

## THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS

### Introduction

This NT letter was written to Hebrew Christians by an unknown author to demonstrate the superiority of Christ's new covenant to the old covenant (Mosaic Law) under which Israel had lived. References to OT worship ritual suggest Hebrews was written prior to the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple by the Romans in AD 70.

### Background

Severe tensions existed in the early church between Jewish and Gentile Christians. Many, whose roots were in Judaism, insisted Gentile converts adopt a Jewish life-style and abide by OT Law. This teaching stimulated Paul to write to the Galatians. It also precipitated the first council of the young church (Acts 15). That council affirmed the freedom of Gentiles from the unbearable "yoke" of the Law, and announced that God by his grace saves through faith alone (15:10, 11).

Yet the tension continued to be felt in the Jewish Christian community. Many were drawn to the familiar practices God had ordained for their forefathers. These Christians needed a clear vision of the relationship of Christianity to OT faith. They particularly needed to see in Christ the reality that OT practices merely foreshadowed. Hebrews was written to meet that need.

This commonly accepted view of Hebrews is supported by a number of facts. (1) The book is sharply focused on critical elements of the OT system, such as priesthood and sacrifice (2) The author uses terms and forms of argument typical of Alexandrian rabbis of the same period (3) The author constantly compares and contrasts Christ with elements of the OT system to show how Christ is superior (4) The need for this Epistle is illustrated by the fact that at least five million Jews lived in various cities outside of Judea in the first century. Some estimate that as many as one person in ten in the Roman Empire was a Jew or an adherent to Jewish religion.

### Authorship

The author of Hebrews is unknown. The sophisticated Greek writing style and rabbinic arguments suggest he was an Alexandrian Jew, which has led many to suppose Hebrews was written by Apollos (Acts 18:18-28). Others argue for Barnabas. The style seems to rule out Paul. Ultimately, as Origen aptly wrote, "God [alone] knows the truth of the matter."

### Structure of Hebrews

1. Jesus: God's Final Word—ch. 1-4:13
  - a) Superior to the angels (1,2)  
    Parenthesis: 2:1-4
  - b) Superior to Moses (3)
  - c) Superior to Joshua (4:1-22)  
    Parenthesis: 4:12, 13

2. Jesus: High Priest in the Order of Melchizidek—ch. 4:14-7:28  
     Parenthesis: 5:11-6:8
3. Jesus: The Perfect Sacrifice—ch. 8:1-10:18
  - a) In a new covenant (8)
  - b) Of a spiritual tabernacle (9)
  - c) Once for all (10:1-18)
4. Jesus: Object of Faith—ch. 10:19-13:17
  - a) Faith's perseverance (10:19-39)  
     Parenthesis: 10:26-29
  - b) Faith's hope (11)
  - c) Faith's discipline (12:1-11)
  - d) Faith's charges (12:12-13:17)  
     Parenthesis: 12:25-29
5. Epilogue—ch. 13:18-25

### **Theological Contributions**

Hebrews is a theological gold mine.

1. *Christ's Superiority.* Hebrews affirms the deity and superiority of Jesus. As the "exact representation" of the Deity, Jesus is God, superior to angels and to Moses as a source of revelation (Heb. 1-4). As high priest of a new order, Jesus is superior in every way to the Aaronic priesthood, and he guarantees salvation. As a living high priest, Jesus provides believers with immediate access to God (Heb. 5-8). Finally, as a sacrifice, Jesus' blood is more efficacious than the blood of OT bulls and goats (Heb. 9, 10).
2. *Old and New Covenants.* Hebrews clarifies the nature of the old and new covenants. It shows the limits of the old and the superiority of the new, under which God not only forgives our sins but writes his law on our very hearts (see Heb. 8:7-13).
3. *Priesthood.* Hebrews examines the role and nature of priesthood, and shows what it means for believers to have a living high priest.
4. *Sacrifice.* Hebrews defines the meaning of Christ's sacrifice, which perfects the believer and cleanses the conscience.
5. *Christ's Humanity.* Hebrews uniquely affirms the human nature of Jesus and examines what this meant for Christ and means for his people in terms of his qualifications to be our high priest (2:14-18; 5:1-8; 12:3).
6. *Faith.* Hebrews illustrates the value of faith by showing how those with faith respond actively to God (Heb. 11).

The author writes to show how Christ is superior to OT faith. To understand Hebrews, we need a grasp of the OT. Furthermore, the author's argument is often interrupted by warnings. Trace

the main line of argument by initially skipping the warnings (Heb. 2:14; 4:12, 13; 5:11-6:8; 10:26-29; 12:25-29).

