

BOOK OF HEBREWS INTRODUCTION

JESUS OUR GREAT HIGH PRIEST

“Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.”
(4:14)

Author, Date and Place of Writing

The author of this letter does not identify himself. The early Christian theologian Tertullian, and some other early authorities, believed that Barnabas was the author. Clement of Alexandria and others thought the letter was written by Paul. Later scholars, such as Jerome and Augustine followed Clement’s view and this widely prevailed until the Reformation. Martin Luther called this into question because he thought the writing style and method of argument were not typical of Paul. So he suggested that Apollos wrote the letter. It seems that the judgment expressed by Origen remains correct: “Who actually wrote the epistle, only God knows” (cited in Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History 6.25.14). Still, several things about the author are clear from the letter: 1) he deeply understood who Jesus is and what he has done; 2) his understanding of the Old Testament and the Levitical priesthood was thorough and profound; 3) his Greek is most scholarly of all New Testament documents; 4) he himself had been previously among the readers of his letter and knew them well (13:19). In any case, he was fully inspired by the Holy Spirit.

The mention of Timothy in 13:23 dates this letter to the first century. Most likely it was written before A.D. 70, when Jerusalem and the Jewish Temple were destroyed. It is unlikely that the author would have failed to mention this. Moreover, the description of temple practices suggests that they were still ongoing (5:1-3; 7:23,28; 8:3-4; 9:1-10; 10:1-2,11; 13:10-11). This letter could have been written in Rome, based on the final greeting “Those from Italy” (13:24).

Recipients

Hebrews was not addressed to people in a specific geographical location or to a specific church. But it is addressed generally to Jewish believers, as the following references suggest: “our ancestors” (1:1), “Abraham’s descendants” (2:16), “your ancestors” (3:9). Furthermore, the author assumes that his readers have a thorough understanding of Jewish history, temple practices, the law, the sacrificial system, and the priesthood. The recipients had been established in

Christian faith which had endured through conflicts and sufferings, and they had trustworthy leaders among them (5:12; 10:32-34; 13:17).

Historical Background

At the beginning stage, Christianity and Judaism were indistinguishable to those in the Greco-Roman world. Many people thought of Christianity as an extension of Judaism, which was tolerated by the Roman Empire. But Christianity proved to be quite distinct.¹ Christians confessed that Jesus is Christ and Lord, who alone is worthy of our worship. That confession upset both the Jews and the Romans. Jews claimed that Jesus was not the Messiah, and continued their traditional temple activities. Romans were offended when Christians refused to worship all kinds of Greco-Roman gods, including Caesar. Christians began to be persecuted distinctly in local regions. The author of Hebrews knew how they had been persecuted and heroically endured (Heb 10:32-34). Yet they were now being tempted to shrink back from Christian faith—retreating to the safe zone of Judaism to avoid persecution (10:39). So the author gave them warnings and encouragement regarding their faith (2:1-3; 4:14-16).

Purpose of Writing

The author wanted the recipients to understand that God had planned something better for them, together with those who had gone before (11:40). The temple system and all that was associated with it were just a shadow of something better—a heavenly reality—that is Jesus and his kingdom. Jesus, the Son of God, came from heaven into the world as the reality that was merely reflected by shadows of heavenly things. Jesus became the temple, the high priest and the perfect sacrifice. After providing atonement for sins, he entered the heavenly tabernacle to serve as our Great High Priest (1:2-3; 8:1-2). Jesus has become the new and living way opened for us to approach the throne of God with confidence (4:16; 10:19-20). The author warned the recipients not to return to Judaism and exhorted them to hold firmly to their faith in Jesus. In this way they could experience the heavenly reality and press on to the heavenly kingdom.

Main Theme

Throughout the letter the author explains the superiority of Jesus. Jesus is the Son of God (1:1-3). Therefore, Jesus is superior to angels (1:4-2:18), Moses (3:1-4:13), Levitical priests (4:14-7:28), and temple sacrifices (8:1-10:18). Jesus is also

¹ As an example, disputes arose in the Jewish synagogues of Rome in about A.D. 49. These disputes might have led to riots in the city. In order to settle this matter, the Emperor Claudius expelled all Jews from Rome (Ac 18:2), treating Christians as equivalent to Jews. However, as time passed the difference between Jews and Christians became more and more apparent.

the Great High Priest and the mediator of a new covenant with better promises, and the perfect sacrifice. For this reason, the author urges his readers not to shrink back, but hold firmly to their faith in Jesus.

