

THE BOOK OF HEBREWS

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Many Jewish believers, having stepped out of Judaism into Christianity, want to reverse their course in order to escape persecution by their countrymen. The writer of Hebrews exhorts them to “go on to perfection” (6:1). His appeal is based on the superiority of Christ over the Judaic system. Christ is better than the angels, for they worship Him. He is better than Moses, for He created him. He is better than the Aaronic priesthood, for His sacrifice was once for all time. He is better than the Law, for He mediates a better covenant. In short, there is more to be gained in Christ than to be lost in Judaism. Pressing on in Christ produces tested faith, self-discipline, and a visible love seen in good works.

Although the King James Version uses the title “The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews,” there is no early manuscript evidence to support it. The oldest and most reliable title is simply *Pros Ebraious*, “To Hebrews.”

THE AUTHOR OF HEBREWS

Like the ancestry of Melchizedek, the origin of Hebrews is unknown. Uncertainty plagues not only its authorship, but also where it was written, its date, and its readership. The question of authorship delayed its recognition in the West as part of the New Testament canon in spite of early support by Clement of Rome. Not until the fourth century was it generally accepted as authoritative in the Western church, when the testimonies of Jerome and Augustine settled the issue. In the Eastern church, there was no problem of canonical acceptance because it was regarded as one of the “fourteen” epistles of Paul. The issue of its canonicity was again raised during the Reformation, but the spiritual depth and quality of Hebrews bore witness to its inspiration, despite its anonymity.

Hebrews 13:18–24 tells us that this book was not anonymous to the original readers; they evidently knew the author. For some reason, however, early church tradition is divided over the identity of the author. Part of the church attributed it to Paul; others preferred Barnabas, Luke, or Clement; and some chose anonymity. Thus, external evidence will not help determine the author.

Internal evidence must be the final court of appeal, but here, too, the results are ambiguous. Some aspects of the language, style, and theology of Hebrews are very similar to Paul’s epistles, and the author also refers to Timothy (13:23). However, significant differences have led the majority of biblical scholars to reject Pauline authorship of this book: (1) The Greek style of Hebrews is far more polished and refined than that found in any of Paul’s recognized epistles. (2) In view of Paul’s consistent claims to be an apostle and an eyewitness of Christ, it is very doubtful that he would have used the phraseology found in 2:3: “which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord and was confirmed to us by those who heard Him.” (3) The lack of Paul’s customary salutation, which includes his name, goes against the firm pattern found in all his other epistles. (4) While Paul used both the Hebrew text and the Septuagint to quote from the Old Testament, the writer of Hebrews apparently did not know Hebrew and quoted exclusively from the Septuagint. (5) Paul’s common use of compound titles to refer to the Son of God is not followed in Hebrews, which usually refers to Him as “Christ,” “Jesus,” and “Lord.” (6) Hebrews concentrates on Christ’s present priestly ministry, but Paul’s writings have very little to say about the present work of

Christ. Thus, Hebrews appears not to have been written by Paul although the writer shows a Pauline influence. The authority of Hebrews in no way depends upon Pauline authorship, especially since it does not claim to have been written by Paul.

Tertullian referred to Barnabas as the author of Hebrews, but it is unlikely that this resident of Jerusalem (Acts 4:36, 37) would include himself as one of those who relied on others for eyewitness testimony about Jesus (2:3). Other suggestions include Luke, Clement of Rome, Apollos, Silvanus (Silas), Philip, and even Priscilla. Some of these are possibilities, but we must agree with the third-century theologian Origen who wrote: “Who it was that really wrote the Epistle, God only knows.”

THE TIME OF HEBREWS

Because of the exclusive use of the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament) and the elegant Greek style found in Hebrews, some recent scholars have argued that this book was written to a Gentile readership. However, the bulk of the evidence favors the traditional view that the original recipients of this letter were Jewish Christians. In addition to the ancient title “To Hebrews,” there is also the frequent use of the Old Testament as an unquestioned authority, the assumed knowledge of the sacrificial ritual, and the many contrasts between Christianity and Judaism, which are designed to prevent the readers from lapsing into Judaism.

