THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS

INTRODUCTION

> *Hebrews 1:1-4 (KJV) God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, 2 Hath in these last days spoken unto us by [his] Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds; 3 Who being the brightness of [his] glory, and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high; 4 Being made so much better than the angels, as he hath by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they.*

It wasn't until after 100 AD that titles of the letters were added. This epistle, in the Greek is, "To the Hebrews." However, it is important to point out that the writer does not identify the recipients as Hebrew or Gentile. But, this letter is filled with inference to Hebrew history and its religious practices. Therefore, since the first century, the traditional title of "The Epistle to the Hebrews" has been maintained.

The introduction to Hebrews from the "Believers Bible Commentary" defines the uniqueness of the epistle.

> The Epistle to the Hebrews is unique in the NT on many counts. While it does not start as a letter, it does so end, and is clearly addressed either to or from Italy (13:24), to a specific group, probably Hebrew Christians. It has been suggested that it was originally addressed to a small house church and therefore had no link with a large and famous congregation to keep alive the tradition of its origin and destination. The style is the most literary in the NT It is poetic, and full of quotations from the Septuagint. It has a large vocabulary and uses the Greek language very precisely in verb tense and other details.
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> Though very *Jewish* in one sense (it has been compared to Leviticus), the warnings against drifting from the reality of Christ's death to mere religious ritual are always needed in *Christendom*. Hence the book's great importance.[1]

Dr. David L. Allen was asked to write a commentary on the book of Hebrews, for the New American Commentary by B & H Publishing Group.[2] In his introduction to the book, Allen quotes Attridge:

> The opening paragraph of Hebrews may be the stylistic apex of the entire Greek New Testament. With the possible exception of the prologue to Luke's Gospel, nothing quite like the lofty rhetorical and literary expression of Heb 1:1–4 occurs elsewhere in the New Testament.[3]

A. C. Thiselton writes:

> The intricate structural organization of the clauses, phrases, and words that constitute the single four-verse sentence reveals the author's literary skill. The structural weight of the entire 72 words in Greek rests upon a single finite verb *elalēsen* and its subject *ho theos*: "God … has spoken." The author's use of rhetorical techniques such as alliteration, meter, rhythm,

[1] William MacDonald, *Believer's Bible Commentary: Old and New Testaments*, ed. Arthur Farstad (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995), 2155.

[2] David L. Allen, *Hebrews, The New American Commentary* (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2010), 95.

[3] W. H. Attridge stated, "The rhetorical artistry of this exordium surpasses that of any other portion of the New Testament" (*The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Her [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989], 36).

> phonetic and semantic parallelism, syntactical/semantic repetition, and chiasm are all evidenced in this sentence.
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> Thiselton claims that these verses "provide one of the most arresting beginnings possible, combining elegance, alliteration, rhythm, rhetorical artistry, and unstoppable force with probably the most sophisticated and stylish Greek in the entire New Testament."[4]
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> The epistle to the Hebrews is a tribute to the incomparable Son of God and an encouragement to the author's persecuted fellow believers. The author feared that his Christian readers were wavering in their endurance. The writer had a twofold approach. (1) He exalted Jesus Christ, who is addressed as both "God" and "the Son of Man," and is thus the only one who can serve as mediator between God and humanity. (2) He exhorted his fellow Christians to "go on to maturity" and live "by faith."[5]

No other book of the New Testament so powerfully portrays Jesus' preeminence and superiority. I have so enjoyed being reminded of this as I read through Hebrews. The writer, from a Jewish point of view, describes Jesus to the Jewish mind in such a way, that the scriptures speak for themselves… "Jesus is greater!" The author refers to the heroes of the Jewish heritage and faith, by laying them along the side of the incomparable Jesus. We read of Jesus' sacrifice, covenant, and ministry which are far, far greater than anything the world has ever seen.

In Hebrews, the author explains how "Jesus is greater than…"

- Jesus is greater than the prophets (He 1:1-3)
- Jesus is greater than the angels (He 1:4, 6, 8)
- Jesus is greater than the Prophet and Lawgiver Moses (He 3:3-6
- Jesus is greater than the sabbath (He 4:1-16; 5:1-10)
- Jesus is greater than Joshua (He 4:8-9)
- Jesus is greater than the priesthood of Aaron (He 7:4-28; 8:1-6, 9-11)
- Jesus is greater than the Old Covenant as He is the mediator of a better covenant (He 8:6-13; 9:1-28)
- Jesus is greater than the sacrificial system (He 9:11-14, 23, 28; 10:1-12)

The author of Hebrews encourages his readers to:

- Hold fast our confession of faith and hope (He 4:14;10:23).
- Stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, encouraging one another (He 10:24-25).

