

Hebrews – Introduction

Establishes the finality of the gospel by asserting the supremacy of Christ.

1. Jesus is God's perfect word to man
2. Jesus is man's perfect representative to God

This book is to serve as a “word of exhortation” (13:22) to encourage the believers to continue to grow and mature.

Divisions and outline

1. Superiority of Christ
 - a. Superior to the prophets - 1:1-3
 - b. Superior to the angels – 1:4-2:18
 - c. Superior to Moses – 3:1-4:14
 - i. Superior Messenger – 3:1-19
 - ii. Superior Sabbath Rest – 4:1-13
 - d. Superior to Aaron and the priesthood – 4:14-7:28
2. Superiority of the New Covenant
 - a. Superior promises – 8:1-13
 - b. Superior Sanctuary – 9:1-28
 - c. Superior Sacrifice – 10:1-18
3. Exhortations to Believers in the Superiority of Christ and the New Covenant
 - a. Come to God and continue in the faith – 10:19-39
 - b. Run the race with endurance – 11:1-12:29
 - c. Final words of exhortation and information – 13:1-25

Points of Interest

1. Hebrews does not begin like a letter but it does end like one. Hebrews begins like a treatise with a systematic argument. It then develops into a sermon of encouragement. Hebrews then ends like a letter with personal comments.
2. Neither the writer nor the community that receives the letter is mentioned.
3. The book of Hebrews was written originally in Greek. This may be the source of the title since it is was a Greek book written in Greek not to the Greeks or the Gentiles but to the Hebrews.
4. Oxyrhynchus Papyri (P13) contained Hebrews 2-5 and 10-22
5. The word synagogue (συναγωγη) is not used or avoided by the author.
6. This book presents a window into the differences between the Gentile mind and the Jewish mind. There is a difference in the way the two reason, consider time, present arguments, and view history. It is easier for us (western mind) to understand the epistles to the western world or the Gentiles. Of all the New Testament books this one is written from the Jewish perspective and reasons with the Jewish mind. We find many things in this book strange and difficult, yet the same apostolic message is there.
7. The style of the book follows Philo and his Alexandrian pattern: Quotes from OT and says “God says. . .” and “the Holy Spirit says. . .” He uses the ritual system to prove moral law.
8. The name “Jesus” is used rather than the full title as does Paul: “Jesus Christ”, “Christ Jesus”, etc.

9. The language is a polished and a higher form of Greek than other biblical writers. The vocabulary is highly rated.
10. There are no new doctrines or teachings found in this book which differ from the rest of the NT.
11. Jesus is expressly called the High Priest in this book but this position is not foreign to the gospels and the New Testament:
 - a. Psalm 110 is used to connect the Messiah to the Priesthood
 - b. Luke 22:32, Jesus prays for Peter
 - c. John 17 is Jesus prayer of consecration as he offers his life
 - d. Luke 12:8, “Everyone who acknowledges me before men, the Son of man will also acknowledge him before the angels of God.”
 - e. Acts 7:56, Jesus “the Son of man standing at the right hand of God” as man’s advocate
 - f. Romans 8:34, Christ Jesus “is at the right hand of God, who intercedes for us.”
 - g. 1 John 2:1, “if any one sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and it is he who atones for our sins.”

Who Were the People Who Received the Letter?