Many places have been suggested for the locality of the readers, but this letter’s destination cannot be determined with any certainty. In the past, Jerusalem was most frequently suggested, but this view is hindered by four problems: (1) It is unlikely that a book addressed to Palestinians would quote exclusively from the Septuagint rather than the Hebrew Old Testament. (2) Palestinian believers were poor (Rom. 15:26), but these readers were able to assist other Christians financially (6:10). (3) Residents of Jerusalem would not be characterized by the description in 2:3 because some would have been eyewitnesses of the ministry of Christ. (4) “You have not yet resisted to bloodshed” (12:4) does not fit the situation in Jerusalem. The majority view today is that the recipients of Hebrews probably lived in Rome. The statement “Those from Italy greet you” in 13:24 seems to suggest that Italians away from Italy are sending their greetings home.

The recipients of this letter were believers (3:1) who had come to faith through the testimony of eyewitnesses of Christ (2:3). They were not novices (5:12), and they had successfully endured hardships because of their stand for the gospel (10:32–34). Unfortunately, they had become “dull of hearing” (5:11) and were in danger of drifting away (2:1; 3:12). This made them particularly susceptible to the renewed persecutions that were coming upon them (12:4–12), and the author found it necessary to check the downward spiral with “the word of exhortation” (13:22). While there is disagreement over the specific danger involved, the classic position that the readers were on the verge of lapsing into Judaism to avoid persecution directed at Christians seems to be supported by the whole tenor of the book. Hebrews’ repeated emphasis on the superiority of Christianity over Judaism would have been pointless if the readers were about to return to Gnosticism or heathenism.

The place of writing is unknown, but a reasonable estimate of the date can be made. Hebrews was quoted in A.D. 95 by Clement of Rome, but its failure to mention the ending of the Old Testament sacrificial system with the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 indicates that it was written prior to that date. Timothy was still alive (13:23), persecution was mounting, and the old Jewish system was about to be removed (12:26, 27). All this suggests a date between A.D. 64 and 68.

THE CHRIST OF HEBREWS

Christ is our eternal High Priest according to the order of Melchizedek. He identified with man in His incarnation and offered no less a sacrifice than Himself on our behalf.

Hebrews presents Christ as the divine-human Prophet, Priest, and King. His deity (1:1–3, 8) and humanity (2:9, 14, 17, 18) are asserted with equal force, and over twenty titles are used to describe His attributes and accomplishments (e.g., Heir of all things, Apostle and High Priest, Mediator, Author and Perfecter of faith). He is superior to all who went before and offers the supreme sacrifice, priesthood, and covenant.

KEYS TO HEBREWS

Key Word: The Superiority of Christ—The basic theme of Hebrews is found in the word “better,” describing the superiority of Christ in His Person and work (1:4; 6:9; 7:7, 19, 22; 8:6; 9:23; 10:34; 11:16, 35, 40; 12:24). The words perfect and heavenly are also prominent. He offers a better revelation, position, priesthood, covenant, sacrifice, and power. The writer develops this theme to prevent the readers from giving up the substance for the shadow by abandoning Christianity and retreating into the old Judaic system. This epistle is also written to exhort them to become mature in Christ and to put away their spiritual dullness and degeneration. Thus, it places heavy stress on doctrine, concentrating on Christology and soteriology (the study of salvation).

Key Verses: Hebrews 4:14–16 and 12:1, 2—“Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need”(4:14–16).

“Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (12:1,2).

Key Chapter: Hebrews 11—The hall of fame of the Scriptures is located in Hebrews 11 and records those who willingly took God at His word even when there was nothing to cling to but His promise. Inherent to all those listed is the recognition that “without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him” (Heb. 11:6).

