

Introduction To The Book Of Hebrews

A thorough study of the book of Hebrews can be an intimidating task for some. The depth of the book causes some to wonder why we need to study such a book. However, those who feel this way need the book more than they realize.

If you need encouragement, you need the book of Hebrews. If you need Christ (who is better than prophets, angels, Moses, and Aaron), you need the book of Hebrews. If you need to be reminded to not give up, but keep pressing on to the end, you need the book of Hebrews. If you need to hear about the dangers of falling back, you need the book of Hebrews.

Though there is depth, the message is quite simple. It is designed to exhort (Heb. 13:22).

The Title

The English text. The English text has the title, "The Epistle to the Hebrews."

The Early Manuscripts. The early manuscripts bear the title "to Hebrews."¹ "But this much is certain, that the title was prefixed to our epistle at a very early date, and most likely before the close of the Apostolic age."² It was later enlarged to read "the Epistle to the Hebrews."³

The name "Hebrew." This term was first used in Genesis 14:13. Its use here (and rest of the Old Testament) emphasized a foreigner. "And hence the name Hebrew is commonly used whenever foreigners are introduced as the speakers; or when the Israelites are speaking of themselves to foreigners; or when they are in any way contrasted with foreigners."⁴ It was used in the Old Testament to denote all the descendants of Jacob. It came to denote those who spoke the Hebrew language. In the New Testament, "the name 'Hebrew' seems to have always some reference to the language, as well as the many other rights and privileges of the seed of Abraham."⁵

Thus, this was written for a Jewish audience.

1 Manuscripts Aleph, A, and B. See Daniel H. King, Sr., *The Book of Hebrews*, Truth Commentaries, 11.

2 Robert Milligan, *Vol. IX – Epistle to the Hebrews*, New Testament Commentary, 27.

3 King, *ibid*, 11.

4 Milligan, *ibid*, 27.

5 Milligan, *ibid*, 28.

The Author

This is perhaps the biggest question about the book since the author's name is not found in the book. Origen is reported to have said, "Who wrote the epistle, God only knows."⁶ However, it doesn't seem that the letter was completely anonymous to the recipients (Heb. 13:19).

Suggested authors. Some of those who have been suggested as possible authors of the book of Hebrews are: Paul, Clement of Rome, Apollos, Aquila, Barnabas, Luke, Mark, Silas, and Philip the evangelist. The traditional view is that it is the apostle Paul.

Evidence that Paul was the author. The following leads us to believe that Paul was probably the author of the book.

- 1. The early writers ("Church Fathers") attribute the book to Paul.** These writers include, Clement of Alexandria (ca 187), Origen (ca 185), Pantaenus (ca 185), Eusebius (ca 264-320), Tertullian (ca 190-200), and Jerome (ca 392).⁷ "Save for the occasional voice against it, Hebrews was generally taken as Pauline until the Reformation, when Erasmus vigorously fought for a change in this opinion."⁸
- 2. The fact that it was anonymous fits Paul's circumstance.** The author had some valid reason for withholding his name. The early writers mentioned above alleged that Paul withheld his name lest its appearance keep some Jewish brethren from reading it. The strong prejudice against Paul would well fit this situation.
- 3. The writer had close association with Timothy (Heb. 13:23).** While others could have such a close relationship, we know Paul did (cf. 1 Tim. 1:2; 2 Tim. 1:2; 2:1).
- 4. The writer had been in chains (Heb. 10:34; 13:18-19, 23).** Obviously, Paul had been in prison in Rome (Acts 28).
- 5. The writer was (or at least had been) in Italy (Heb. 13:24).** Paul was there in two imprisonments.
- 6. There are terms and phrases used in the book that are very similar to Paul's.**⁹

6 Gareth L. Reese, *Hebrews*, xxi. Reese argues that Origen was talking about who the amanuensis (one who writes what another dictates) was.

7 For more details see Milligan, *ibid.*, 6-12.

8 King, *ibid.*, 22.

9 This list is compiled from King, *ibid.*, 28-29 and David McClister, *A Commentary on Hebrews*, 8.

Subject	Hebrews	Paul's Writings/ Preaching
Milk and solid food	Heb. 5:13-14	1 Cor. 3:2
Quotes Hab. 2:4	Heb. 10:38	Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:11
Quotes Psa. 2:7	Heb. 1:5	Acts 13:33
Signs and wonders	Heb. 2:4	Rom. 15:19; 2 Cor. 12:12
World consist by Christ	Heb. 2:10	Rom. 11:36; Col. 1:16
Descendants of Abraham	Heb. 2:16	Gal. 3:29; Rom. 4:16
Word compared to sword	Heb. 4:12	Eph. 6:17
If God permits	Heb. 6:3	1 Cor. 16:7
Confidence by blood	Heb. 10:19	Rom 5:2; Eph. 2:18

7. The writer was not one of the twelve (Heb. 2:3). The statement, "...which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard Him" does not exclude an apostle. It just excludes the original twelve. That would obviously fit the apostle Paul.

