



Summary of Hebrews

Introduction

The author of Hebrews neither names himself nor clearly designates his audience. The traditional title 'to the Hebrews' reflects the ancient assumption that the original recipients were Jewish Christians, who knew the author well.

The author's identity has been a matter of significant conjecture throughout church history. In antiquity, authorship was attributed to figures such as Barnabas or especially Paul. However, several of the most astute church fathers recognised considerable differences in style and method of argument between this book and Paul's named writings. Therefore other candidates such as Clement of Rome, Luke and Apollos have been mentioned but it is generally accepted that the book must remain anonymous.

It was most likely written from Rome in the second half of the 1st Century, and probably before AD70, although some believe it was written from outside of Italy to a church in Rome, with Italians present with the author at the time of writing.

It is not written in the normal format accepted as a general letter. The careful rhetorical progression of the book, along with its frequent practical exhortations, has led many to consider it a single sermon. Perhaps Hebrews is best understood as a sermonic letter.

Its main theme is that Christ is greater than any angel, priest, or old covenant institution; thus each reader, rather than leaving such a great salvation, is summoned to hold on by faith to the true rest found in Christ and to encourage others in the church to persevere.

Stylistically, it is one of the most beautifully written books in the NT. It is fully engaging in the way the subject matter is presented and is well supported with a number of OT Scriptures, particularly those drawn from the Psalms.

Chapter One

The focus of God's salvation plan had been in place since before creation. It was to be implemented through a Messiah that would come to his people in order to free them from the bondage of their slavery to sin, and thereby reconciling them to God.

This was something that had been revealed as a sketch to many of God's servants, the prophets, but was revealed in its full reality through the work, death and resurrection of Jesus, the Christ of God.

The writer then goes on to elaborate, using several powerful, messianic Psalms that foretold the coming of the Christ, showing that he is superior even to the most elevated of heavenly beings - God's holy angels - in his person, for he is the unique Son of God and equal to him in nature, substance and deity.

Chapter Two

Having demonstrated the pre-eminence of Jesus and his superiority over the angels in his quality as the Son of God, the author now intersperses his argument with warning and exhortation against neglecting the message of the Gospel in the way that the Jews had drifted away from the original intention of the Mosaic Law. Although the law was significant for it was from God and had been delivered by his angels, the Gospel is far greater for it was brought in by the Lord in person, authenticated by God through signs, wonders and the Holy Spirit's gifts.

It was God's original plan that man should take stewardship of creation but had failed. In the new world that was to come, that part of the plan would be fully implemented but it had already been partially implemented and signposted through the man Jesus. It was through his suffering and death that the rest of humankind could become his siblings and thus were being prepared for their future role. Thus Jesus was also superior to the angelic beings and indeed humankind for he is also the Son of Man: *<<For just as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself; and he has given him authority to execute judgement, because he is the Son of Man>>* (John 5:26-27).

Because of Jesus' victory over sin and death, he is exalted to the position of the true High Priest, as he had fulfilled God's will and had remained free of sin even though he was in sinful flesh and had been tempted just as everyone else has been.

Chapter Three

The chapter commences with a comparison between Moses and Jesus. Quite rightly the author commends Moses as a great leader and faithful servant over God's house, the Hebrew nation. Yet Jesus, as both high priest and Son of God is the builder and owner of the house, his church; therefore, he should be exalted to a much higher position than even the great man Moses.

The writer then turns to Scripture, quoting from Psalm 95, which gives an illustration of the failings of the people of God in the early years of God leading them out of slavery towards the Promised Land. Their lack of belief and trust in God, and their continued provocation of him through their sin and challenging behaviour, brought just punishment on the whole generation, with all but two of them dying during a 40 year period of wandering in the wilderness.

The writer uses this illustration to warn both the early and current church not to fall into the same mental trap as the Israelites, who squandered an opportunity to come into a land flowing with milk and honey, where they could have lived in God's rest. Disciples of Jesus are called to take care that they keep focused on him and not to allow themselves to be drawn away for any reason whatsoever, or they too will never enter his rest.

