

Hebrews: An Introduction

Jim Deason

Introduction:

- I. The Bible is a unique book in many ways. It is actually a collection of 66 different books written by about 40 different authors from varied backgrounds over a period of 1600 years from two continents by men speaking three languages. Yet, it contains a remarkable unity of message that can only be explained by the fact that a Single Mind guided their efforts – “*men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God*” (2 Pet. 1:21).
- II. Thus, with every word being “*inspired by God,*” they are “*profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; ¹⁷so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work*” (2 Tim. 3:16-17).
- III. David’s description of the “*law of the Lord*” included such words as perfect, sure, simple, right, pure, enlightening, enduring, true, and righteous (Psa. 19:7-9). Therefore, I certainly understand and share David’s sentiments when he said to God, “*my heart stands in awe of Your words*” (Psa. 119:161).
- IV. That feeling is never more true than when I open the book of Hebrews. The book is a literary masterpiece. It starts out like a formal treatise, turns into a sermon, and ends up like a letter to close friends.
 - A. In the world of art, a painting considered a masterpiece must be studied to be appreciated. You don’t merely pass casually by and say, “O, what pretty colors!” and move on. Appreciation is gained by spending time in front of the painting, considering its different parts and how they relate to one another.
 - B. The same is true with the book of Hebrews. Some books may be casually read and their message quickly gleaned. However, that approach to the book of Hebrews will cause the reader to miss a lot of its beauty.
- V. My task is introduce the book of Hebrews...
 - A. ... to back away from the painting and take it all in
 - B. ... to ask who did the painting? When and why?
 - C. ... to look at the different parts and how they relate to the whole
- VI. Hopefully, if I can accomplishing this task, a foundation will be laid from which we can all more profitably engage in a detailed study of this wonderful book.

Body:

- I. **Lessons From the Back of the Book – Chapter 13** [Some important features stand out:]
 - A. **Hebrews is a letter.** In typical Greek style, greetings to other persons are included at the end of the letter (cf. Rom. 16:1-16; 1 Cor. 16:19-21; Col. 4:10-18). Hebrews, likewise, closes with a greeting (13:24). Greek letters also often closed with a benediction (cf. Rom. 16:25-27; Phil. 4:20; 1 Thess. 5:23-24), and Hebrews is no exception (13:20-21).
 - B. **Hebrews seems to be a letter to a specific congregation.** The author and the readers have close ties.
 1. He asks for their prayers (13:18).
 2. He expects to see them soon (13:19, 23).

3. He knows about their leaders, past and present (13:7, 17), and extends greetings to the present leadership (13:24).

C. Other sections of Hebrews show clearly that it was a specific letter to a specific congregation with specific problems.

1. They had suffered physical persecution, loss of property, and had stood the test well (10:32-34). Although, they had not undergone martyrdom (12:4).
2. They had learned the gospel from eye and ear witnesses of Christ (2:3).
3. They had been Christians for some time (5:12).
4. They had been and were still active in serving their fellow Christians (6:10).
 - a. All of this suggests that Hebrews was not a general letter, but was a letter sent to a particular congregation with a glorious past.

D. Hebrews is a letter or exhortation (13:22).

1. Actually, chapter 13, from verse 1 on, contains exhortation after exhortation. Similar exhortations interlace the entire letter. Some are short and to the point, others are much lengthier and combine a variety of admonitions with expositions of selected passages from the Old Testament.
2. Lightfoot notes that, “Of the 305 verse in Hebrews, 172 are exhortation verses. This means that more than half of Hebrews consists of special appeals to its readers” (Neil R. Lightfoot, *Everyone’s Guide To Hebrews*, p. 14).
 - a. Just a few of the exhortations are as follows: 2:1; 3:12-13; 4:1; 6:1; 10:23-25; 12:1-2
3. This is one of the reasons why a study of the book of Hebrews is so important for, just as they had “*need of endurance*” (10:36), so also do we. The message of Hebrews is “Hold on! Don’t give up! Go forward!”