The warnings in Hebrews are addressed to believers to encourage deeper commitment to Christian faith and life.

(above material taken from The Revell Bible Dictionary)

The Epistle to the Hebrews is of such importance that I rank it beside the Epistle to the Romans (which is excelled by no other book). I have wondered how to give this magnificent Epistle to the Hebrews the introduction it deserves.

Dr. William Pettingill, in his book *Into the Holiest: Simple Studies in Hebrews*, has a different emphasis in his opening statement:

From Adam to Moses, through 2500 years, and from Moses to Malachi, through 1100 years, the prophets were speaking for God to man. But at the end of the 3600 years their revelation of God was only partial. Then after a silence of 400 years, when the fullness of the time was come, God sent forth His Son, and in that Son the revelation of God is perfect.

That is tremendous statement. Now I'm going to give another introduction to the Epistle to the Hebrews. It comes from the excellent book by E. Schuyler English, *Studies in the Epistle to the Hebrews*:

The Epistle to the Hebrews, one of the most important books of the New Testament in that it contains some of the chief doctrines of the Christian faith, is, as well, a book of infinite logic and great beauty. To read it is to breathe the atmosphere of heaven itself. To study it is to partake of strong spiritual meat. To abide in its teachings is to be led from immaturity to maturity in the knowledge of Christian truth and of Christ Himself. It is to "go on unto perfection."

And here is a further statement:

The theme of the Epistle to the Hebrews, the only book of the New Testament in which our Lord is presented in His high priestly office, is the supreme glory of Christ, the Son of God and Son of man.

This is tremendous!

Now I turn to another author, Sir Robert Anderson, and quote from his book, *The Hebrews Epistle in the Light of the Types*. As we go through this epistle I trust I shall be able to emphasize this which he emphasizes so well, and I also trust that this introduction will clarify the thought:

That the professing Church on earth is "the true vine"—this is the daring and and impious lie of the apostasy. That it is "the olive tree" is a delusion shared by the mass of Christians in the churches of the Reformation. But the teaching of Scripture is explicit, that Christ Himself is the vine, and Israel the olive. For "God hath NOT cast away His people whom He foreknew."

This Epistle to the Hebrews was not accepted by the Western church for a long time, and the reason is found at this particular juncture: the church wanted to usurp the place of Israel. They adopted all the promises God had made to Israel and spiritualized them, applying them to themselves and rejecting God's purposes in the nation Israel. As a result, you'll find that the church in those early days became actually anti-Semitic and persecuted the Jew! Therefore, to say that God is through with the nation Israel is a sad blunder, and I trust that this epistle may be helpful in our understanding the great truth that a Hebrew is a Hebrew, and when he becomes a Christian, he is still a Hebrew. When any person becomes a child of God, it does not change his nationality at all, but it brings him into a new body of believers called the church. Today God is calling out of both Jews and Gentiles a people for His name. When that is consummated, God will take His church out of the world, and He will pursue His purpose with the nation Israel, fulfilling all of His promises to them and through them to the gentile world, and He will pursue His purpose with the nation Israel, fulfilling all of His promises to them and through them to the gentile world in that day.

The human author of the Epistle to Hebrews has always been a moot question. Although the Authorized Version has the heading, "Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews," there is still a question as to authorship. The Revised Version and other later versions correct this and simply entitle it the Epistle (or letter) to the Hebrews. If you are acquainted with the literature of the Scriptures, you recognize that there is no unanimity of thought and no agreement as to who is the author of this epistle. When I was a seminary student, I wrote a thesis on the authorship of Hebrews, and I attempted to sustain the position that the apostle Paul is the author. When I wrote my thesis I thought I had solved the problem and that the world would be in agreement that Paul wrote Hebrews! But I find that there is just as much disagreement today about the authorship as there was before I wrote my thesis! Neither John Calvin nor Martin Luther accepted Paul's authorship, and neither did many others of the past. On the other hand, many do accept Paul as the author. However, the human author is not the important thing, but the fact that the Epistle to the Hebrews is part of God's inspired Word is important.

In spite of the fact that the Pauline authorship cannot be stated in a dogmatic fashion, there is abundant evidence that Paul was the author. Both internal and external evidence support the authorship of Paul. The writer had been in bonds (see Heb. 10:34). He wrote from Italy (see Heb. 13:24). His companion was Timothy (see Heb. 13:23). The writing is Pauline. Also, in my opinion, Peter identifies Paul as the writer (see 2 Pet. 3:15-16). I believe that there is good and sufficient reason for Paul's changing his style and for not giving his name in the epistle.