Characteristics

Jesus' Deity and Humanity: From the beginning, the author emphasizes the deity of Jesus as the Son of God (1:2,3,5[2],8; 3:6; 4:14; 5:5,8; 6:6; 7:3,28; 10:29). In 1:1-3, the author introduces Jesus as the heir of all things—the rightful owner, the Creator God, the radiance of God's glory, the exact representation of his being, the Sustainer of all things and the provider of purification for sins. Jesus forever sits at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.

At the same time, he emphasizes Jesus' humanity. Jesus was made lower than the angels for a little while to share in our humanity (2:7,9). Jesus suffered death so that by the grace of God he might bring many sons and daughters to glory (2:10). Jesus entered humanity and is not ashamed to call us brothers and sisters (2:11-13). Through his death, Jesus destroyed the power of Satan, who holds the power of death, and sets people free from the fear of death (2:14-15). Since he became fully human in every way, he is a merciful and faithful high priest. He understands our weaknesses and is able to help us when we are tempted (2:17-18).

Jesus is the Source of Eternal Salvation: The word “salvation” appears 7 times in the book of Hebrews (1:14; 2:3[2]; 2:10; 5:9; 6:9; 9:28). This salvation was first announced by the Lord and confirmed by those who heard him. God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will (2:3-4). This salvation refers to the gospel, and is the inheritance of those who believe (1:14). It is a salvation from the power and fear of death (2:14-15), sin (2:17), judgment and condemnation (9:27-28). Notably the expressions “so great a salvation” (2:3) and “eternal salvation” (5:9) appear uniquely in Hebrews. The words “so great a salvation” are given in the context of warning. No one can escape God's judgment if they ignore such a great salvation. The words “eternal salvation” indicates that this salvation is perfect, ultimate and everlasting (2:9-10; 9:28b). Jesus is the source of this salvation (5:9).

Once For All: The words “once for all” are used significantly in Hebrews, primarily to explain the power and efficacy of Jesus' sacrifice (7:27; 9:12; 10:2,10). Jesus shed his blood on the cross once for all to provide purification for sins. In doing so, Jesus made animal sacrifices obsolete. Animal sacrifices made believers outwardly clean, but could not take sins away. They only foreshadowed Jesus' sacrifice. Jesus offered his blood, the blood of the one and only Son of God,

to cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death so that we may serve the living God (9:14). By one sacrifice Jesus has made perfect forever those who are being made holy (10:14,26b). A new and living way opened for us. Now we can approach God's throne of grace at any time, wherever we are, by depending on the blood of Jesus.

Jesus: Better, Greater, Superior and Perfect: The comparative English word "better" is repeated 11 times in Hebrews (6:9; 7:19,22; 8:6; 9:23; 10:34; 11:4,16,35,40; 12:24). In reference to Jesus, it indicates a better covenant (7:22), better promises (8:6), and a better sacrifice (9:23). In reference to believers, it describes better salvation (6:9), better hope (7:19), better possessions (10:34), better country (11:16), better resurrection (11:35), better plan (11:40), and better word (12:24). The word "greater" appears six times (3:3 [2], 6:13,16; 7:7; 9:11; 11:26). Most significantly it explains that Jesus is worthy of greater honor than Moses (3:3), and that the heavenly tabernacle is greater and more perfect than the earthly one (9:11), and that Jesus is of greater value than the treasures of Egypt (11:26). The word "superior" appears four times (1:4 [2]; 8:6 [2]). It signifies that Jesus is superior to angels in being and name (1:4), and that Jesus' ministry of the New Covenant is superior to the old one (8:6). The word "perfect" is repeated 11 times (2:10; 5:9; 7:11,19,28; 9:11; 10:1,14; 11:40; 12:2,23). In terms of salvation, Jesus was made perfect as our Savior (2:10; 5:9; 7:28). The law and the Levitical system could not make people perfect (10:1), but Jesus, the perfect High Priest and perfect sacrifice, makes perfect forever those who draw near to him (9:11; 10:14; 11:40; 12:2,23). The words "better," "greater," "superior" and "perfect" point to Jesus not only in a comparative sense, but in an ultimate sense, replacing the shadows with the reality.