1. The Title
 - a. The title “To (the) Hebrews” (προς Ἑβραίους) was not the title it was known by in the first century.
 - b. προς Ἑβραίους first appears at the head of this epistle at around 180 AD. This Papyri is called the Chester Beatty Papyri. P46 of the Chester Beatty Papyri contains the entire book of Hebrews (along with parts of Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians and 1 Thessalonians. On folio 21 the title “To the Hebrews” appears for the first time.
 - c. Clement of Alexandria (180 AD) writes that this book was written “for the Hebrews”.
 - d. Tertullian (220) knows it as “Hebrews”
 - e. We do not know if this was the original title and if it was, who were the “Hebrews”? Did they live in Jerusalem? Outside of Israel? Where they following Judaism? or, were they a fringe group?
 - f. We must not let the title dictate who received this letter but instead let the context of the letter speak.
2. They are familiar with the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament since this is what the author quotes to them
3. They are Jewish believers
 - a. They may from a Greek culture since they use the Septuagint.
 - b. They may be a fringe group from Orthodox Judaism (traditional rabbinical) since they have some unique practices that match the Essenes of the Qumran society. (They may have been Hellenistic-Jews who had been influenced by the Qumran
 - i. Ceremonial washings beyond the law were typical of the Essenes. These “washings” are mentioned in 6:2. These washing preceded all rituals and meals.
 - ii. The Essenes were waiting for a messiah of David (royal) and a messiah of Aaron (priestly)
 - iii. The Essenes membership with this community was their New Covenant
 - iv. The Essenes were an eschatological group who were waiting for the Messiah, a priest and a king.
 - v. The Essenes set importance on the role of angels in history and in eschatology

- vi. The Essenes were a group who lived away from the cities and took up residence in the wilderness. They found strength and hope from the Exodus passages about Israel's wilderness experience. The author of Hebrews goes directly after these verses.
- c. They are told they should have been teachers by now (5:12) which may indicate they were not normal Jews but Levites or converts from the priesthood. If they were from the priesthood then these verses would have been a little more pointed:
 - i. 5:12, they should have become teachers in the Christian community as they had been under the law.
 - ii. 3:1, Jesus is "the high priest whom we confess", and not the ruling Jewish high priest.
 - iii. 6:6, "crucifying the Son of God all over again" would mean the priest rejected and killed him the first time and now they are going to do it again.
 - iv. 13:10, concerning their fellow brother priests who continued in the temple service and ate the offerings it says, "We have an altar from which those who minister in the tabernacle have no right to eat."
- d. They had never seen Jesus preach (2:3)
- e. They had once faced persecution early in their Christian life (10:32-34) but martyrdom had not occurred (12:4)
 - i. This could indicate they had not been in Jerusalem since Saul had killed Jewish believers there.
- f. They had shown evidence of their faith by standing with those who had been persecuted. (6:10; 10:34)
- g. They had stopped growing in their faith and had drawing back to the place the instructions would have to begin over. (5:11-14; 10:35-39)
- h. They are believers even though they need further instruction and their faith is deficient. (5:11-6:3)
- i. They would appear to live in a city (13:14)
- j. They had stopped going to church (10:25)
 - i. A Jew who became a Christian would be forsaken by his family, cut off from his inheritance, taken outside the city and banned from the temple.
 - ii. The temptation to renounce their public confession of Christ was great.
 - iii. Attending church and gathering with other believers just added to the problem.
- k. They had some connection with Italy: "Those from Italy send you their greetings."
 - i. The readers were in Italy and there were some native Italians with the writer.
 - ii. The writer was in Italy when he wrote the letter

Conclusion: The original readers of this letter were living in a city. They were Hellenistic Jews who read the Septuagint and had not been mainline Rabbinic Jews. They had instead either been Essenes (Qumran) or been influenced by one of these groups. They had come to the faith through an apostle or an associate of an apostle. They had faced persecution, but not bloodshed and the social rejection was wearing them down. Many of them had started drifting back into their Jewish ways.