E. Hebrews is a letter of warning. Chapter 13:7-9 illustrates this well. The writer basically says – Remember your leaders who first preached the gospel to you. The gospel has not changed, nor has Jesus Christ, so don’t be led away by false teaching.” Here we have exhortation and warning, a pattern noticeable throughout Hebrews. Other somber warnings are found in 6:4-8; 10:31

F. Hebrews is a letter of doctrinal significance. After warning against false teaching (13:9), the author declares that “*We have an altar from which those who serve the tabernacle have no right to eat*” (13:10). That altar, figuratively representing the sacrifice of Christ, benefits only the obedient. Almost half of the book of Hebrews focuses on Christ and what He has accomplished for us and the eternal significance of it.

II. To Whom was “Hebrews” Written?

- A. The very title of the book in our English Bibles provides the best answer. Though not provided by the author, the title “To The Hebrews,” does go as far back as the end of the second century and is the earliest title in extant Greek manuscripts.
- B. It was assigned to the letter because it obviously was written to Christians of Jewish background.
 1. The statement, “*He gives help to the descendant of Abraham*” (2:16) suggests that the readers were ethnically Jewish.

2. The letter is filled with references to the Jewish form of worship – the tabernacle, the priesthood, the sacrifices, and all that went with them.
 3. The author of the book portrays Jesus Christ as our Great High Priest, offering Himself as a perfect sacrifice for our sins, and ministering today in heaven on our behalf.
 - a. He emphasizes the superiority of Christ over the prophets, the angels, Moses, Joshua, and Aaron
 - b. He emphasizes the superiority of the sacrifice of Christ over the animal sacrifices of the Levitical priesthood (10:1-10).
 - c. His point is that the Old Testament, with its institutions and promises, finds its full meaning only in Christ.
 - d. All of this he uses in the attempt to urge his readers not to revert back to Judaism from whence they came.
 4. His arguments would make no sense at all if written to anyone other than a Jewish Christian.
- C. Acknowledging the Jewish background of the readers brings up another challenging question, “*Where did these Jewish Christians live?*” Was the letter written to Palestinian Jews, or was it destined for somewhere else? Consider:
1. Heb. 2:3 indicates that neither the author nor the readers had seen nor heard Jesus during His earthly ministry as many Palestinian Christians had surely done.
 2. Heb. 6:10 suggests that these Christians provided aid for other saints. Except for their initial outpouring of benevolence (Acts 2:45; 4:32-37), Palestinian Christians are portrayed as so poor and impoverished that they were the recipients of aid (Acts 11:27-30; Rom. 15:26; 2 Cor. 8-9).
 3. The author’s statement, “*Those from Italy greet you*” (13:24) indicates that *the letter either originated or was destined for Rome* and the latter seems preferable. This is by no means conclusive, and there are other possibilities, but it seems the most reasonable to me.

III. When Was The Book Written?

- A. Historical allusions to Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection (1:3; 2:17-18; 5:8-9; 9:14-16; 10:1-10; 13:20) and the arguments of the book itself show that it was written after that event (29-33 AD).
- B. The readers had heard testimony from eyewitnesses to the Lord’s ministry which testimony had to be given before those eyewitnesses died (2:3)
- C. When we read that Levi “*received tithes*” (7:9) and of others who “*serve the tabernacle*” (13:10), such expressions argue that worship was still going on in the Jewish temple. If so, the date of writing must be placed before 70 AD.
- D. Yet, in reference to the Mosaic system the Hebrew writer said, “*He has made the first obsolete. But whatever is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to disappear*” (8:13). This seems to be a reference to the nearness of Jerusalem’s destruction and the end of the Jewish economy and sacrificial system.
- E. “*The day drawing near*” of 10:25 might also be a reference to the same event.

- F. Hence, it seems reasonable to suppose that a date a few years prior to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 is in order. Most scholars date the book from A.D. 64-68.