Chapter Four

The writer to the Hebrews indicates there is great privilege and hope for those who have believed the good news of the Gospel and subsequently live their lives for God. However, there is also a warning, based on the example of the exodus generation who also had the same promises of God but failed to come into God's rest due to their apostasy, or lack of faith at least.

The writer refers to three types of God's rest: his Sabbath, when he rested from the work of creation and which he gave as a gift to his people to similarly rest from all their labours; the rest the people received after entering the Promised Land under the leadership of Joshua; and a final rest that is offered for those who persevere in the faith that is theirs through Christ Jesus.

The chapter concludes just as the writer returns to the theme of Jesus as the great high priest who, in his human state, underwent the same type of testing that all other humans do and yet was without sin.

Chapter Five

The writer continues the theme of Jesus as the ultimate high priest. God had long promised that he would send his people a high priest who would do perfectly and in perpetuity what the priesthood was originally established to do and yet could not; or at least, it could do only partially and imperfectly.

One fact that the writer wants the readers to understand is that Jesus remains fully human and therefore can fully empathise with the sufferings of his people; yet he is also fully God and knows intimately the requirements of the Father and therefore he is the only one capable of fulfilling this essential role.

After a résumé of the role of high priest, with its strengths and weaknesses, the writer then reflects on the calling of Jesus, with what he had to undergo in order to train for the role that God was to bestow upon him. He does so by citing psalms written by David concerning the Messiah that was to come.

The writer then provides a graphic illustration of how Jesus came to learn obedience to the Father through his prayers and supplications, most likely a

reference to the Garden of Gethsemane, but no doubt a feature of Jesus' entire earthly life.

In a dramatic switch, the author suddenly rebukes his readership for their spiritual immaturity, indicating that, if they had truly embraced the message they had received, then they would have been in a far better place than their current spiritual infancy would suggest.

Chapter Six

The author commences this chapter by stating that believers need to become mature, moving beyond the basics of their faith, warning of the perils that await those who fall into apostasy and reminding them of the rewards for those who persevere in their faith, a faith demonstrated by resultant works and fruit.

However, the writer appears confident that this does not apply to his readership, commending their response to the faith and assuring them that God's response to them will be faithful and just.

Through the example of the promises that God had made to Abraham, which he subsequently kept of course, promises that he swore by his own name, the author clearly states that the Christian hope is based on those same promises and that same God, who cannot lie or prove false in any way. Therefore, their hope and trust will not be in vain.

Finally, the author returns to the subject of Jesus as the true high priest being the anchor of all hope for he has passed behind the veil, not the one separating the most holy place in the earthly temple, but the one that opens up the way to God. The allusion is that those who believe in Jesus are then attached to him by a divine anchor chain, providing them a link directly into heaven.

Chapter Seven

Having returned to the theme of Jesus being a high priest in the order of Melchizedek in the concluding verses of Chapter Six, the writer now takes a deeper look at Melchizedek, giving a deeper insight into who he may have been and what he represented, especially with regard to his supremacy over the patriarch Abraham, and the subsequent human priesthood that came through the descendancy of his great grandson Levi.

The writer then turns his attention to Jesus, comparing him with Melchizedek and the reason why there needed to be a new priesthood. The Mosaic Law had established a human priesthood that could not make anyone perfect, for the priests themselves could never be perfect, since they were mortal and inherently sinful.

For that reason a new and much more superior priesthood had to be established, which Melchizedek's brief appearance had pointed towards and which was fulfilled in the person of Jesus as both the Son and Christ of God. His personal perfection, being the only mortal to be sin free, and his holy and righteous status as the only true Son, made him the only candidate that could

bring others to righteousness, for he was righteous in the sight of God, having offered himself as the atoning sacrifice for all sin.

Chapter Eight

Following a summary of the excellence of the high priesthood of Jesus and his duties in the heavenly sanctuary, the writer announces that he too must have something to offer in the way of sacrifice, as did his human predecessors.

The writer then announces that the earthly tabernacle and the temple that replaced it were but copies of the original, which is in heaven; the place where Jesus now ministers, for he was not authorised to undertake such duties within the earthly imitations.

