

# The Epistle to the Hebrews

Lesson # 1            September 13, 2015    Introduction to Hebrews

## Introduction

This is the second time I have taught through the book of Hebrews – the first time, as near as I can remember, was in the late 1990's. Hebrews is a challenging book because it contains so much theology and is so connected to the OT. It is filled with many contrasts to show the superiority of Jesus Christ in numerous ways, and it is famously brimming with warning passages for believers. The presence of chapters about Jesus as High Priest and as our substitute soar to heights of splendour, and chapter 11, the Hall of Faith presents a list of OT faithful that surprises us occasionally by filling in information not presented in the original OT passages about certain of these people.

The main theme of the letter is the superiority of Christ over everyone and everything. It is not an easy book to study because of the depth of the theology, and an understanding of Leviticus is helpful to connect to some of the passages in it, and a knowledge of certain Psalms is also helpful, as many verses in certain Psalms are cited. Hebrews picks up on OT theology, history, typology and symbolism throughout the book.

Jesus Christ is exalted throughout this epistle – His grandeur is especially front and center in chapter 1. The background theme is encouragement to Hebrew Christians ( those converted to Christ out of Judaism ), many of whom appear to have been on the verge of returning to Judaism, thus falling away from Christ.

## The Writer of Hebrews

There are many ideas within Christendom today and all the way back to the Church Fathers regarding who wrote this letter, because the writer never identifies himself. Thomas Schreiner is very helpful in a recent commentary as he lists proposed writers of Hebrews, and then notes why certain theologians have thought and argued for these proposed individuals.

Clement of Alexandria ( 150-215 AD ) thought it was Paul, and very specifically, that Paul wrote it in Hebrew, then Luke translated it into Greek ( very good Greek, by the way ). Origen ( 185-253 AD ) said that the theology was Pauline, but an anonymous person took notes and then crafted the letter. Generally, up to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, Paul was thought to be the author in the East ( Asia and eastern Europe ).

However, in the West, Tertullian ( 155-220 AD ) suggested Barnabus was the writer, which means, at least, that the West ( Italy and west of that ) had not followed the lead of the East with regard to Paul. The suggestion of Barnabus has some appeal since Acts 4:36 tells us he was a Levite, and would thus have had a strong

understanding of the Jewish sacrificial system, and a significant portion of Hebrews is on that topic. But, even in the West, eventually, due to Augustine and Jerome, Pauline authorship became the prevailing view until the Reformation.

At that time, Erasmus did not think Paul was the author, but was ready to submit to the church's authority if that was the decision made. Luther, on the basis of Heb. 2:3, rejected Pauline authorship. However, Luther proposed that Apollos was the author – without almost any evidence to support that idea. John Calvin weighed in, rejecting Paul and proposing Luke or even Clement of Rome as possible authors.<sup>i</sup>

In contemporary times, various scholars have proposed: Priscilla, Silas, Epaphras, Jude, Aristion, etc. And David Allen launched a vigorous defence of Luke as the author<sup>ii</sup>. David Alan Black wrote to defend Paul as the author<sup>iii</sup>, and A.W Pink also thinks strongly that Paul is the author<sup>iv</sup>. He appeals to II Peter 3:15, and the people Peter wrote to as his 1<sup>st</sup> proof, and he also provides an impressive and almost convincing array of points including terminology, numerical proofs, connective passages such as Rom. 8:35-39 & Heb. 12:18-24, doctrinal parallels, devotional correspondence, Timothy as the writer's companion ( Heb. 13:23 ), the closing verse of Hebrews is distinctly Pauline in form, and Pink's last 'proof' is that if Paul did not write Hebrews, then he penned only 13 books, a number associated with evil! John Phillips is also convinced that it was written by Paul.<sup>v</sup> John MacArthur is convinced the author is not Paul, and refuses to speculate as to whom it might be, sticking with "No one knows" – "How fitting, since the book's purpose is to exalt Christ."<sup>vi</sup>

The truth is, whoever this unidentified writer is, he has not recorded it and God has not seen fit to share it with us, and as a result, perhaps this point of anonymity allows the greatness of the Lord Jesus Christ to shine forth that much brighter and we must leave it at that.

## Date of Writing

Since no date is inscribed ( just as other books both OT and NT ), we have to date the book based on internal clues, and there are a number of those in Hebrews. Schreiner comments re: dating Hebrews;

"Timothy was still alive ( 13:23 ) when the letter was written, and thus the letter was written in the first century, since the author mentions the second generation of Christians ( 2:3 ), Timothy ( 13:23 ), and the death of some Christian leaders ( 13:7 ), the document was not written in the 30's or 40's.