Arguments that Paul was not the writer. Our limited space will not permit us to look at all the objections to Paul's authorship of Hebrews. However, we will consider three such contentions.

1. The style of Hebrews is different from the style of Paul's writings. Robert Milligan perceived this to be the strongest argument against a Pauline authorship.¹⁰ This is not completely true. We have already noticed above some phrases similar to Paul's others writings. We shall notice later in this introduction that the writer has five major sections where a warning or exhortation follows a doctrinal section. That is very much in the style of Paul. However, we do have to admit that Hebrews is different from other writings by the apostle. Yet, that doesn't mean that the author is different. Deuteronomy is different from Genesis. But they have the same writer. A different audience and different circumstance warrants a different style.

2. The author was dependent upon others to learn the revelation (Heb. 2:3); whereas Paul was independent in learning the revelation (Gal. 1:11-24). "The author's use of the second person plural 'us' in the passage may only be employed in order to more fully identify with the Jewish Christian audience to which he is directing his remarks."¹¹ The writer of Hebrews does the same in Hebrews 6:1 when he says those who have failed to grow need to go on to perfection. Surely, he was not including himself in the delinquent.

3. Paul was an apostle to the Gentiles, but this letter is to the Hebrews. Paul's work was not confined to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15). He preached to Jews and Gentiles (Acts 13).

Arthur Pink cited 2 Peter 3:15 (where Peter said Paul wrote some things hard to be understood) and concluded, "If the Epistle to the Hebrews be not *that* writing, where is it?"¹²

¹⁰ *ibid.*, 13.

¹¹ King, *ibid.*, 23.

¹² Arthur Pink, *Exposition of Hebrews*, 18.

The Recipients

*This is perhaps the second biggest question about the book of Hebrews. "On this question, the critics are still much divided."¹³ However, it is agreed that the letter was written to Jewish brethren, but *where* is the question.*

Various suggestions. Some think these Jewish Christians were in Italy (based upon Hebrews 13:24). Other suggestions include Greece, Galatia, Spain, and Egypt. The most common thought is that the letter was sent to Jews living in Palestine.

Evidence that this letter was intended for Jewish Christians in Palestine. The following evidence leads us to believe that the recipients lived in Palestine.

- 1. It harmonizes with the title "to Hebrews."** "...it follows that the Epistle was, as is generally supposed, addressed to the Jewish Christians in Palestine. For they were the only body of Christians in that age who spoke the Hebrew language (or rather the Aramaic, which was a corruption of the Hebrew)."¹⁴
- 2. Those addressed were familiar with the Mosaic economy.** The mention of the law, the priest, the tabernacle and the sacrifices is without explanation. Those in Palestine (particularly Jerusalem) would have been most familiar with all the rites and ceremonies of the Old Testament system.
- 3. The "Church Fathers" suggested Palestine as the destination.** "So far as they have expressed any opinion on the subject, it is to the effect, that the Epistle was addressed to the Jewish Believers in Palestine."¹⁵
- 4. There is no reference to the Jew-Gentile controversy that was prevalent outside of Palestine.**
- 5. The church must have been made up entirely of Jews.** There is no hint of a Gentile or Gentiles concerns in the epistle. This would fit well in Palestine.¹⁶
- 6. Those to whom the letter was written had learned the gospel from the immediate disciples of Christ (Heb. 2:3-4).**
- 7. The danger of a relapse into Judaism would have been greater in Palestine (cf. Heb. 6:6; 10:29).** The whole line of argumentation throughout the book shows the danger of returning to Judaism.
- 8. There was an immediate crisis looming (3:13; 10:25, 37; 12:27).** The destruction of Jerusalem would certainly make Palestine a candidate for consideration.

13 Milligan, *ibid.*, 26.

14 Milligan, *ibid.*, 28.

15 Milligan, *ibid.*, 28.

16 *ibid.*, 15.

More specifically, the church at Jerusalem seems to be indicated. If that be the case, this is not a general epistle as some have supposed. The following sections seem to fit the church at Jerusalem; or at least a particular congregation.