IV. Who Wrote The Book?

- A. Ultimately, I must admit to you that I do not know. Further, I don't think anyone else conclusively knows because the author does not identify himself in the text of the message itself. It is perhaps a little easier to answer the question, "Who *didn't* write Hebrews?"
- B. The title given in the King James Version reads: "The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews." Yet this is only a traditional title and is not found in the earliest and best manuscripts.
- C. The testimony from early Christian writers concerning Pauline authorship seems, to me at least, to be quite mixed, particularly between the east and west.
1. In the East, Pauline authorship was accepted early. Pantaenus (180 AD), bishop of Alexandria, supported it (Eusebius, H.E., VI.14.4), as did Clement of Alexandria (190 AD) (Eusebius, H.E., VI.14.1-3).
 2. In the West, the early writers denied Pauline authorship. Those writers included Irenaeus (180 AD), Hippolytus (222 AD) (a student of Irenaeus) and Cyprian (258 AD). Tertullian, bishop of Hippo (200 AD) ascribed authorship of Hebrews to Barnabas. But perhaps it was the influential Augustine, bishop of Hippo (430 AD), who turned Western opinion back toward Pauline authorship.
 3. The writer that particularly interests me on this subject is Origen (210 AD).
 - a. In a letter to Africanus he wrote, "But possibly some one pressed with this argument will have recourse to the opinion of those who reject this epistle as not written by Paul. In answer to such an one, *we intend to write a separate discourse, to show that the epistle is Paul's*" (Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 4, p. 388).
 - b. But, on another occasion he wrote, "If then, any church receives this epistle as coming from Paul, let it be commended for this; for it is not without reason that the ancients have handed it down as Paul's. *But who wrote the epistle, God only knows certainly* [Emphasis mine – JHD]. But the account that has come down to us is various; some saying that Clement, who was bishop of Rome wrote the epistle; others that it was Luke, who wrote the Gospel and Acts" (Eusebius, H.E., VI.25.11-14).
 - c. There is also some evidence to the possibility that Origen believed that the theology and arguments of the epistle were Paul's, but that some other person wrote them down in the form and style they now possess.
 - d. I guess all of this is to say that, when it comes to who wrote the book of Hebrews, Origen and I have something in common – neither of us have the foggiest idea.
- D. Three main objections to the Pauline authorship of Hebrews are worthy of mention here.
1. From 2 Thessalonians 3:17, Paul affirmed that a "*distinguishing mark in every letter*" he wrote was the fact that he identified himself. This self-identification is missing from Hebrews.
 2. Paul affirmed that the gospel he preached was not received "*from man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ*" (Gal. 1:11-12). The

writer of Hebrews, on the other hand, seems to have received the gospel first from the teachings of others (Heb. 2:3-4).

3. The dissimilarity in tone and content. It doesn't take a Greek or Hebrew scholar to notice the difference between the polish of Hebrews and other writings that are known to be from Paul's pen.
 4. While this may not be insurmountable evidence against the possibility that Paul wrote Hebrews, I think it is certainly convincing.
- E. Others who have been mentioned as possible authors are: Apollos, Barnabas, Luke, Silas, Timothy, Titus, Mark, Philip (the evangelist), and Aquilla. Adolf von Harnack even argued for the possibility that Priscilla wrote the book of Hebrews. According to Harnack, she preserved her anonymity because she was a woman in a man's world.
- F. What we do know about the author of Hebrews is this —
1. He was a Jew, a point never held in dispute. His knowledge of the Levitical ritual and the application he makes of it strongly argues against the writer being a Gentile.
 2. He habitually used the LXX for his Old Testament quotations. Gareth L. Reese makes the point that some of the author's arguments depended upon the wording of the LXX for some of their force, e.g., 1:6, 10; 2:7; 10:5-7 (*Hebrews*, p. xviii).
 3. He used excellent Greek.
 - a. Reese says that the grammar itself closely approximates classical Greek and is "perhaps the finest example of the use of the Greek language we find in the New Testament Scriptures" (*Ibid.*, p. xviii).
 - b. Lightfoot argues that, "The literary character of the Epistle would go so far as to argue that the author was probably a Jew with distinctive Greek training as well — that is, he was a Hellenistic Jew" (*Jesus Christ Today*, p. 27).
 4. He was familiar with his readers (5:12; 6:9; 13:18-19, 23-24).
 5. He was not one of the original twelve apostles. Hebrews 2:3 precludes it.
 6. He was acquainted with Timothy (13:23).

V. Why Was Hebrews Written?

- A. Try to imagine what it was like to be a Jewish Christian in the first century.
1. On one hand was the land promised to the fathers with Jerusalem, the city of David, as its center. The Jew could travel to Jerusalem and see with his own eyes the illustrious temple, hear the music, smell the sweet incense, and watch the priests with their impressive offerings.
 2. On the other hand, after their obedience to the gospel, these Jewish Christians often were forced to meet in the secret — no priests, no sacrifices, no pageantry to glory in. They had forsaken much they held dear.
 3. Besides, there were the Gentiles crowding into the churches with no regard for the time-honored traditions of the fathers.
- B. What was going to happen next?
1. Yes, Jesus had been preached and had been received by many Jews — including these to whom this book is written.