AUTHOR

The King James Version of the Bible assumes Pauline authorship. Pantaenus, Origen, Jerome, Augustine, and Eusebius attribute Hebrews to the apostle Paul, even though Paul's usual introduction is missing, and he didn't name himself as the author. Eusebius furthers his argument by agreeing that Paul wrote

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[4] A. C. Thiselton, "Communicative Action and Promise in Interdisciplinary, Biblical, and Theological Hermeneutics," in *The Promise of Hermeneutics*, ed. R. Lundin, et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 146. Elsewhere he noted, "Much of the poverty of some preaching today derives from exclusive attention either to 'teaching,' 'exhortation,' or personal anecdote, in contrast to the richly multilayered, multilevel model of preaching, teaching, and praise seen here" ("Hebrews," in *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*, ed. J. D. G. Dunn and J. W. Rogerson [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003], 1454).

[5] Malcolm B. Yarnell III, *"Hebrews,"* in *CSB Study Bible: Notes*, ed. Edwin A. Blum and Trevin Wax (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017), 1945.

Hebrews in Hebrew and that Luke translated it into Greek for the Hellenistic audiences. That would account for the stylistic differences. So why wouldn't Paul attach his name to the epistle? Perhaps, since Paul was writing to a Jewish audience, he felt that attaching his name would prejudice them from reading the epistle.

There are four main arguments pertaining to the author of the epistle.

- Paul (compare He 1:3 & Col 1:15-17; He 2:4 & 1 Cor 12:11; He 2:14 & Phil 2:7-8; He 8:6 & 2 Cor 3:6; He 10:14 & Rom 5:9; 12:1)
- Barnabas – Tertullian, Gregory of Elvira, Filaster, Wescott
- Apollos – Martine Luther (16th century)
- Luke – Brotius (17th century)

DATE

It is fairly certain that Hebrews was written before the destruction of Jerusalem and the second Temple in 70 AD by the Roman army under the command of Titus, after a four year campaign. Timothy was still alive (Heb 13:23). We can therefore place the date of this writing during the reign of Emperor Nero, which was 64-68 AD.

AUDIENCE

Hebrew Christians. The specific location of the recipients of this letter is never stated. The term "Hebrews" is a designation of the descendants of the patriarchs; Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (also called Israel). Therefore, this epistle is written to the Jewish Christians. The epistle also focuses on Old Testament use of the Tabernacle, the priesthood, the sacrificial system, Moses, Melchizedek, and Abraham.

Recent thought places the audience to a house church in Rome.

> The statement in 13:24, "Those from Italy send you their greetings," sounds as if Italians away from their home were returning greetings to friends in Rome. If this is true, Rome is the probable destination of the writing. A second fact favoring this view is that a knowledge of Hebrews first appears in Clement's First Epistle, which was written in Rome.[6]

THEME

The consistent theme is the exaltation of Jesus. Since this epistle is written to a Jewish audience, who were still looking for the arrival of the Messiah, it must ensure that the reader understands who Jesus truly was. Of all the books in the New Testament, this epistle "ties together" the Old and New Testament for the Jewish mind.

PURPOSE AND CONTENT

The writer was very familiar with the recipients of this letter.

- They were in danger of lapsing into sin (Heb 3:12-14)
- Immature (Heb 5:11-14)
- Generous (Heb 6:10)

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[6] Thomas D. Lea, "*The General Letters*," in *Holman Concise Bible Commentary*, ed. David S. Dockery (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998), 620.

- Leaning towards apostasy (Heb 6:4-9; 10:26-31)
- He was aware of their persecution (Heb 10:32-34; 12:2)
- He knew they were not meeting together enough (10:24-25)
- He planned on seeing them soon (Heb 13:19, 23)

The writer wanted them to return to their first love and Christian fellowship.

> Historically, the most common purpose advocated suggests the author is attempting to dissuade his Jewish Christian readers from a relapse into Judaism brought on by increasing persecution and a desire for the stability of the old faith.[7]

Evans and Ogilvie add.

> Our author wastes no time in launching into his purpose of nurturing the lives of his readers to mature discipleship. He devotes his entire first chapter to proclaiming and clarifying the doctrine of Jesus Christ, in particular His superiority to all other beings through His nature as Son-Messiah. These introductory phrases draw attention to both the message and Person of Christ by comparison to the prophets. God's message through His Son expresses its superior significance in the relationship of the Speaker to the Author of the message.[8]

KEY THOUGHT/CENTRAL MESSAGE

> *Hebrews 13:21 (KJV) Make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is wellpleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. 22 And I beseech you, brethren, suffer the word of exhortation: for I have written a letter unto you in few words.*

Persecution followed the increase of the spread of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The persecution was difficult for both Gentile and Jew; however, it was especially fierce and passionate for Jews who accepted Jesus as the Messiah, or even worse that Jesus was God. Jewish believers turned away from family, friends, and abandoned the practices and ordinances of Moses law. They were misunderstood and not tolerated in their faith.