1. **Hebrews 10:32-24.** The conflict shortly after they became Christians would fit well with the situation at Jerusalem (Acts 2, 4, 5).
2. **Hebrews 13:12-14.** The references to the gate and the city would have greater meaning to those in Jerusalem.
3. **Hebrews 13:19, 23.** The fact that Paul plans to see them soon would indicate that he is writing to one congregation.
4. **Hebrews 12:4-8.** They had suffered persecution. Saints in Jerusalem had so suffered (Acts 4, 5).
5. **Hebrews 5:12-14.** They were not new converts. Some time has passed since their becoming Christians.
6. **Hebrews 13:19.** The recipients know the author.
7. **Hebrews 13:23.** The recipients know Timothy.
8. **Hebrews 13:7, 17.** Those to whom the letter was intended had elders.
9. **Hebrews 13:24.** Author Pink argues from this verse that the congregation was of considerable size.¹⁷

Our conclusion is that the letter was sent to Jewish Christians in Palestine, most likely the church at Jerusalem. "The fact that no church ever laid claim to this Epistle is something that is easily understandable on the ground that after Jerusalem was destroyed no church existed in that location."¹⁸

To be fair, there are objections to the Palestine (Jerusalem) destination of the letter that must be considered.¹⁹ We will not take the space to address those here. They are not convincing enough to rule out the Jerusalem church as the recipient.

The Place of Writing

The writer mentions that those of Italy send greetings (Heb. 13:24). This would indicate that he was in Italy at the time of the writing. Paul was in Rome for two imprisonments.

17 Pink, *ibid.*, 11.

18 King, *ibid.*, 16.

19 See King, *ibid.*, 16 and McClister, *ibid.*, 38-39.

The Date of Writing

The letter was written after 33 A.D. It has been some time since Pentecost (Heb. 5:12). When the writer looks back to former days when they were first obedient (Heb. 10:32-33), he reveals to us that it has been a number of years since Pentecost.

The letter was written before 70 A.D. when Jerusalem was destroyed. The temple was still standing (Heb. 7:8; 9:6-10; 13:10). The priests were still offering sacrifices (Heb. 8:4; 10:11-14). The destruction of Jerusalem was near (10:24-25, 37).

It is probable that Paul is at liberty (Heb. 13:23). He was released from his imprisonment in Rome in 63 A.D.

With that information, we conclude that the letter was written sometime between 63 A.D. and 66 A.D. The later part of that period (65-66 A. D.), would better fit the looming crisis (Heb. 10:24-25, 37; 12:27).

The Purpose and the Message

The purpose is to persuade the Hebrew brethren to persevere to the end (just as they had begun) and not fall back into Judaism. The writer calls his letter a "word of exhortation" (Heb. 13:22). He writes to encourage his readers to remain faithful to Christ.

The problem was severe persecution and discouragement. Pressure was on from Jewish leaders who used any tactic they could.

1. Persecution. They had endured persecution in the past, and now they face a circumstance where they need endurance (Heb. 10:32-36). They are dealing with what the writer calls "the chastening of the Lord" (Heb. 12:1-11). The chastening is persecution, for it is peculiar to the sons of God (v. 6).

The scribes and rulers exercised all their powers of logic, rhetoric, and sophistry, against the disciples of the despised Nazarene, as they were wont to call our Immanuel; and when the force of argument was unavailing, they had recourse to persecution. Some of them they killed; some, they put into prison; and others, they despoiled of their goods: - and all this they did with the view of putting a stop to the progress of Christianity, and inducing all to follow Moses their leader.²⁰

2. Discouraged. The treatment they received caused the Jewish Christians to be greatly discouraged. The author pictures them with hands hanging down and knees getting feeble (Heb. 12:12-13). "Hebrews presents us with a picture of Jewish Christians who were confused in their faith, weary of persecution and alienation, and were leaning toward quitting Christianity to find relief from their oppression. Hebrews was written to inform their faith more perfectly and to encourage and warn them not to quit following Christ."²¹

20 Milligan, *ibid.*, 32

21 McClister, *ibid.*, 31.

The argument is based upon the superiority of Christ. He is “so much better” (Heb. 1:4). He is better than prophets (1:1-3), angels (1:4 – 2:18), Moses (3:1-19), Joshua (4:1-13), and Aaron (5:14 – 7:18). He is so much better for he offers a better rest (3-4), a better priesthood (4-5; 7-8), a better sacrifice (7-8), and a better covenant (8-9).

There are five warning sections. Each warning section of the book follows a doctrinal section. The warning is based upon the doctrine.²²

1. Doctrine – Superior to prophets and angels (1:4-14), then a warning about giving heed to the things heard (2:1-4).
2. Doctrine – Superior to angels and Moses (2:5–3:6), then a warning about the hardening of the heart as Israel did (3:7–4:16).
3. Doctrine – Better High Priest (5:1-10), then a warning about not maturing (5:11–6:20).
4. Doctrine – Better covenant and sacrifice (7:1–10:18), then a warning exhorting steadfastness (10:19-39).
5. Doctrine – Examples of faith (11:1-40), then a warning to have the same faith (12:1-29).