Date of the Book

1. Clement of Rome who wrote around 85 AD:
 - a. Quotes from this book in 1 Clement 36:1-5:

"This is the way, dearly beloved, wherein we found our salvation, even Jesus Christ the High priest of our offerings, the Guardian and Helper of our weakness. Through Him let us look steadfastly unto the heights of the heavens; through Him we behold as in a mirror His faultless and most excellent visage; through Him the eyes of our hearts were opened; through Him our foolish and darkened mind spring up unto the light; through Him the Master willed that we should taste of the immortal knowledge Who being the brightness of His majesty is so much greater than angels, as He hath inherited a more excellent name. For so it is written "Who makes His angels spirits and His ministers aflame of fire" but of His Son the Master said thus, "You are My Son, I this day have begotten you. Ask of Me, and I will give you the Gentiles for your inheritance, and the ends of the earth for your possession." And again He says unto Him, "Sit Thou on My right hand, until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet."
 - b. Clement's use of Hebrews shows two things:
 - i. Hebrews was in existence before 85 AD
 - ii. Hebrews had already been accepted as an authoritarian book which meant it was viewed as having an apostolic connection.
2. Those who accepted the gospel had accepted it from those who heard Jesus speak and they had time to grow and fall away before this book was written. (2:3)
3. Timothy was still alive (13:23) but in prison.
 - a. This is not recorded in Acts or any of Paul's letters.
 - b. Timothy was free when Paul died in 68 AD (2 Tim.).
 - c. The fact that Timothy is mentioned and not Paul suggests that Paul had already died.
4. There had been an early persecution but serious persecution (martyrdom) was still a thing of the future. The minor persecution would have come from the Jewish community rejecting the believing Jews but Nero's persecution that began in Rome in 64 AD would have still been local around Rome and not yet in Jerusalem (but, may have been spreading their way.)
5. The temple service is spoken of as having given way to Jesus but was still spoken of in the present tense as still occurring.
 - a. 5:1-4, "For every high priest who is chosen from among men is appointed. . . to offer. .he can deal gently. . .he himself is beset with weakness. . . he is bound to offer. . . one does not take . . .but he is called."
 - b. 7:8 – "In one case, the tenth is collected by men who die. . ."
 - c. 7:21, "They have become priests. . ."
 - d. 7:23
 - e. 7:27, "He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily."
 - f. 7:28, "The law appoints as high priests men who are weak."
 - g. 8:13 – "By calling this covenant 'new,' he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear."
 - i. This indicates the old covenant was still functioning but would soon disappear.
 - ii. If the temple had already been destroyed (70 AD) then clearly the new covenant had come spiritually and the old covenant had ceased and disappeared physically.

- iii. 9:6-9 – The verbs are in the present tense (even though the NIV does not translate them this way)
 - iv. 9:13
 - v. 9:25, “the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year.”
 - vi. 10:1-3 concerning sacrifices – “they would have ceased to be offered”
 - vii. 10:11, “Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices.”
 - viii. 13:10 – “We have an altar from which those who minister at the tabernacle have no right to eat.”
 - ix. 13:11 – “. . . the bodies are burnt outside the camp.”
6. If the temple had been destroyed already then two questions need to be asked:
 - a. Why is it still a temptation to resort back to the sacrifices of animals and the temple rituals if they no longer exist
 - b. Why does the author not come right out and say, “Hey, look the temple is gone. What more proof do you need that God is done with the old system??”
 7. The coming Roman armies may be near since 13:13 encourages them to come outside the city. These words echo Jesus warning to flee Jerusalem when you see it being surrounded.
 8. The church must be in the early days yet because no titles such as bishop, deacon, etc. are mentioned. The church still appears to be assembling together for strengthening one another without the hierarchy that was developing even in Paul’s day.
 9. The forty years of the Exodus wandering mentioned in 3:7 may be hinting at the fulfillment of the forty years Jesus warned about in 30 AD.

Conclusion:

- I believe the book of Hebrews was written before 70 AD for a variety of reasons.
- I would venture a guess at a more specific date after Paul’s death which at the earliest was the fall of 67 AD and latest was the spring of 68 AD.
- The Jewish Wars with Rome began in 66 AD.
- Titus and the Roman legions arrived at the northern wall of Jerusalem on Passover 70 AD. Five months later the walls fell and the temple was burned.
- I place the date of the writing of this letter at 68-69 AD as Roman legions were approaching Jerusalem.

Authorship:

What Was the Author Like?

1. The author seems to share a common background and theology base with the readers. If they are Jewish then he may be Jewish. If they are Hellenistic Jews they he himself may have a Greek background.
2. The author quotes from the Septuagint.
3. The author (and, the readers) is fully acquainted with:
 - a. OT persons
 - b. OT institutions especially concerning the temple services
 - c. OT text
 - d. The Mosaic Law
 - e. The Authority of Scripture as God’s inspired Word

4. The author uses rabbinic teaching styles and tendencies:
 - a. He establishes points and defends arguments from the silence of scripture (7:3; 14)
 - b. Extra-scriptural traditions (such as the angels giving the Law in 2:2)

Who Wrote the Book of Hebrews?