If you were in this situation, what would you need to read and hear to be secure in your faith? God moved the author of Hebrews to explain the preeminence of Jesus. All things that you held in high concerning your past faith would be placed along side of the incomparable Christ. This is the key thought of Hebrews. No other book in the New Testament places Jesus as a have a high priest who understands and identifies with our weaknesses (He 2:17; 3:1; 4:14-15; 5:1, 5, 10; 6:20; 7:1, 26; 8:1, 3; 9:7, 11, 25; 10:21; 13:11), makes intercession before the Father on your behalf (He 7:25), and is the mediator of a new a better covenant (He 8:6-10, 13; 9:1, 4; 10:16, 29; 12:24; 13:20).

[7] David L. Allen, *Hebrews, The New American Commentary* (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2010), 79.

[8] Louis H. Evans Jr and Lloyd J. Ogilvie, Hebrews, vol. 33, The Preacher's Commentary Series (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Inc, 1985), 37.

OLD TESTAMENT CONNECTIONS

PARALLEL PASSAGES

Old Testament Quotes in Hebrews	Hebrews
• Ps 2:7	Heb 1:5
• 2 Sa 7:14; 1 Ch 17:13	Heb 1:5
• Dt 32:43; Ps 97:7	Heb 1:6
• Ps 104:4	Heb 1:7
• Ps 45:6–7	Heb 1:8–9
• Ps 102:25–27	Heb 1:10–12
• Ps 110:1	Heb 1:13
• Ps 8:5–7	Heb 2:6–8
• Ps 22:22	Heb 2:12
• 2 Sa 22:3; Is 8:17; 12:2	Heb 2:13
• Is 8:18	Heb 2:13
• Ps 95:7–11	Heb 3:7–11
• Ps 95:7–8	Heb 3:15
• Ps 95:11	Heb 4:3
• Ge 2:2	Heb 4:4
• Ps 95:11	Heb 4:5
• Ps 95:7–8	Heb 4:7
• Ps 2:7	Heb 5:5
• Ge 14:18–20; Ps 110:4	Heb 5:6
• Ge 22:17	Heb 6:14
• Ps 110:4	Heb 7:17
• Ps 110:4	Heb 7:21
• Ex 25:40	Heb 8:5
• Je 31:31–34	Heb 8:8–12
• Ex 24:8	Heb 9:20
• Ps 40:6–8	Heb 10:5–7
• Je 31:33–34	Heb 10:16–17
• Dt 32:35	Heb 10:30
• Dt 32:36	Heb 10:30
• Is 26:20; Hab 2:3–4	Heb 10:37–38
• Ge 5:21–24	Heb 11:5
• Ge 21:12	Heb 11:18
• Ge 47:31	Heb 11:21
• Pr 3:11–12;	Heb 12:6
• Ex 19:12	Heb 12:20
• Dt 9:19	Heb 12:21
• Hag 2:6	Heb 12:25
• Dt 31:6	Heb 13:5
• Ps 118:6	Heb 13:6

THE KEY VERSE/PASSAGE

Key Verse/s

Hebrews 1:3 (KJV) Who being the brightness of [his] glory, and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high;

Hebrews 2:3-4 (KJV) How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation; which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard [him]; 4 God also bearing [them] witness, both with signs and wonders, and with divers miracles, and gifts of the Holy Ghost, according to his own will?

Heb 3:1 (KJV) Wherefore, holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling, consider the Apostle and High Priest of our profession, Christ Jesus;

Hebrews 4:1 (KJV) Let us therefore fear, lest, a promise being left [us] of entering into his rest, any of you should seem to come short of it.

Hebrews 5:7-9 (KJV) Who in the days of his flesh, when he had offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto him that was able to save him from death, and was heard in that he feared; 8 Though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered; 9 And being made perfect, he became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him;

Hebrews 7:26-27 (KJV) For such an high priest became us, [who is] holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and made higher than the heavens; 27 Who needeth not daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifice, first for his own sins, and then for the people's: for this he did once, when he offered up himself.

Hebrews 8:13 (KJV) In that he saith, A new [covenant], he hath made the first old. Now that which decayeth and waxeth old [is] ready to vanish away.

Hebrews 10:11-12 (KJV) And every priest standeth daily ministering and offering oftentimes the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins: 12 But this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God;

Hebrews 11:1 (KJV) Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.

Heb 12:3 (KJV) For consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds.

Hebrews 13:9 (KJV) Be not carried about with divers and strange doctrines. For [it is] a good thing that the heart be established with grace; not with meats, which have not profited them that have been occupied therein.