Furthermore, 5:12 indicates that the believers had been Christians for a while. The earliest date usually assigned is in the 60's."<sup>vii</sup>

Some try to date it after 70 AD, but the reasons to date it before then are massive and more than persuasive. The author refers to the tabernacle ( temple ) often – in the present tense – which would not make sense after 70 AD after Titus and his armies leveled Jerusalem and the temple. The author also relegates the sacrificial system of Judaism to the present as well, which appears to indicate that these sacrifices were still going on ( but they would end after 70 AD ). Furthermore, Clement of Rome, in

his own epistle, I Clement ( AD 96 ), cites what we now know as Hebrews, so by AD 96, the epistle had been around enough to become part of the apostolic tradition, also suggesting a pre-70 AD date.

## The Recipients

The dominant view is that this letter was written to a community of Jews who had been converted to Christianity, some of whom were being tempted to revert back to the old sacrificial system they were most familiar with. It is apparent by theological historians that the title, Hebrews” was not affixed to this letter until the end of the second century, and that has more to do with the contents rather than the recipients. There is nothing in the letter that would not be of value to gentile Christians, even as late in history as our own era, despite the focus on the Levitical priesthood and Mosaic Law. We need to know these things too since they prepare us to understand Jesus’ ministry.

However, if we assume that the majority opinion is correct, and it was written to Jewish Christian primarily, then where were these people located? Guesses include: Jerusalem, Palestine, Alexandria, Rome, Samaria, Antioch, Corinth, Cypress, Ephesus, Bithynia or Pontus.

There may be a clue within Hebrews 13:24, but it is a bit ambiguous. It says, *“Greet all your elders and all the saints. Those who come from Italy send you greetings.”* This could mean that the letter was written and sent from Italy ( Rome ), and those who are with the writer in Italy send their greetings.<sup>viii</sup> That is a possible way to interpret this. Thomas Schreiner weighs in here with a more plausible interpretation:

“But it seems more probable that he wrote to those in Italy ( cf. Acts 18:2 ), i.e., to Rome itself, so that those absent from Italy sent their greetings back to Rome. If this is the case, then Hebrews was written to Jewish Christians in Rome. A Roman destination also fits with I Clement, for Clement wrote from Rome and knew the contents of Hebrews. His knowledge of Hebrews makes sense if the letter was directed to Rome. In addition, if we accept the nearly universal view that Paul didn’t write Hebrews, it is suggestive that the West didn’t accept Pauline authorship as early as the East did. If Hebrews was written to the Romans, they would have a more accurate historical memory regarding the author of the letter.”<sup>ix</sup>

Another historian, Carl Mosser, makes a strong case that the recipients were actually in Jerusalem. Much of his argumentation does seem to fit the facts, but the slightly stronger argument is for Rome as the destination of the letter.

Hebrews 10:32-34 talks about the readers having experienced persecution in earlier times but 12:4 seems to indicate they had not yet begun to suffer martyrdom, so if the letter went to Rome, it was prior to Nero’s persecution of Christians, so the letter may have been preparatory for the recipients for whom persecution was about to worsen.<sup>x</sup> We cannot be 100% certain.

This would fit the historical facts though. Nero's wave of persecution included the martyrdoms of both Peter and Paul, and mentions of a continuing priesthood and sacrifices within Hebrews give no hint of destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 70 AD; and this would surely have altered at least the tense of those passages ( ie. Heb. 9:25-10:3, etc. ) if not providing outright mention if the Temple were already gone.

## Purpose of the Letter

Hebrews has a distinctive style and message. The theology of it is clearly orthodox and fits the NT, especially Pauline theology. But it is laid out differently from every other NT book. Amidst the covenantal, Levitical, angelic, Melchizedekian language, the letter is eminently practical.

The practicality and purpose become evident as a result of the warning passages found in Hebrews. There are five; Heb. 2:1-4; 3:12-4:13; 5:11-6:12; 10:26-39 & 12:25-29. Although the warnings are diverse, they essentially make the same point. The basic point of all of them is that believers are to take steps so as not to fall away – by heeding the warnings as well as seeing the superiority of Jesus Christ. Schreiner again makes sense, when he says;

“It is imperative to understand that the warnings, with all their diversity, essentially make the same point. In other words, the warnings should be read synoptically. They mutually cast light on one another. Hence the purpose of the letter becomes clear, for the warnings urge readers not to fall away. They must not turn away from Jesus and the new covenant and revert to the Mosaic law and the old covenant. The same message could be formulated positively. The readers are called on to persevere, to hold on, and to keep believing until the end. If they fall away, the author insists, they will face destruction and damnation.”<sup>xi</sup>

Furthermore, he adds,

“The author's point is that since the work of Christ is so great, it would be folly to turn away from Him. The main point in the theology of the letter ( 8:1 ), the, provides a foundation for the central purpose of the letter: don't fall away.”<sup>xii</sup>

But, of course, this begs the question: “Why were the readers tempted to fall away in the first place?” There could be a number of reasons, all of them alluded to by clues in the letter's structure & topics within the text.

