

Hebrews

Introduction

God's Grace in Hebrews

Hebrews presents God's grace by its detailed discussion of the person and work of Jesus Christ, who is the divine-human Prophet, Priest and King, with over 20 titles being used to describe his attributes and accomplishments. God made his supreme and final revelation to human beings through Jesus, who is far above the prophets of the OT and above angels. He suffered, died and arose for all people and won salvation for believers. We have a new covenant with God through our great High Priest, for he offered himself as the one final sacrifice, far superior to the animal sacrifices in the OT. (CSB)

Faith is confident reliance on the word of God's grace and certainty about future unseen realities, as numerous examples in the OT testify. These great heroes of faith are watching us, which is an incentive to us to persevere, rejoicing in the salvation offered by Jesus Christ through the grace of God. (CSB)

Luther on Hebrews

"... a marvelously fine epistle. It discusses Christ's priesthood masterfully and profoundly on the basis of the Scriptures and extensively interprets the Old Testament in a fine way. Thus it is plain that this is the work of an able and learned man; as a disciple of the apostles he had learned much from them and was greatly experienced in faith and practiced in the Scriptures (CSB)

"Who wrote it is not known, and will probably not be known for a while; it makes no difference ... He discloses a firm grasp of the reading of the Scriptures and of the proper way of dealing with them" (*LW* 35:395). (CSB)

Author

The writer of this letter does not identify himself, but he was obviously well known to the original recipients. Though for some 1,200 years (from c. A.D. 400 to 1600) the book was commonly called "The Epistle of Paul to the Hebrews," there was no agreement in the earliest centuries regarding its authorship. Since the Reformation it has been widely recognized that Paul could not have been the writer. There is no disharmony between the teaching of Hebrews and that of Paul's letters, but the specific emphases and writing styles are markedly different. Contrary to Paul's usual practice, the author of Hebrews nowhere identifies himself in the letter—except to indicate that he was a man (see note on 11:32). Moreover, the statement "This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him" (2:3), indicates that the author had neither been with Jesus during his earthly ministry nor received special revelation directly from the risen Lord, as had Paul (Gal 1:11–12). (CSB)

The earliest suggestion of authorship is found in Tertullian's *De Pudicitia*, 20 (c. 200), in which he quotes from "an epistle to the Hebrews under the name of Barnabas." From the letter itself it is clear that the writer must have had authority in the apostolic church and was an intellectual Hebrew Christian well versed in the OT. Barnabas meets these requirements. He was a Jew of the priestly tribe of Levi (Ac 4:36) who became a close friend of Paul after the latter's conversion. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the church at Antioch commissioned Barnabas and Paul for the work of evangelism and sent them off on the first missionary journey (Ac 13:1–4). The author, furthermore, calls his document "my word of exhortation" (13:22) and Barnabas means "son of encouragement/exhortation" (Ac 4:36)—the Greek word is the same in each instance. (CSB)

The other leading candidate for authorship is Apollos, whose name was suggested by Martin Luther and who is favored by many scholars today. Apollos, an Alexandrian by birth, was also a Jewish Christian with notable intellectual and oratorical abilities. Luke tells us that "he was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures" (Ac 18:24). We also know that Apollos was associated with Paul in the early years of the church in Corinth (1Co 1:12; 3:4–6, 22). (CSB)

Date

Hebrews must have been written before the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in A.D. 70 because: (1) had it been written after this date, the author surely would have mentioned the temple's destruction and the end of the Jewish sacrificial system; and (2) the author consistently uses the Greek present tense when speaking of the temple and the priestly activities connected with it (see 5:1–3; 7:23, 27; 8:3–5; 9:6–9, 13, 25; 10:1, 3–4, 8, 11; 13:10–11). (CSB)

Recipients

The letter was addressed primarily to Jewish converts who were familiar with the OT and who were being tempted to revert to Judaism or to Judaize the gospel (cf. Gal 2:14). Some have suggested that these professing Jewish Christians were thinking of merging with a Jewish sect, such as the one at Qumran near the Dead Sea. It has also been suggested that the recipients were from the "large number of priests who became obedient to the faith" (Ac 6:7). (CSB)