1. It is interesting to begin by noting that Clement of Rome (in the west) showed his acceptance of it by quoting from it in 85 AD. Clement does not give the author's name but he does mention Paul when he quotes from First Corinthians. We then assume that it was not Paul and that Clement may not have known.
2. In the West;
 - a. The Muratorian Canon:
 - i. a list of the accepted books of the Bible called The Muratorian Canon, a fragment of parchment that has a list of books recognized as scripture and authoritative, is dated to around 170-190 AD. This document leaves out of its accepted books:
 1. 1 and 2 Peter,
 2. James,
 3. Hebrews
 4. 3 John.
 - b. In the West around 200 AD Tertullian writes as though it is commonly known that Barnabas wrote the letter.
 - i. The phrase "word of encouragement" of Heb. 13:22 matches Acts 4:36 description of Barnabas as being the "son of encouragement"
 - ii. The insight and understanding of the Levitical service and the priesthood would fit that of a Levite, which Barnabas was:
"Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means Son of Encouragement), sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet." Acts 4:36, 37
 - iii. Heb. 2:4 says the gospel "was confirmed to **us** by those who heard him (Jesus)" would mean that Barnabas had not personally heard Jesus preach.
3. In the East:
 - a. Clement of Alexandria (around 200 AD)
 - i. Wrote that his teacher, Pantaenus, claimed that Paul wrote Hebrews. He says Paul left off his name because Jesus is the Apostle to the Hebrews and not Paul.
 - ii. Wrote that Paul wrote the letter to the Hebrews in Hebrew and that Luke translated it into Greek.
 - b. Origen, who followed Pantaenus as Alexandria's teacher, rejected Paul's authorship of Hebrews but accepted the book as scripture.
 - i. Origen said the thoughts were Paul's but the style of writing was not.
 - ii. Origen said it lacked Paul's rudeness of expression which Paul himself claimed to have.
 - iii. Origen said that he suggested that Luke or Clement of Rome wrote it, but concluded that "God alone knows who wrote it."
 - c. The Eastern Church continued to promote the book as Paul's and continued to accept it.
 - d. In the Chester Beatty Papyrus (200-250 AD) which were found in Egypt, includes the book of Hebrews and places it after Paul's letter to the Romans.

4. 250 AD - Cyprian (d. 258 AD), from Carthage in the west, was a bishop and wrote during the time of persecution. He was one of the first to claim that there was only one true church authority and used the OT priesthood to defend this position and the clergy. In all of his writings he never uses Hebrews since it would not support its position
5. 400 AD - Jerome and Augustine sided with the East in accepting the book and Paul's authorship around 400 AD. The rest followed.
6. 393-419 AD - The Synod of Hippo in 393 and the Third Synod of Carthage in 397 credited Paul with 13 epistles. By the Sixth Synod of Carthage in 419 Paul was given credit for 14 epistles which included Hebrews.
7. 1250 AD - Thomas Aquinas said that Luke translated Paul's Hebrew letter into Greek.
8. 1400's AD - Erasmus (1400's) said Paul could not have written Hebrews.
9. 1520 - Luther suggested Apollos
10. 1550 - Calvin thought it was written (not translated) by Luke or Clement of Rome
 - a. (Clement could not have written it because it was written 30 years before he wrote First Clement to the Corinthians.)
 - b. (The two styles are different with the author of Hebrews is superior to the author of Clement.)
11. Recently Priscilla and Aquila have been suggested.
 - a. The fact that Priscilla was a woman explains why the name was dropped.
 - b. This has support from the fact that:
 - i. they were teachers who taught Apollos
 - ii. they did know Timothy
 - iii. they had lived in Italy so they had friends in Italy and from Italy living elsewhere.