The date of writing is particularly important in the case of the Epistle to the Hebrews because of the authorship question. Many scholars, even sound scholars, have taken the position that it was written after AD 70. Some give the date of AD 85, AD 96 and others up in the 90s. However, as you read this epistle, you are forced to the conclusion that the temple at Jerusalem was still standing at the time it was written. This means it had to have been written before AD 70, since Titus the Roman destroyed the temple in AD 70 and Paul had already gone to be with the Lord. I believe that it was written by the apostle Paul and it was written before AD 70.

(above material taken from Thru the Bible with J. Vernon McGee)

### **Application**

Hebrews raises the question of the security of the Christian. Can a Christian be saved today and lost tomorrow? Verses such as John 10:29 seem to suggest that this is impossible. And yet we do meet people who once seemed to be Christians but now deny Christ.

The warning passages in Hebrews seems to suggest that the Christian is still free to go back to his old ways:

“We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first” (3:14).

“It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened...to be brought back to repentance...” (6:4-6).

“If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment” (10:26-27).

If the letter was sent to Jews who had attached themselves to a Christian church but would not commit themselves to Christ, then the teaching is clear: go on or get out! But if it was written to Christians the letter would seem to confirm that even after becoming Christians we remain free to opt out again. This is difficult to accept as the teaching of Hebrews, because it goes against Jesus’ own words (as in John 10:29), against the various analogies of salvation (can the Christian be ‘unborn’?) and strikes at God’s power to keep his sheep safe.

So, the teaching of Hebrews is:

- There’s no half-way house in Christianity. Go on or get out!
- Faith has always been the key to the life demanded by God. Faith, however, is not merely belief **about**, but **is** obedient action
- The Old Testament can legitimately be used to light up the teaching of the New Testament. The whole Bible is the word of God.

(above material taken from Opening Up God’s Word by John Balchin)

### **Elementary Principles of Christianity**—Hebrews 6:1-3

#### **Faith**—Hebrews 11

“Faith is the substance of things hope for.” The Greek word for “substance” is *hupostasis*. It is a scientific term, the opposite of hypothesis or theory. It is that which rests upon facts. In chemistry it would be the chemical which settles at the bottom of the test tube after you have made an experiment.

In my college chemistry class the teacher would give each one of us students a test tube and ask us to find out what was in it. I would take some of whatever was in the tube and add another chemical or two to it and heat it on the Bunsen burner to discover what was in the tube. One day I nearly blew up the laboratory with my experiment because something had been put in the test tube which should not have been put there. Five years later the janitor who swept out the laboratory told me he was still sweeping up little pieces of the big glass Florentine receiver which I had used in my experiment! Fortunately, the glass flew only onto my vest and not into my eyes. I experimented with one test tube for two weeks before I went to the professor to tell him what I thought was in it. I said it was a certain kind of powder and he told me it was right. I had a substance in the bottom of the test tube, and the professor, because he knew his chemistry, was sure of what it was (I’ll be honest with you, I wasn’t too sure!) But that substance in the

bottom of the test tube was what I was looking for. That is the reality. And that is what faith is—faith is a substance.

Dr. A. T. Robertson translates substance as “title deed.” What is the title deed? What is the substance? It is the Word of God, my friend. If your faith does not rest upon the Word of God, it is not biblical faith at all. It has to rest upon what God says. Actually, it means to believe God. (above material taken from Thru the Bible with J. Vernon McGee)

### **The Perfect Church**—Hebrews 13

Eight factors:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.

### **Summation**

1. Jesus, the Living Word—Heb. 1:1-4:13
  - As the ultimate revelation—1:1-14
  - Warning against drifting—2:14
  - As source of salvation—2:5-18
  - As superior to Moses—3:1-6
  - The urgency of response—3:7-4:13
2. Jesus, our High Priest—Heb. 4:14-8:13
  - Jesus’ priesthood—4:14-5:10
  - Go on to maturity—5:11-6:20
  - Superiority of Jesus’ priesthood—7:1-28
  - Implications of Jesus’ priesthood—8:1-13
3. Jesus, the Perfect Sacrifice—Heb. 9:1-10:39
  - His sacrifice cleanses—9:1-28
  - His sacrifice removes sin—10:1-18
  - Warning against turning from God—to:19-39
4. Jesus’ Continuing Ministry—Heb. 11:1-12:29
  - Accessed by faith—11:1-40

- Experienced as discipline—12:1-13
- Missing God's grace—12:14-29

5. Exhortations—Heb. 13:1-21

- Farewell—13:22-25

(above material taken from The Smart Guide to the Bible series by Larry Richards)