A good supposition is that the addressees were Jewish Christian assemblies at Rome—some of the household churches (Ro 16:5, 14, 15), for the following reasons: 1. Hebrews was known to the early church fathers at Rome (Clement and Hermas); 2. "Those from Italy send you their greetings" (13:24) seems to imply that some Christians from Italy (or Rome) are with the author and are sending greetings to their friends at home. Possibly Nero's fury fell on some Christians, but martyrdom had not yet reached the Jewish Christians (12:4) who were minimizing their Christian characteristics and emphasizing their Jewish background—to conceal their Christian faith under the guise

of Judaism. Such compromise would cause spiritual dullness and the danger of a relapse into Judaism. (CSB)

Theme

The theme of Hebrews is the absolute supremacy and sufficiency of Jesus Christ as revealer and as mediator of God's grace. The prologue (1:1–4) presents Christ as God's full and final revelation, far surpassing the limited preliminary revelation given in the OT. The prophecies and promises of the OT are fulfilled in the "new covenant" (or "new testament"), of which Christ is the mediator. From the OT itself, Christ is shown to be superior to the ancient prophets, to angels, to Moses (the mediator of the former covenant) and to Aaron and the priestly succession descended from him. Hebrews could be called "the book of better things" since the two Greek words for "better" and "superior" occur 15 times in the letter. (CSB)

Practical applications of this theme are given throughout the book. The readers are told that there can be no turning back to or continuation in the old Jewish system, which has been superseded by the unique priesthood of Christ. God's people now must look only to him, whose atoning death, resurrection and ascension have opened the way into the true, heavenly sanctuary of God's presence. Resisting temptations to give up the struggle, believers must persevere in the spiritual contest to which they have committed themselves. Otherwise they may meet with judgment as did the rebellious generation of Israelites in the desert. (CSB)

Historical and Cultural Setting

Where these Jewish Christians lived cannot be definitely made out. Italy is the most likely place, and within Italy, Rome. These readers have their own assembly (10:25) but are also connected with a larger group, as the words "greet all your leaders and all the saints" (13:24). (The Lutheran Bible Companion # 2)

These Christians had in the past given evidence of their faith and love (Heb. 6:10). They had stoutly endured persecution and had courageously aided others under persecution (10:32-34). Their believing courage had not failed them in times of crisis, but it was failing them in a long-drawn, unending struggle with sin (12:4). They were growing dispirited and slack (12:12); the continuous pressure of public contempt, particularly the contempt of their fellow Jews (13:13), had revived in them the old temptation to be offended at the weakness of the Christ they believed in, at His shameful death, and at the fact that the Christ did not fulfill their Judaic expectation and "remain forever" on earth (cf. John 12:34) but was removed for sight in the heavens. They had ceased to progress in their faith (Heb. 5"11-14) and were neglecting the public assembly of the church, which could strengthen them in their faith (10:25). Some had perhaps already apostatized (6:4-8); all were in danger of falling away (3:12) and reverting to the old faith (13:9-14). Judaism – with its fixed and venerable institutions, its visible and splendid center in the Jerusalem temple and its worship, its security and

exemption from persecution as an approved religion under Roman law – must have had for them an almost overwhelming fascination. (The Lutheran Bible Companion # 2)

Author

The letter does not name its author, and there is no consistent tradition in the Early Church concerning the authorship. The fact that the author counts himself and his readers among those who received the word of salvation at second hand from those who had heard the Lord is conclusive evidence that the author is not Paul (Heb. 2:3), for Paul appeals repeatedly to the fact that he has seen the Lord and has received the Gospel directly from Him (1 Cor. 9:1; 1 Cor. 15:8; Gal. 1:11-12). The characteristics of the letter itself further limit the possibilities, indicating that the author was in probability a Greek-speaking Christian, thoroughly at home in the OT in its Greek translation, and intimately acquainted with the whole worship and cultus of the Jews, a man capable, moreover, of the most finished and literary Greek in the NT. Barnabas, the Levite from Cyprus (Acts 4:36) and companion of Paul, would be a likely candidate for authorship. Apollos, whom Luther suggested as the possible author, is even more likely. He was associated with Paul, though not in any sense a “disciple” of Paul, and Luke describes him as a Jew, a native of that great center of learning and rhetoric (Alexandria), an eloquent man, well versed in the Scriptures, and “fervent in spirit” (18:24-25), all characteristics that we find reflected in the Letter to the Hebrews. (The Lutheran Bible Companion # 2)