The chapter concludes with the longest quote from Scripture, where the prophet Jeremiah announced God's intention to form a new and better covenant with his people. This he has done through his Son.

Chapter Nine

The author gives an extensive summary of the first covenant, symbolised through the structure of the Mosaic tabernacle and perpetual nature of the sacrificial rituals that had to be performed in order for God's people to seek forgiveness and reconciliation.

However, with the coming of Jesus and his once for all sacrifice on the Cross, the first covenant was revealed for what it was intended to be - a pointer towards God's original plan for salvation. This was the inauguration of the second and final covenant. What was truly surprising and never foreseen was that the Christ was both the true High Priest who would offer the sacrifice, and the sacrifice itself.

All of humankind is now free to return to God through Jesus and can eagerly await the final fulfilment of God's promises when Christ returns to restore all of creation to the way God had originally intended.

Chapter Ten

The writer continues expounding the theme of Jeremiah Chapter 31 to demonstrate the power of Jesus' sacrificial death by stating that the OT sacrifices were unable to finally deal with but, in fact, acted more as a reminder to them of their sin due to its repetitive nature (v.3). The death of Jesus was the ultimate sacrifice that dealt fully and finally with sin; therefore, there is no need for any further sacrifices.

The chapter then moves into a new major section of teaching with the writer offering exhortations for believers to hold on to the knowledge of the truth they have received when coming to faith in Jesus.

The author offers a stark warning to those who persist in wilful and unrepented sin. The consequences for such people are dire and are an indication that such people have never truly accepted the Gospel of Jesus. Those who have embraced it and endure the tribulations of life that such faith brings are saved.

Chapter Eleven

Hebrews has now reached a plateau from which there is an excellent view of those who have gone on before in the OT. Looking at them, the readers can discover for themselves what is up ahead, what they will need to cope with it, and the fact that, when they get there themselves, there will be a great welcome. All they need to complete their journey is faith.

The section starts with a summary statement of faith before looking at the faith of three antediluvian characters: Abel, Enoch and Noah, whose family were the only survivors from that era.

The writer then gives a longer exposition concerning the faith of the father of the Hebrew nation, Abraham, who left his own homeland to follow the call of God and travelled to a land that he did not know anything about. Despite the fact that he was old and his wife Sarah was barren, he held to the promise that they would have a son together and that, through him, a great nation would come into existence. The author then provides summaries of the faith and blessings in the lives of Isaac, Jacob, Joseph and his two sons.

The account then moves on to the great Hebrew leader Moses, who had all the riches and comforts in the world as a member of Pharaoh's household, but gave it all up to rejoin his own people and faithfully fulfil God's call on his life.

Many other OT heroes are then named as living by faith, none of whom would receive the final reward during their lifetimes. However, their faith was revealed in that they trusted the Word of God and looked forward to a time when the promises would come into being.

What this chapter shows is that the Jewish nation needed to look back at the examples in their heritage of the achievements of people who had faith in the promises of God. They needed to keep the story alive in their own generation, as do Christians today.

Chapter Twelve

Having given examples of the faith exhibited by so many people who had gone before, the writer now turns to the perfect example of faith, the account of Jesus' suffering and death that would reconcile all people to God. The writer exhorts his readers to follow this great example and to be prepared to suffer for their faith in the same way that the Lord had done for them.

The writer then instructs them to encourage others to faith, by pursuing faith with them, and ensuring that no one rejects the grace of God. He reminds them that they are no longer in a place where they could not approach God, as even the animals at Mount Sinai could not without facing death. Instead, they are now at Mount Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem, introduced to them through the death of their saviour.

The chapter concludes with a warning not to ignore the teachings of Jesus as many had done when he was on earth, for his return will come with a shaking of the earth to finally sort out the wheat from the chaff.

Chapter Thirteen

This final chapter provides the author with one final opportunity to encourage his readers to implement the good lifestyle practices that are based on the teachings of the church, especially warning of the worldly traps of sex, power, money and its associated suffering. The solution to avoid such traps is given - Jesus! What is more, Jesus makes sense of the rest of it. The writer then goes on to offer a final benediction and personal greetings.