SURVEY OF HEBREWS

Hebrews stands alone among the New Testament Epistles in its style and approach, and it is the only New Testament book whose authorship remains a real mystery. This profound work builds a case for the superiority of Christ through a cumulative argument in which Christ is presented as “better” in every respect. In His Person He is better than the angels, Moses, and Joshua; and in His performance He provides a better priesthood, covenant, sanctuary, and sacrifice. Evidently, the readers are in danger of reverting to Judaism because of the suffering they are beginning to

experience for their faith in Christ. However, by doing so, they would be retreating from the substance back into the shadow. In addition to his positive presentation of the supremacy of Christ, the writer intersperses five solemn warnings about the peril of turning away from Christ (2:1–4; 3:7–4:13; 5:11–6:20; 10:19–39; 12:25–29). These parenthetical warnings include cautions against neglect (2:1–4) and refusal (12:25–29). After using the Old Testament to demonstrate the superiority of Christ’s Person (1:1–4:13) and the superiority of Christ’s work (4:14–10:18), the writer applies these truths in a practical way to show the superiority of the Christian’s walk of faith (10:19–13:25).

The Superiority of Christ’s Person (1:1–4:13): Instead of the usual salutation, this epistle immediately launches into its theme—the supremacy of Christ even over the Old Testament prophets (1:1–3). Christianity is built upon the highest form of divine disclosure: the personal revelation of God through His incarnate Son. Christ is therefore greater than the prophets, and He is also greater than the angels, the mediators of the Mosaic Law (1:4–2:18; see Acts 7:53; Heb. 2:2). This is seen in His name, His position, His worship by the angels, and His incarnation. The Son of God partook of flesh and blood and was “made like His brethren” in all things (2:17) in order to bring “many sons to glory” (2:10). Christ is also superior to Moses (3:1–6), for Moses was a servant in the house of God, but Christ is the Son over God’s household. Because of these truths, the readers are exhorted to avoid the divine judgment that is visited upon unbelief (3:7–4:13). Their disbelief had prevented the generation of the Exodus from becoming the generation of the conquest, and the rest that Christ offers is so much greater than what was provided by Joshua. The readers are therefore urged to enter the eternal rest that is possessed by faith in Christ.

The Superiority of Christ’s Work (4:14–10:18): The high priesthood of Christ is superior to the Aaronic priesthood (4:14–7:28). Because of His incarnation, Christ can “sympathize with our weaknesses,” having been “in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin” (4:15). Christ was not a Levite, but He qualified for a higher priesthood according to the order of Melchizedek. The superiority of Melchizedek to Levi is seen in the fact that Levi, in effect, paid tithes through Abraham to Melchizedek (7:9–10). Abraham was blessed by Melchizedek, and “the lesser is blessed by the better” (7:7). The parenthetical warning in 5:11–6:20 exhorts the readers to “go on to perfection “by moving beyond the basics of salvation and repentance.

By divine oath (7:21), Christ has become a permanent and perfect High Priest and the “Mediator of a better covenant” (8:6). The new covenant has made the old covenant obsolete (8:6–13). Our Great High Priest similarly ministers in “the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this creation” (9:11). And unlike the former priests, He offers Himself as a sinless and voluntary sacrifice once and for all (9:1–10:18).

The Superiority of the Christian’s Walk of Faith (10:19–13:25): The author applies what he has been saying about the superiority of Christ by warning his readers of the danger of discarding their faith in Christ (10:19–39). The faith that the readers must maintain is defined in 11:1–3 and illustrated in 11:4–40. The triumphs and accomplishments of faith in the lives of Old Testament believers should encourage the recipients of “something better” (11:40) in Christ to look “unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith” (12:2). Just as Jesus endured great hostility, those who believe in Him will sometimes have to endure divine discipline for the sake of holiness (12:1–29). The readers are warned not to turn away from Christ during such times, but to place their hope in Him. The character of their lives must be shaped by their dedication to Christ (13:1–19), and this will be manifested in their love of each other through their hospitality, concern, purity, contentment, and obedience. The author concludes this epistle with one of the finest benedictions in Scripture (13:20, 21) and some personal words (13:22–25)

