are still in prison (13:3). Others do not attend church gatherings regularly (10:25). And still, others are in danger of developing an evil, unbelieving heart until they lose their faith in Jesus (6:4-6; 10:26-31). The author first warns them about the danger of the loss of faith and apostasy using the Israelite desert generation as a negative example (3:7-19). Then he encourages them to hold fast to their confession of Jesus (4:14-16; 10:19-25) by using a list of heroes of faith as a positive example (ch. 11). The main point of his argument is, however, to remind them that God has spoken to them in the person of His Son, Jesus (1:1, 2), whom He has appointed as their King and Priest (8:1, 2). As their King, Jesus has defeated Satan and delivered them from the power of death (2:14-18) and can lead them into the promised rest (4:1-16). As their perfect High Priest (chs. 5-7), Jesus has offered Himself as a perfect sacrifice to cleanse their conscience from sin so that they can approach God with boldness and find help (chs. 8-10). Furthermore, Jesus has also mediated a

new covenant with better promises, and He lives forever to intercede for them in God's presence. The author's purpose is to draw the attention of his readers back from the discouraging circumstances they face and set it on Jesus, who has been enthroned at the right hand of God as their King and Priest (8:1, 2; 12:1-4). If they do so, they would inherit God's promises (10:35-39).

STRUCTURE

The structure of Hebrews is based around the book's overarching theme of the superiority of Christ, and includes five warnings about the danger of unbelief in each of its main sections (2:1-4; 3:7-19; 5:11-6:12; 10:19-39; 12:14-29).

In the opening section of Hebrews, Jesus is set forth as the climax of God's revelation to humanity (1:1-2:18). The prophetic activity of the Old Testament prophets is a mere shadow in comparison to the revelation now manifest in Jesus (1:1). As God's Son, Jesus is equal with the Father (1:2-3) and, therefore, also superior over all the angelic beings, through whom God has worked in times past (1:5-14; 2:5-10, 16). The second section of Hebrews then focuses on the faithfulness of Jesus (3:1-4:16), whom the author sets forth as even greater than the prophet Moses (3:2-6). Those who follow Christ are encouraged to remain faithful in their spiritual walk (4:1-16).

In the central two sections of Hebrews (5:1-10:39), the author focuses on the exalted priesthood of Christ. As a priest after the order of Melchizedek, the ministry of Christ in the heavenly sanctuary is seen as far surpassing that of Aaron and his sons (5:1-10; 7:1-28). Moreover, the earthly sanctuary and its services were only symbolic (9:1-10). They pointed to the more significant work God sought to accomplish in Christ, whose sacrifice of himself is far superior to that of animals (10:1-18). As such, Christ is the mediator of even a greater covenant (9:15-28).

In light of the superiority of Christ, the final section of the letter calls upon Christians to recognize how great a salvation they have in Christ (11:1-13:17). In response, they are called to follow the example of all those who through the ages have lived by faith in God's promise of redemption. After a warning against unbelief, the letter concludes with a request for prayer (13:18-19), an apostolic benediction (13:20-21), and some final greetings (13:22-25).

As you read Hebrews, consider how the epistle's theme of the superiority of Christ as God's ultimate revelation of Himself offers encouragement to Christians, especially those facing persecution and opposition for their faith.

OUTLINE

- I. Introduction: God's Supreme Revelation through Jesus Christ (1:1-2:18)
 - A. Christ's Equality with the Father (1:1-3)
 - B. Christ's Superiority over Angels (1:4-14)
 - C. The First Warning: The Danger of Neglecting to Listen to Christ (2:1-4)
 - D. The Humiliation and Glorification of Christ (2:5-18)
- II. The "Rest" That Remains to the People of God (3:1-4:16)
 - A. The Faithfulness of Christ, Our Apostle and High Priest (3:1-6)

- B. The Second Warning: The Danger of Unbelief (3:7-19)
- C. An Appeal to Enter into God's "Rest" through Faith in Christ (4:1-16)
- III. The Exalted Status of Christ as High Priest (5:1-8:13)
 - A. Christ Appointed High Priest by the Father (5:1-10)
 - B. The Third Warning: The Danger of Spiritual Immaturity (5:11-6:12)
 - C. The Certainty of the Christian Hope (6:13-20)
 - D. Christ as High Priest after the Order of Melchizedek (7:1-28)
 - E. Christ's Priesthood Concerning the Sanctuary and the Covenant (8:1-13)
- IV. The High-Priestly Ministry of Christ (9:1-10:39)
 - A. The Symbolic Significance of the Earthly Sanctuary (9:1-14)
 - B. Christ as the Mediator of the New Covenant (9:15-28)
 - C. Christ's Sacrifice Superior to Animal Sacrifices (10:1-18)
 - D. The Fourth Warning: The Danger of Disloyalty to Christ (10:19-39)
- V. An Appeal to Faithfulness and Godly Living (11:1-13:17)
 - A. The Testimony of the Faithful (11:1-40)
 - B. An Appeal to Join the Faithful (12:1-13)
 - C. The Final Warning: The Danger of Refusing God's Grace (12:14-29)
 - D. Final Instructions (13:1-17)
- VI. Conclusion and Final Greetings (13:18-25)
 - A. A Request for Prayer (13:18-19)
 - B. An Apostolic Benediction (13:20-21)
 - C. Final Greetings (13:22-25)

ARCHAEOLOGY

Christ is central to the argument of Hebrews. He is higher than the angels (Heb. 1:5-14), superior to Melchizedek (Heb. 7:1-10), and a superior sacrifice and High Priest (Heb. 8:3-10:18). When we compare the language used in Hebrews for Jesus to that employed for deities in Greco-Roman literature, we can see that the author is referring to Jesus as a true God. It was common to use negative descriptions for real deities: they are uncreated, ungenerated, immortal, imperishable, without beginning and end (cf. Heb. 7:3, 24). Deified heroes in Greek mythology, such as Hercules, received eternal life, but only concerning the future. True eternal gods, on the other hand, had no beginning in the past and no end in the future. Plutarch writes concerning the god Apollo: "My native tradition removes this god from among those deities who were changed from mortals into immortals, like Heracles and Dionysus, whose virtues enabled them to cast off mortality and suffering; but he is one of those deities who are unbegotten and eternal, if we may judge why what the most ancient and wisest men have said on such matters" (*Pelopidas* 16). Just as Zeus is praised for his eternity ("Zeus was, Zeus is, and Zeus will be"; Pausanias, *Desc. Graec.* 10.12.10), Jesus remains "the same yesterday, today, and forever" (Heb. 13:8). It is clear, therefore, that Hebrews presents Jesus as a true deity: He has no beginning nor end, no father and no mother, and continues forever (cf. Heb. 1:8, 12; 7:3, 24; 13:8).