Date of Composition

Since Clement of Rome quotes Hebrews in his letter to the Corinthians of AD 96, the letter must be earlier than that date. There is no evidence that enables us to determine exactly how much earlier the letter was written. Timothy is still alive at the time of writing (Heb. 13:23), but since he was a young man when Paul first took him as his companion in AD 49 (Acts 16:1-3), he may have lived to the end of the first century or beyond. They have endured one persecution (probably the Neronian persecution; AD 54-68) and are apparently facing another (10:36), All this points to the latter half of the first century. The argument from silence is strong in this case, and a dating before AD 70, probably shortly before, seems very probable. (The Lutheran Bible Companion # 2)

Purpose/Recipients

The purpose of Hebrews is practical, like that of every book of the NT. Its aim is to strengthen faith and hope, to inculcate stout patience and a joyous and resolute holding fast to the Christian confession. The message that provides the basis for the exhortation and the impetus and power for the fulfillment of the exhortation has three primary characteristics: (1) it is founded on the OT; (2) it is centered in Christ; and (3) it is marked by an intense consciousness of the fact that all days since the coming of the Christ are last days. (The Lutheran Bible Companion # 2)

Literary Features – Genre

The letter to the Hebrews is not so personal as a letter of Paul's. It is more on the order of a sermon (cf. 13:22, "my word of exhortation"), and it is more literary, with its high stylistic finish and its strictly unified theme. Still, it is not merely an essay in letter form, but a genuine letter. It grows out of a personal relationship between the author and his readers. The author has lived among the people whom he is now addressing, and though he is at the time writing separated from them, he hopes to be restored to them soon (13:18-19, 23). The content of the letter indicates that these readers were Jewish Christians, so that the title given by the men of the second century is fitting. (The Lutheran Bible Companion # 2)

The author points his readers to Jesus and urges them to look to Jesus, "The founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God" (12:2). The whole long and detailed exposition of the high priesthood of Christ is anything but a merely informative theological treatise. It is wholly pastoral and practical in its aim and intent. The author is a leader like the leaders whom he describes in his letter (Heb. 13:17); he is keeping watch not over the theology of his people, but over their soul, as one who will have to give an account of his leadership. (The Lutheran Bible Companion # 2)

Literary Features – Place of the OT

The message is, first founded on the OT. It is to a larger extent an interpretation and exposition of OT Scriptures. It has been likened to a Christian sermon or a series of sermons on selected Psalms (Ps. 2, 8, 95, 110). The letter therefore contains high testimony to the inspiration and authority of the OT. In the first verse, the whole OT is designated as the very voice of God speaking to mankind, and throughout the letter, words that men of God spoke of old are presented as spoken by God Himself (e.g., Heb. 1:5, 6, 13; 5:5) or by Christ (e.g., 2:11-13; 10:5-7) or by the Holy Spirit (3:7-11; 10:15-17). (The Lutheran Bible Companion # 2)

Literary Features – Typology

The author's characteristic use of the OT is that which has been termed the typological use; that is, he sees in the history and the institutions of the old covenant events, persons, and actions which are typical, foreshadowings and prefigurings of that which was to become full reality in the new covenant. (The Lutheran Bible Companion # 2)

Literary Features – Christ, the Son of God

The message is, secondly, centered in Christ. Christ, the Son of God, dominates the whole, and Christ colors every part of the whole. He stands at the beginning of history as the Son through whom God created the world; He stands at the end of all history as the divinely appointed "heir of all things" (1:2). He dominates all history and rules the

whole world, “upholding the universe by the word of His power” (1:3). He is God’s ultimate and definite word to mankind (1:2), and His high priestly ministry is God’s ultimate deed for mankind – a whole, assured, eternal deliverance from sin. No letter of the NT is so full of the humanity of Jesus as the Letter to the Hebrews. (The Lutheran Bible Companion # 2)

Literary Features – The Last Days

The message is, third, marked by the consciousness that the days since God spoke in His Son are “these last days” (1:2). This “last days” character of Jesus’ work (its eschatological character) gives it a final, once-for-all character and makes the decision of faith one of terrible urgency; eternal issues are being decided now, in faith or unbelief. Seen in this light, the sternness of the warnings in 6:4-8 and 10:26-31, warnings that at first glance seem to preclude the possibility of a second repentance, is not strange. God has spoken His last word, and the time is short; people must not be left under the delusion that they can coolly and deliberately sin and then repent in order to sin again. (The Lutheran Bible Companion # 2)

The Author

He seems to have moved in the circle of Paul’s friends and co-workers as his words about “brother Timothy” in 13:23 indicate. The uncertainty about the author does not diminish our certainty about the book. In every part the authorship of the Holy Spirit is apparent and to him goes the appreciation for this great book. From his inspiration of the unnamed author has come a book with a vital message for every age. Beautifully and skillfully the book of Hebrews focuses on Jesus Christ as the perfect Savior from sin and the total answer for every need. (PBC)