Heavenly Reality and Earthly Shadows: The words "heaven," "heavens" or "heavenly" are repeated 17 times in Hebrews. "Heaven" and "heavenly" are used in reference to God's dwelling place (1:3; 4:14; 8:1,5; 9:23 [2],24,25; 11:16; 12:22,23,25). "Heavenly" is also used in reference to God's calling and gift (3:1; 6:4). "Heavens" refers to creation (1:10; 7:26; 12:26). The author wants his readers to be aware of the heavenly reality. The earthly sanctuary is just a copy and shadow of what is in heaven (8:5). "The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves" (10:1). Christ did not enter a sanctuary made with human hands that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence (9:24).

Promise and Hope: The word "promise" appears 17 times in the book of Hebrews, more than in any other New Testament book (4:1; 6:12,13,15,17; 7:6;

8:6; 9:15; 10:23,36; 11:9,11,13,17,33,39; 12:26). This word “promise” is generally associated with salvation through the coming of the Messiah. God fulfilled his promises by sending Jesus as the Messiah. God is a God of covenant promises. God binds himself to his people through his promises so that they may have the certainty of salvation by holding on to his promises. God, who had promised, is faithful (10:23; 11:11), and wants his people to trust him in faith, not being anxious about salvation. For this, God made the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised by confirming it with an oath (6:17). God wants us to hold on to his promises, looking forward to the full salvation he will give when Jesus comes again (6:12; 9:15; 10:36; 12:26). This is our hope. When we take hold of this hope set before us, we can be greatly encouraged. This hope is the anchor, firm and secure, for our souls (3:6; 6:11,18,19; 7:19; 10:23; 11:1).

By Faith: The author of Hebrews uniquely defines faith as confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see (11:1). He emphasizes that we can please God only by faith (11:6). He explains that faith in the Old and New Testaments are essentially the same. The author describes how the heroes of faith in the Old Testament pleased God, enduring all hardships and persecution, holding on to God’s promises. Faith in the Old Testament looks forward to the coming Messiah, while faith in the New Testament looks back on the Messiah who fulfilled God’s promises. In both cases, the Messiah is the focal point.

Warnings and Encouragement: There are five warnings strategically positioned throughout the letter (2:1-3; 3:7-19; 6:4-8; 10:26-31; 12:14-17). The author sternly warns the recipients that a return to Jewish practices is a denial of Christ’s atoning work on the cross and so would have dire consequences. At the same time, the author regards his letter as a “word of exhortation” (13:22). He repeatedly exhorts the recipients with the words “let us.”

The warnings included are: not to drift away from the gospel message (2:1-3), not to harden their hearts in unbelief, disobedience and rebellion, as the Israelites did (3:7-19; 4:6,11); not to fall away into eternal condemnation by denying what Jesus had done for them (6:4-8), not to deliberately keep on sinning, which would result in the fearful judgment of God (10:26-31), not to fall short of God’s grace and become a bitter root (12:14-17).

The author also encouraged them as follows: “Let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of [the promise of entering his rest]” (4:1), “Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest so that no one will perish by following their example of disobedience” (4:11), “...let us hold firmly to the faith

we profess” (4:14b), “Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence” (4:16a), “...let us move beyond the elementary teachings about Christ and be taken forward to maturity” (6:1a), “...let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with full assurance that faith brings” (10:22a), “...let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess” (10:23a), “...let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds” (10:24), “...let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles...let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith” (12:1-2a), “...let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe” (12:28b), “Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore” (13:13), “Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that openly profess his name” (13:15).