- They were being persecuted because of their faith in Christ ( 10:32-34 )
- This could account for the moral laziness and temptation to renounce Christ ( 5:11-6:12 )
- Judaism was a legal religion in the Roman empire by that point in history ( it was not in the early 50's ), so they may have felt safer in that religion.
- Forgiveness seemed more concrete as a result of the inherent symbolism of Judaism.
- Perhaps they had lost their assurance of the salvation that Jesus' blood provided.<sup>xiii</sup>

The letter answers all these points and more to show there is boldness to enter God's presence only through Jesus' death on the cross and His resurrection.

## Connection to the Old Testament

"The place of Hebrews in the canon and in the NT is significant. It comes after the Gospels and the book of Acts. Having given a brief survey of the Bible's story line, we are not surprised that Hebrews picks up central themes from that story line. First, God's promises have been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. He is the Son of God, the Messiah, and the Melchizedekian high priest. The new covenant promised in the OT has been realized in him. Believers, therefore, are forgiven of their sins through the atoning work of Jesus Christ. Second, the fulfillment in Christ has an already-but-not-yet character. The new age has been inaugurated but not consummated. So the new covenant has indeed come, but believers are not yet perfectly free from sin. They are forgiven of their sins through Christ's sacrifice, but they still struggle with feelings of guilt. The age to come has arrived through Christ's resurrection, and yet believers still await the coming of the heavenly city. Third, the OT is typological so that the institutions, events and persons in the OT forecast what is to come. The OT sacrificial system points forward to the final and definitive atonement accomplished in Jesus Christ's sacrifice. The Davidic king and Israel as God's son point ahead to Jesus as the Messiah, the unique Son of God who fulfilled what Adam was called to do in paradise. Fourth, the earthly reflects the heavenly. The tabernacle and its furnishings on earth point to a heavenly tabernacle above, to the presence of God. The OT should be read eschatologically, typologically, and spatially."<sup>xiv</sup>

This becomes one of the most important themes of Hebrews. The OT is brought to light in the NT, and the purpose of the Levitical aspects of the OT are thereby also revealed in Hebrews. If Christ is the final sacrifice – the once-for-all sacrifice – then you cannot depend on Old Covenant truths to save you ( see Heb. 10:29-31 ). If you try it, you deny Christ's unique and finished sacrifice. You deny His reason for coming at all, and blatantly reject His offer of saving grace. The warning passages in Hebrews are so strongly worded because the readers were really tempted to deny Christ and all he accomplished.<sup>xv</sup>

The Law and sacrifices of the OT are 'shadows' pointing to a greater reality ( Heb. 10:1; cf. Gal. 3:24 ). That is why the author informs us that the blood of bulls and goats cannot atone for sin – so that we'll see that they point us to Christ's death, to His blood shed as our substitute. We will see many threads of thought which bring Christ's substitutionary atonement into sharp contrast with many OT pictures of sacrifice and offerings, and a completed priestly work vs one that went on and on year after year, and never fully resolved the sin problem, and never could. Let's begin then, by examining the actual text itself, as next time, we will look at Heb. 1:1-4.

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<sup>i</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, Commentary on Hebrews, Biblical Theology for Christian Proclamation, Holman Reference, 2015; B & H Publishers, Nashville, TN, p. 3 – most of the above information

<sup>ii</sup> David Allen, Lukian Authorship of Hebrews, 2010, B & H, 2010 / Kindle

<sup>iii</sup> David Alan Black, The Authorship of Hebrews – The Case for Paul; Energion, 2013

<sup>iv</sup> A.W. Pink, An Exposition of Hebrews - Vol. 1; Baker, 1963, p. 18

<sup>v</sup> John Phillips, Exploring Hebrews, Moody Press, 1977, Chicago, p. 33

<sup>vi</sup> John MacArthur, MacArthur New Testament Commentary, Hebrews, Moody Press, Chicago, 1983, p. x

<sup>vii</sup> Schreiner, p. 5

<sup>viii</sup> IBID, p. 8

<sup>ix</sup> IBID, p. 8-9

<sup>x</sup> Nero Caesar ( Roman Emperor from 54-68 AD ). Persecution began in earnest from 64-66 AD, and the Jewish revolt of 67-70 was put down by a Roman army filled with mercenaries, and the Temple was destroyed along with much of Jerusalem.

<sup>xi</sup> IBID, p. 14

<sup>xii</sup> IBID, p. 14

<sup>xiii</sup> IBID, p. 14-15

<sup>xiv</sup> IBID, p.28

<sup>xv</sup> IBID, p. 28