Conclusion:

- The thought of the Epistle is not Paul but it is supported by Paul's teaching
- The language is not Paul
- The technical use of the Old Testament is not Paul
- The author:
 - Had heard the gospel from those who heard Jesus speak
 - Well versed in the Septuagint
 - Interpreted with creative exegetical principle
 - Had a brilliant vocabulary
 - Masterful rhetorical style
 - Powerful in the use of the scriptures
 - He was a Hellenist
- I think the writer was Barnabas because:
 - He was a Hellenistic Jew from Cyprus
 - He was a Levite which means:
 - he would have been exposed to higher Jewish training in scripture,
 - trained for and possibly served in the temple,
 - was by his tribal responsibility a teacher,
 - son of encouragement,
 - taught and traveled with Paul so would have been influenced by him,
 - Taught in many Gentile churches.

Canonicity – When was the book accepted as scripture?

1. Clement of Rome used it as an authoritative source in 85 AD
2. These are some of the other early church fathers who knew and used the book of Hebrews:
 - a. Clement of Rome – 85 AD
 - b. Polycarp in “Polycarp to the Philippians” – 120 AD
 - c. Justin Martyr in “First Apology” – 155 AD
 - d. Theophilus, Bishop of Antioch 170 AD
 - e. Pantaenus – 190 AD
 - f. Clement of Alexandria – 200 AD
 - g. Origen – 220 AD
3. The Muratorian Canon recognizes the existence of the book of Hebrews. The Muratorian Canon, a list of the accepted books, is a fragment of parchment that has a list dated from around 170-190 AD leaves out of its accepted books: 1 and 2 Peter, James, Hebrews and 3 John. This list originated in the West.
4. The church historian Eusebius (260-340) listed Hebrews among the epistles of Paul. Eusebius also explained that some rejected it because the church in Rome did not think it was written by Paul.
5. In 367 Athanasius of Alexandria (298-373) used the term “canonical” and listed it with the exact same twenty-seven books that we have.
6. In 397 the Third Council of Carthage ratified the accepted opinion that the 27 books of the New Testament were canon

Destination

Who was the letter to the Hebrews sent to?

This answer hinges on the phrase “those from Italy send their greetings” (13:24)

1. Jerusalem or Jewish believers in Palestine
 - a. Jewish character of the book.
 - b. Reference to the heavenly Zion in 12:22 would be a comparison to the earthly city of Jerusalem.
 - c. Problem is the readers were said to be generous (6:10; 13:16), but we know from Paul’s letters the Jewish Christians were suffering from famine and poverty and were themselves receiving financial aid from the Gentiles.
2. Alexandria
 - a. The style of writing is similar to Alexandrian thought and Philo’s style.
 - b. This destination is unlikely since they were the first to ascribe it to Paul which is clearly incorrect (in many people’s opinions)
3. Corinth
 - a. The theory is that Apollos wrote Hebrews around 52-54 from Ephesus to Jewish believers in Corinth.
 - b. “those from Italy” were driven from Jerusalem under Claudius persecution of Jews in 49 AD.
4. Rome
 - a. “Those from Italy” could mean:
 - i. “those in Italy send their greetings” indicating the letter was written from Italy.
 - ii. “those from Italy send their greetings” meaning those from Italy who are somewhere with the writer send their greetings back to Italy.

- iii. This second (ii) one is more natural (John 1:44; Acts 6:9; 10:23 all use “*apo*” or “from”)
- b. The fact that Clement in Rome quotes Hebrews in 85 AD supports Rome as the destination.
- c. Paul would have converted many of the Jewish leaders at the end of Acts. These leaders would have turned their synagogues into Messianic synagogues. When Nero’s persecution of 64 AD broke out the Christians would have suffered but the Jews were protected by the law. (Or, the persecution could have been in 49 AD under Cladius.)
- d. The destination of Rome would explain why they used the Septuagint and why they did not hear Jesus teach.
- e. The reason it was so Jewish in flavor was because these were Messianic Jews still meeting in synagogues, which was something Paul tried throughout Acts