The warnings of the book well adapt to us. This study of Hebrews will not be merely looking at the struggles of the Christians in the first century. Our problems and discouragements will plug into this book. “The Epistle is written to second generation Christians for whom the new religion had lost its freshness and wonder.”²³

Robert Milligan correctly said, “And hence it follows that while the world stands, this Epistle will be to the Church as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast. No other portion of the written record is better calculated to encourage all Christians to persevere in the Divine life, and to perfect holiness in the fear of God.”²⁴

Use of the Old Testament

If we are unfamiliar with the Old Testament, the book can be most frustrating. As noted earlier, it assumes the reader has a knowledge of the Mosaic system.

Hebrews quotes heavily from the Old Testament. “The epistle quotes the OT directly about 35 times, which is a high incidence compared to other NT writings (there are about 93 direct OT quotations for all of Paul’s letters together). The number of quotations in Hebrews accounts for over a tenth of all the OT quotations in the NT.”²⁵ Psalms is the most quoted. The books of Moses come a close second. Generally the quotations are longer than in other New Testament books.

The real value of the use of the Old Testament in Hebrews is that we see the Old as a type of the New. The tabernacle and priesthood as a shadow of the real (Heb. 8:5). The law was

22 This is not unlike the writings of Paul.

23 King, 46.

24 *ibid.*, 35.

25 McClister, *ibid.*, 44.

a shadow of better things to come (Heb. 10:1). Melchizedek was a type of Christ (Heb. 7:15). These we would not fully understand without the book of Hebrews.

The Old Testament quotations serve to prove inspiration. The Hebrew writer quotes from an Old Testament text and says, "He says" (Heb. 1:5-9; 10:6-8) which affirms that what the Old Testament writers said was from God. On one occasion, he attributes Psalm 95 to the Holy Spirit (Heb. 3:7).

Style

A high form of writing. "From a literary perspective, the book of Hebrews is the most carefully developed writing in the New Testament. As far as style is concerned, it also demonstrates the best Greek of any New Testament writing."²⁶

It is presented much like a sermon. It is, after all, a word of exhortation (Heb. 13:22). Similar language describes a sermon Paul preached (Acts 13:15).

A treatise, a sermon and a letter. The fact that it has no introductory greetings causes some to think that it is more of a sermon than a letter. One writer captured the style saying, "It is often said that Hebrews begins like a treatise, continues like a sermon, and concludes like a letter."²⁷

Outline

There is little to no agreement among students as to the structure of the book. Some follow the five warnings (or exhortations) that we noted above. Others follow the list of better things under Christ. Others even look for a larger picture. Part of the difficulty in outlining any book is that an outline requires some interpretation. Thus, outlines will vary greatly.

Some have contended that the book cannot be divided into two sections (as we have done in the outline below). They argue that the book cannot be divided into doctrinal and practical sections for the "doctrinal" section has some exhortation and the "practical" section has some doctrine. Arthur Pink commented on this point, "These have been set forth so simply by Dr. J. Brown we cannot do better than quote from him: 'The Epistle divides itself into two parts—the first, doctrinal; the second, practical—though the division is not so accurately (closely, A.W.P.) observed, that there are no duties enjoined or urged in the first part, and no doctrines stated in the second. The first is by far the larger division, reaching from the beginning of the Epistle down to the 18th verse of the 10th chapter. The second commences with the 19th verse of the 10th chapter, and extends to the end of the Epistle.'"²⁸

26 King, *ibid.*, 36.

27 Neil Lightfoot, *Jesus Christ Today*, 43.

28 Pink, *ibid.*, 14.

I. Christ is the Way (1:1–10:18)

- A. *Superiority of Christ's Person* (1:1-4:13)
 - 1. Superiority over prophets (1:1-3)
 - 2. Superiority over angels (1:4–2:18)
 - 3. Superiority over Moses (3:1–4:13)
- B. *Superiority of Christ's Work* (4:14–10:18)
 - 1. Superiority of Christ's priesthood (4:14–7:28)
 - 2. Superiority of Christ's covenant (8)
 - 3. Superiority of Christ's sanctuary (9:1-14)
 - 4. Superiority of Christ's sacrifice (9:15–10:18)

II. Don't Give Up (10:19–13:28)

- A. *Keeping the faith* (10:19-39)
- B. *Examples of faith* (11)
- C. *Endurance of faith* (12)
- D. *Performance of faith* (13)

Author's note: I am following the NKJV in the comments throughout this workbook. At the end of each lesson we list references from the Old Testament. These are direct quotations from the Old Testament and not merely an inference to an Old Testament character or story.