Many Old Testament Quotations: In order to communicate the superiority of Jesus to a primarily Jewish audience, the author makes 47 references to Old Testament Scriptures: 1:5a [Ps 2:7], 1:5b [2Sa 7:14]; 1:6 [Deut 32:43]; 1:7 [Ps 104:4]; 1:8-9 [Ps 45:7-8]; 1:10-12 [Ps 102:25-27]; 1:13 [Ps 110:1]; 2:8 [Ps 8:4-6]; 2:12 [Ps 22:22]; 2:13a [Isa 8:17]; 2:13b [Isa 8:18]; 3:7-11 [Ps 95:7b-11]; 3:15 [Ps 95:7b-8a]; 4:3b [Ps 95:11]; 4:4b [Gen 2:2]; 4:5 [Ps 95:11b]; 4:7b [Ps 95:7b]; 5:5 [Ps 2:7]; 5:6 [Ps 110:4]; 6:14 [Gen 22:17]; 7:1-2 [Gen 14:17-19]; 7:4 [Gen 14:20]; 7:17 [Ps 110:4]; 7:21 [Ps 110:4]; 8:5b [Ex 25:40]; 8:8-12 [Jer 31:31-34]; 9:20 [Ex 24:8]; 10:5-7 [Ps 40:6-8]; 10:8 [Ps 40:6]; 10:9 [Ps 40:8]; 10:16-17 [Jer 31:33-34]; 10:28 [Deut 17:6]; 10:30a [Deut 32:35]; 10:30b [Deut 32:36]; 10:37a [Isa 26:20]; 10:37b [Hab 2:3b]; Heb 10:38a [Hab 2:4b]; 11:18 [Gen 21:17b]; 11:21b [Gen 47:31b]; 12:5-6 [Pr 3:11-12]; 12:15b [Deut 29:17b]; 12:15 [Deut 9:19]; 12:21 [Deut 9:19]; 12:26b [Hag 2:6,21]; 12:29 [Deut 4:24; 9:3], 13:5 [Deut 31:6,8]; 13:6 [Ps 118:6].

Old Testament references directly quoted to support his arguments: Superior to angels—Heb 1:4-14; Ps 2:7; 2Sam 7:14; Deut 32:43; Ps 104:4; Ps 45:6-7; Ps 102:25-27; Ps 110:1; Fully human, lower than angels—Heb 2:5-9; Ps 8:4-6, Ps 22:22; Isa 8:17-18; Today, hear his voice—Heb 3:7-4:13; Ps 95:7-11; Better than the Old Testament Levitical priesthood—Heb 4:14-7:28; Ps 110:4; Better than the Old Covenant (and its sacrifices)—Heb 8:1-10:18; Jer 31:31-34; Christ's self-sacrifice—Heb 10:1-10; Ps 40:6-8; Living by faith under pressure—Heb 10:32-12:3; Hab 2:3-4; Isa 26:20; God disciplines his children—Heb 12:4-13; Pro 3:11-12; Mountain of fear and mountain of joy—Heb 12:18-29; Ex 19:10-23.

Purpose of Our Study

Through the study of Hebrews we want to understand more deeply who Jesus is so that we may have full assurance of our salvation and not drift away. We are living in a multi-religious society characterized by relativism. We may be tempted to lose our distinctive Christian faith in order to blend in with our society and thus avoid peer pressure, slander and persecution—both verbal and physical. We should not shrink back, but come to Jesus who is our Great High Priest and find mercy and grace to help us in our time of need. Then we can be included among the heroes of faith and live as world changers.

Outline:

- I. Jesus Is the Radiance of God's Glory (1:1-4)
 - A. Now, God Speaks through Jesus his Son (1:1-2a)
 - B. Jesus Is the Exact Representation of God's Being (1:2b-4)

- II. Jesus Is Superior to Angels and Moses (1:5-3:19)
 - A. Jesus Is Superior to Angels (1:5-14)
 - B. Warning Not to Drift Away from Great Salvation (2:1-4)
 - C. Jesus Became Fully Human to Save Mankind (2:5-18)
 - D. Jesus is Greater than Moses (3:1-6)
 - E. Hold our Original Conviction Firmly to the End (3:7-19)

- III. Jesus Is Our Great High Priest (4:1-10:18)
 - A. Make Every Effort to Enter God's Rest through Faith in Christ (4:1-13)
 - B. Jesus' Priesthood Is Superior to the Levitical Priesthood (4:14-5:10)
 - C. Warning and Encouragement to Move on to Maturity (5:11-6:12)
 - D. The Certainty of God's Promise (6:13-20)
 - E. Jesus Is High Priest Forever in the Order of Melchizedek (7:1-28)
 - F. Jesus Became High Priest Based on the New Covenant (8:1-13)
 - G. Jesus Is the Mediator of a New Covenant by his Blood (9:1-28)
 - H. Christ's Sacrifice Once for All (10:1-18)

- III. Live by Faith in Jesus (10:19-12:29)
 - A. Warnings and Encouragement to Keep the Faith (10:19-39)
 - B. Heroes of Faith (11:1-40)
 - C. Fix Our Eyes on Jesus and Receive God's Discipline (12:1-13)
 - D. Encouragement and specific warnings (12:14-17)
 - E. Mount Sinai contrasted with Mount Zion (12:18-29)

- IV. Final Exhortations and Greetings (13:1-25)