Readers

Who of us doesn’t need the stirring call to remain moored to the Christian truth, to maintain steady confidence in Christ, and to move forward in Christian maturity. (PBC)

The Date

A clue is the absence of any reference in the letter to the fall of Jerusalem. This famous city of the Jews with its beloved temple fell to the Roman legions in AD 70. The ruin of the temple and all that went with it would have been a convincing proof for the author’s claim that Christ and his work had rendered the OT sacrificial system obsolete. The lack of reference to Jerusalem’s fall causes some to think that the book was written shortly before AD 70. (PBC)

The Purpose

In all the NT no epistle comes more quickly to the point. Without introduction or greeting the author launches into his subject. It's as if he just could not wait to set forth the glorious superiority of Jesus Christ. (PBC)

It was written to urge people not to abandon their faith in Christ. It's as if he were telling them, "Look what a supreme treasure you have in Christ and Christianity" and then asking them, "Now what you are going to do with this treasure?" (PBC)

Christianity had been outlawed when Nero began his religious persecution, while Judaism remained legal and under state protection. The pressure to revert to the safety of Judaism was very real and grew even more so as the persecution heated up. (PBC)

Some had already fallen away; others were in danger of doing so, but the author urged, "Don't." And then he told them why not, in a beautiful fashion and with intense detail he showed the supremacy of Christianity. With broad and beautiful strokes he painted the sweeping design of the OT, showing how its fulfillment was found in the person and work of Christ. Again and again he used the key word "better" as he portrayed Christianity as the one true religion, the perfect and final revelation of God to man. (PBC)

Christians are Pilgrims

"I'm but a stranger here; heaven is my home" – so we sing in a popular hymn. When we sing the words of this hymn, we are saying that we don't belong to this earth, that we are just passing through on our way to another destination – heaven – where our permanent home is located. We Christians know we are pilgrims on this earth – people who are temporary residents while passing through. (LL)

Perhaps you have traveled, or been a temporary resident, in a foreign country. You may have been advised, if only by your own reading and personal preparation for your visit, of precautions one should take while in that country. Perhaps dietary cautions were in order. Or perhaps you needed to be advised of certain laws in that country. Or you may have needed to be advised of rules governing travel. Or you may have been advised about customs or the personal sensibilities of the people among whom you would be for a time. Such advisories are helpful and may even be crucial for a safe and successful visit. (LL)

Hebrews is a letter written to advise and encourage Christians, who know they are "aliens and strangers on earth" on their way to a better country – a heavenly one" (Heb. 11:13,16). (LL)

Hebrews is a Word of Encouragement

At an unidentified time and place in the first century A.D, a particular group of Christian pilgrims needed this travel advisory; in fact, they were in serious danger. They were in danger of losing the true faith. So God put it into the heart and mind of a Christian teacher to send them a “word of exhortation” (Heb. 13:22). (LL)

Who was this teacher? Some have suggested Paul, but this is not likely for a number of reasons we cannot discuss now. Perhaps it was Apollos or Barnabas or another of Paul’s associates. It was written either from Rome or to Rome (Heb. 13:24). We do not know for sure. The fact is, the name of the author and identity of those first readers have been long forgotten. But God’s inspired words in the epistle to the Hebrews have encouraged pilgrims for centuries ever since. (LL)

The Message and Plan of Hebrews – Boiled Down

Some years ago a German writer named Wolfgang Nauck laid out the basic message and structure of Hebrews in a way that is both convincing and easy to grasp. He noted that the document contains paragraphs that teach (for example, 1:1-4; 2:14-18) and paragraphs that command or encourage (for example 2:1-4; 3:1;4:14-16). Nauck simply suggested that we focus on the commands or encouragements in order to discover the outline. The doctrinal sections support the commands or exhortations. (LL)

The author wrote to a specific audience. He wanted them to do certain things. And he told them why they should do it, always backing up his reasons with passages from the OT Scriptures. Approaching Hebrews in this way, we find three simple and memorable commands in Hebrews: *Listen; draw near; endure*. Listen to the Word of God revealed through the Son, Jesus (1:1-4:13). Draw near to God through the High Priest Jesus (4:14-10:22). Endure through faith, which looks up to Jesus (10:23-13:35). (LL)