Key Word/s & Phrases

- Jesus Heb 2:9; 3:1; 4:8, 14; 6:20; 7:22; 10:10, 19; 12:2, 24; 13:8, 12, 20-21
- Christ Heb 3:1, 6, 14; 5:5; 6:1; 9:11, 14, 24, 28; 10:10; 11:26; 13:8, 21
- God Heb 1:1, 6, 8-9; 2:4, 9, 13, 17; 3:4, 12; 4:4, 9-10, 12, 14; 5:1, 4, 10, 12; 6:1, 3, 5-7, 10, 13, 17-18; 7:1, 3, 19, 25; 8:5, 10; 9:6, 14, 20, 24; 10:7, 9, 12, 21, 29, 31, 36; 11:3-7, 10, 16, 19, 25, 40; 12:2, 7, 15, 22-23, 28-29; 13:4, 7, 15-16, 20

- Lord Heb 1:10; 2:3; 7:14, 21; 8:2, 8-11; 10:16, 30; 12:5-6, 14; 13:6, 20
- Faith Heb 4:2; 6:1, 12; 10:22-23, 38; 11:1, 3-9, 11, 13, 17, 20-24, 27-31, 33, 39; 12:2; 13:7
- Grace Heb 2:9; 4:16; 10:29; 12:15, 28; 13:9, 25
- Word Heb 1:3; 2:2; 4:2, 12; 5:13; 6:5; 7:28; 11:3; 12:19, 27; 13:7, 22
- Teach Heb 5:12; 8:11
- Righteousness Heb 1:8-9; 5:13; 7:2; 11:7, 33; 12:11
- Mercy Heb 4:16; 10:28
- Love Heb 6:10; 10:24; 13:1
- Savior
- Sound Heb 12:19
- Doctrine Heb 6:1-2
- Works Heb 1:10; 2:7; 3:9; 4:3-4, 10; 5:14; 6:1,5; 9:11, 14; 10:1, 24; 11:2, 12, 39; 13:9, 16, 18, 21
- High Priest Heb 1:3; 2:17; 3:1; 4:14-15; 5:1, 5-6, 10; 6:20; 7:1, 3, 11, 15, 17, 20-21, 26-28; 8:1, 3-4; 9:7, 11, 25; 10:11, 21; 13:11
- Mediator Heb 8:6; 9:15; 12:24
- Perfect Heb 2:10; 5:9; 7:19; 9:9, 11; 10:1; 11:40; 12:23; 13:21

OUTLINE

I. Christ Better Than Old Testament Economy, Chapters 1–10
(Doctrinal)
   A. Christ Is Superior to Prophets, Chapter 1:1–3
   B. Christ Is Superior to Angels, Chapters 1:4–2:18
      1. Deity of Christ, Chapter 1:4–14
      2. Humanity of Christ, Chapter 2:1–18
         1st Danger Signal: Peril of Drifting, Chapter 2:1–4
   C. Christ Is Superior to Moses, Chapters 3:1–4:2
      2nd Danger Signal: Peril of Doubting, Chapters 3:7–4:2
   D. Christ Is Superior to Joshua, Chapter 4:3–13
   E. Christ Is Superior to Levitical Priesthood, Chapters 4:14–7:28
      1. Our Great High Priest, Chapter 4:14–16
      2. Definition of a Priest, Chapter 5:1–10
         3rd Danger Signal: Peril of Dull Hearing, Chapter 5:11–14
         4th Danger Signal: Peril of Departing, Chapter 6:1–20
      3. Christ Our High Priest after Order of Melchizedek, Chapter 7:1–28
         a. Christ Is Perpetual Priest, Chapter 7:1–3
         b. Christ Is Perfect Priest, Chapter 7:4–22
         c. Christ in His Person Is Perpetual and Perfect Priest, Chapter 7:23–28
   F. Christ as Our High Priest Ministers in Superior Sanctuary by Better Covenant Built upon Better Promises, Chapters 8:1–10:39
      1. True Tabernacle, Chapter 8:1–5
      2. New Covenant, Better than the Old, Chapter 8:6–13
      3. New Sanctuary, Better than the Old, Chapter 9:1–10
      4. Superior Sacrifice, Chapters 9:11–10:18
      5. Encouragement, Chapter 10:19–25
         5th Danger Signal: Peril of Despising, Chapter 10:26–39
II. Christ Brings Better Benefits and Duties, Chapters 11–13
(Practical)

A. Faith, Chapter 11:1–40
B. Hope, Chapter 12:1–29
    1. The Christian Race, Chapter 12:1–2
    2. Believers Are Now in Contest and Conflict, Chapter 12:3–14
    6th Danger Signal: Peril of Denying, Chapter 12:15–29
C. Love, Chapter 13:1–25
    1. Secret Life of Believers, Chapter 13:1–6
    2. Social Life of Believers, Chapter 13:7–14
    3. Spiritual Life of Believers, Chapter 13:15–19
    4. Benediction, Chapter 13:20–25[9]

[9] J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible Commentary,* electronic ed., vol. 5 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 504.