2. But had he restored the kingdom to Israel (cf. Acts 1:6)? Had their expectations been met?
 3. Why had he delayed so long in coming?
- C. From the contents of the letter, it seems that these Hebrew Christians were vacillating between the Christ they had confessed (3:1,6,14; 4:14; 10:23), and their ancient customs.
1. The Hebrews were in danger of reverting into Judaism. The writer maintains that to reject Christ (10:26-29), is the same as to crucify Him again, with irrevocable consequences (6:4-6).
 2. The author wrote this book to encourage his readers to make an ultimate and final choice between Judaism and Christianity.

VI. The Style Of Hebrews

- A. The language of Hebrews is, in many respects, unusual among the books of the Bible. It is an eloquent book. Much of the book is somewhat like a sermon (cf. Acts 13:15), and it reads to some extent like an oral address. As you study Hebrews, read it *aloud* and take the time to *listen* to its message. The book makes frequent reference to speaking (2:5; 5:11; 6:9; 9:5; cf. 11:32).
- B. The author, though undoubtedly a Jew, was versatile in his reading. His language-world was not only that of the Septuagint but it was also that of the Greek philosophical writings. He chooses words with care for their sounds. This cannot be observed unless one looks at the original Greek text.
1. His opening lines (1:1) read, *Polumeros kai polutropos palai ho theos lalesas tois patrasin en tois prophetais* (“*In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets*”); the alliteration of pol-, pol-, pal-, pat-, and pro- is remarkably effective.
 2. When he describes Melchizedek as “*without father or mother or genealogy*” (7:3), he uses three words (*apator, ametor, agenealogetos*) that begin with alpha.
 3. The author’s familiar statement, “*as it is appointed for men to die once*” (9:27), is written beautifully, with almost every word beginning with alpha – *apokeitai tois anthropois (h)apax apothanein*.
- C. The author is equally impressive when he pours forth long sentences (1:1- 4; 5:7-10; 7:1-3; 10:19-25; 12:18-24) and when he abbreviates his thoughts (2:18; 10:18).

VII. The Vocabulary of Hebrews

- A. Aside from its literary qualities, the vocabulary of Hebrews is quite different. According to one source, there are 152 words in Hebrews found nowhere else in the New Testament. This is one reason why many people find Hebrews hard to understand, for it is a difficult book unless one becomes acquainted with its unusual terms. Three features should be kept in mind about the language of Hebrews:
- B. It’s language is saturated with Old Testament terminology. The very framework of Hebrews consists of practical expositions of selected Old Testament texts.
1. In all, Hebrews contains about thirty quotations from the Old Testament and about seventy allusions to it.

Hebrews Chapters

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13

OT References

7 OT Quotations
Psa. 8, Psa. 22, Isa. 8
Num. 12; Psa. 95
Psa. 95, Gen. 2
Psa. 2, Psa. 110
Allusions to OT
Gen. 14, Psa. 110
Jer. 31
Allusions to OT
Psa. 40; Jer. 31; Hab. 2
Allusions to OT
Prov. 3; Hag. 2
Psa. 118

- C. It is language of ritual and ceremony – sacrifices, offerings, and priests. Hebrews abounds in priestly terminology such as “*draw near*,” the language of an Old Testament priest who would approach God in performing his priestly service (cf. *perfect, sanctify, minister*, et. al.).
- D. It is a language of comparison and analogy.
1. Here is just a sample:
 - a. The speaking of the prophets and the speaking of the Son (1:1-2).
 - b. The message declared by angels and the great salvation declared by the Lord (2:2-3).
 - c. The glory of man and the glory of Jesus (2:7-9).
 - d. The rest in Canaan and the rest in heaven (4:1-13).
 - e. Aaron as high priest and Jesus as high priest (5:1-10).
 - f. The blood of goats and calves and the blood of Christ (9:12)
- E. Some of the language of Hebrews is figurative in nature and cannot be taken literally. Hebrews 6:19-20 uses the analogy of the High Priest entering the Holy of Holies in saying that Jesus “*enters within the veil*.” The point being that Jesus has gone into the heavenly Holy of Holies beyond that curtain (cf. Heb 10:20).
- F. All of this is to say that special care must be given to the vocabulary of Hebrews. It is beautiful, complex, and subtle. To understand the book one needs to remember: “A poet one can only rightly understand, when one goes into the poet’s land.” Anyone who does not remember this is destined to misunderstand Hebrews. We are attempting, in this study, to go “into the poet’s land” – i.e. to understand the language and times of the writer.