SURVEY OF HEBREWS

FOCUS	CHRIST'S PERSON	CHRIST'S WORK					THE WALK OF FAITH			
REFERENCE	1:1-----1:4-----3:1-----4:14-----8:1-----9:1-----10:19-----12:1-----13:1-----13:25									
DIVISION	CHRIST OVER PROPHETS	CHRIST OVER ANGELS	CHRIST OVER MOSES	PRIEST- HOOD	COVENANT	SANCTUARY AND SACRIFICE	ASSURANCE OF FAITH	ENDURANCE OF FAITH	EXHORTATION OF LOVE	
TOPIC	MAJESTY OF CHRIST			MINISTRY OF CHRIST			MINISTERS FOR CHRIST			
	DOCTRINE						DISCIPLINE			
LOCATION	PLACE OF WRITING UNKNOWN									
TIME	C. A.D. 64-68									

OUTLINE OF HEBREWS

Part One: The Superiority of Christ's Person (1:1–4:13)

I. The Superiority of Christ over the Prophets 1:1–3

II. The Superiority of Christ over the Angels 1:4–2:18

A. Christ Is Superior Because of His Deity 1:4–14

B. First Warning: Danger of Neglect 2:1–4

C. Christ Is Superior Because of His Humanity 2:5–18

III. The Superiority of Christ over Moses 3:1–4:13

A. Christ Is Superior to Moses in His Work 3:1–4

B. Christ Is Superior to Moses in His Person 3:5, 6

C. Second Warning: Danger of Unbelief 3:7–4:13

1. Danger of Hardening the Heart 3:7–19

2. Challenge to Enter His Rest 4:1–13

Part Two: The Superiority of Christ's Work (4:14–10:18)

I. The Superiority of Christ's Priesthood 4:14–7:28

A. Christ Is Superior in His Position 4:14–16

B. Christ Is Superior in His Qualifications 5:1–10

1. Aaronic Priesthood 5:1–4

2. Melchizedekian Priesthood 5:5–10

C. Third Warning: Danger of Not Maturing 5:11–6:20

1. Dullness of Hearing 5:11–14

2. Need for Maturity 6:1–8

3. Exhortation to Maturity 6:9–20

D. Christ Is Superior in His Priestly Order 7:1–28

1. Description of Melchizedek 7:1–3

2. Superiority of Melchizedek 7:4–10

3. Imperfection of Aaronic Priesthood 7:11–28

II. The Superiority of Christ's Covenant 8:1–13

A. A Better Covenant 8:1–6

B. A New Covenant 8:7–13

III. The Superiority of Christ's Sanctuary and Sacrifice 9:1–10:18

A. Old Covenant's Sanctuary and Sacrifice 9:1–10

1. Old Covenant's Sanctuary 9:1–5

2. Old Covenant's Sacrifice 9:6–10

B. New Covenant's Sanctuary and Sacrifice 9:11–10:18

1. New Covenant's Sanctuary 9:11

2. New Covenant's Sacrifice 9:12–10:18

Part Three: The Superiority of the Christian's Walk of Faith (10:19–13:25)

I. Exhortation to Full Assurance of Faith 10:19–11:40

A. Hold Fast the Confession of Faith 10:19–25

B. Fourth Warning: Danger of Drawing Back 10:26–39

C. Definition of Faith 11:1–3

D. Examples of Faith 11:4–40

1. Abel 11:4
2. Enoch 11:5, 6
3. Noah 11:7
4. Abraham and Sarah 11:8–19
5. Isaac 11:20
6. Jacob 11:21
7. Joseph 11:22
8. Moses' Parents 11:23
9. Moses 11:24–29
10. Joshua and Rahab 11:30, 31
11. Many Other Heroes of Faith 11:32–40

II. Endurance of Faith 12:1–29

- A. Example of Christ's Endurance 12:1–4
- B. Exhortation to Endure God's Chastening 12:5–24
- C. Fifth Warning: Danger of Refusing God 12:25–29

III. Exhortation to Love 13:1–17

- A. Love in the Social Realm 13:1–6
- B. Love in the Religious Realm 13:7–17

IV. Conclusion 13:18–25