VIII. Christ: The Center Of The Message

- A. Even though Hebrews takes its terminology from the Old Testament, still it must be kept in mind that Hebrews especially exalts Christ. He is above all. He is the heart and center of Hebrews.
- B. It is to the author’s credit that he begins Hebrews at the center and not the circumference. God has spoken his final message through one who is Son. The author does not focus attention on his readers. He does not begin with their problems and urge them to share their problems with others. He knows that what they need is Christ. If they can fully appreciate Him and what He has done for them, they can successfully deal with their congregational

and personal problems, whatever they are. “Fix your thoughts on Jesus,” he says, “the apostle and high priest” whom we have confessed (3:1 NIV; cf. 12:2).

- C. Hebrews arranges all of its leading ideas around two great themes: the person of Christ and the work of Christ. The first part of Hebrews concerns *who* Christ is, the last part *what* Christ does. A brief outline of the book looks like this:
1. Chap. 1-6: The word of God – who Christ is
 2. Chap. 7-10: The work of God – what Christ does
 3. Chap. 11-13: The word of God – concluding exhortations
- D. Who is this Christ? In chapters 1-6 we see him as the Son of God.
1. Greater than the prophets (1:1)
 2. Greater than the angels (1:2-2:18)
 3. Greater than Moses (3:1-6)
 4. Greater than Joshua (4:1-10)
 5. Greater than Aaron (5:1-10)
- E. What has this Christ done? In chapters 7-10 we see him as Son and priest. Actually, the priesthood of Jesus is alluded to and even stated plainly in the early chapters as well (1:3; 2:17; 4:14-5:10).
- F. If chapter 1 depicts him as the Son of God, chapter 2 presents him as the Son of man. The Son, made like his brothers (2:17), clothed himself in a human body (2:14). He became, for a little while, lower than the angels (2:9) He accepted the human condition, including the painful stress of temptation (2:18; 4:15). Son though he was, he learned obedience, all the way to the cross; and having learned this final lesson, he is qualified to be our high priest (5:8-9). Indeed, his death on the cross was a high-priestly act (cf. 8:3).
- G. Historically, his death took place on the earth, “*outside the gate*” (13:12, but on earth he could not be high priest (8:4). Therefore, his great high-priestly act, the sacrifice of himself, belongs to heaven. There, figuratively, he sprinkled his own blood before God as an eternal offering (9:12-14). There, in heaven – where there are no shadows (cf. 10:1) – the real sacrifice was made. It is no wonder that God crowned him with glory and honor (2:9). We sometimes sing these words from *Fairest Lord Jesus* –
1. Beautiful Savior! Lord of all nations!
Son of God and Son of Man.
Glory and Honor, Praise, adoration
Now and forever more be thine.

Conclusion

- I. Our study of the book of Hebrews, as an old preacher once said, will “plow a little deep.” When we study Hebrews, we will study the beautiful types and figures of the Old Testament to see their wonderful fulfillment in Jesus Christ.
- II. Perhaps, by this means, we’ll come to better appreciate *who* He is, and *what* He has done (and is doing) for us.
- III. Along the way you are going to make practical observations that should change your life forever as you draw closer to Him.

Jim Deason
3203 Overhill Ct.
Murfreesboro, TN 37130
(615) 494-5392 or (615) 896-0090
jhdeason@comcast.net

Selected Bibliography

- Bruce, F. F. *The Epistle to the Hebrews*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1990.
- Lightfoot, Neil. *Everyone's Guide To Hebrews*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 2002.
- _____. *Jesus Christ Today: A Commentary On The Book Of Hebrews*. Abilene, TX: Bible Guides, 1976.
- MacArthur, John Jr. "Hebrews." *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1983.
- Milligan, Robert. *The Epistle To The Hebrews*. Delight, AR: Gospel Light, n.d.
- Reese, Gareth. *Hebrews*. Moberly, MO: Scripture Exposition Books, 1992.