



## Hebrews - Introduction

### Author, Audience and Title

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.

Scholars have suggested other possible authors, such as Clement of Rome, Luke or Apollos. However, most today concede that this author remains anonymous. It seems that the judgment expressed by Origen, who died in circa AD254, remains correct: 'Who actually wrote the epistle, only God knows', which is cited in Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History 6.25.14.

The author clearly knew his recipients and longed to be reunited with them. They had a mutual friend in Timothy, and almost certainly this was the same Timothy who ministered alongside Paul.

The author was presumably male, since he refers to himself using a masculine participle, such as: <<**For time would fail me to tell**>> (Hebrews 11:32b). Since 'us' included the author in: <<**it was attested to us by those who heard him**>> (Hebrews 2:3b), it appears that he was not an eyewitness of Jesus. The author most probably wrote this in Rome, since he writes: <<**Those from Italy send you greetings**>> (Hebrews 13:24). However, scholars debate whether he was in Italy writing to the church elsewhere or was outside Italy, although accompanied by Italians, and writing back to an audience in Italy, possibly at Rome.

The audience's social situation can be inferred from commands to: <<**remember those who are in prison**>> (Hebrews 13:3a), and who: <<**were being tortured**>> (Hebrews 13:3c). Timothy himself had just been set free, as recorded in Hebrews 13:23. Indeed, the author of Hebrews commended his audience for their former

endurance of persecution, for their compassion on those in prison, and for having accepted the loss of their own possession for the faith.

The author warned against 'strange teachings' in the church and these teachings may have been related to the use of ritual foods. Moreover, he repeatedly called his audience to persevere in the truth and cautioned them about the danger of leaving the Christian communion, for he sought to show the superiority of Christ to Mosaic sacrifices and rituals.

Hence, the early church was likely correct to assert that Jewish Christians, as well as Gentiles who had previously been drawn to the Jewish religion, were the intended audience for this book. Furthermore, such an audience would have clearly understood the book's many citations and allusions to the OT, and would have shared in the writer's frequent use of the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the OT.

### Date

Hebrews was almost certainly written in the 1st Century and probably before AD70. Reasons for asserting a 1st Century date include the mention of Timothy, who was known to be active in the 1st Century, and the influence of Hebrews, and its way of thinking, on 1 Clement that was written circa AD96.

The crucial issue in dating the book concerns whether the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in AD70 had already occurred. Hebrews speaks of the Jewish sacrificial system as if it were a still-present reality, for example: **<<Unlike the other high priests, he has no need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for those of the people; this he did once for all when he offered himself. For the law appoints as high priests those who are subject to weakness, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect for ever>>** (Hebrews 7:27-28), and: **<<We have an altar from which those who officiate in the tent have no right to eat. For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp>>** (Hebrews 13:10-11), which does not seem likely after the cessation of the Jerusalem temple sacrifices in AD70.

Admittedly, Hebrews focuses on the Mosaic tabernacle rather than the Solomonic or the Herodian temples. Nevertheless, if the writer was attempting to convince his readers of the inferiority of the Mosaic system, and possibly dissuade church members from returning to Jewish practices, an obvious argument would have been to mention the cessation of the temple sacrifices, if they were in fact no longer taking place.

### Theme

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.

## Purpose

The genre of Hebrews is unusual. The book is without an introduction or other early indications that it is a letter. Yet the final verses do pass on greetings and blessings, and the author speaks of having: <<**written to you briefly**>> (Hebrews 13:22c). However, the author also identifies his work as a: <<**word of exhortation**>> (Hebrews 13:22b). 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.

Hebrews frequently encourages the audience to endure and warns against leaving Christ. These warning passages are interspersed throughout the book and have noticeable structural similarities, especially in terms of exhortation and threatened consequence. Around these passages the argument of the book progresses carefully. Moreover, these specific exhortations themselves flow out of the surrounding material. Thus the book is unified in both structure and intent.

The warning passages exhort church participants to remain faithful. The more expository sections of the epistle show the superiority of Christ and his new covenant work to angels, Moses, the tabernacle priesthood, and the sacrificial system. The implication is that these are so inferior to Christ that it is futile to return to them, or to go anywhere else. Thus the book encourages the church to hold fast to its faith, because that faith is grounded in the most superior revelation.

The background of such exhortations must have been the audience's need to continue enduring through persecution and the trials of life. They appear to have grown less attentive to Christian instruction: <<**About this we have much to say that is hard to explain, since you have become dull in understanding. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic elements of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food; for everyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is unskilled in the word of righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, for those whose faculties have been trained by practice to distinguish good from evil**>> (Hebrews 5:11-14); and some apparently have ceased regular attendance at their meetings: <<**not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching**>> (Hebrews 10:25).

Nevertheless, the author reminds them of their past faithfulness and communal love in the midst of persecution: <<**But recall those earlier days when, after you had been enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and persecution, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion for those who were in prison, and you cheerfully accepted the plundering of your possessions, knowing that you yourselves possessed something better and more lasting**>> (Hebrews 10:32-34). He encourages their faithfulness by careful exposition of the OT in light of the revelation in Jesus Christ.

The soteriology, i.e. salvation teaching of Hebrews is rooted in its Christology – the Son of God became the heavenly high priest, who offered himself as a sacrifice

once for all. Christ obtained salvation for all who approach in faith, and such faith perseveres until it receives the promised eternal reward.

### Key Themes

	<u>Theme</u>	<u>Verses</u>
1	Jesus is fully God and fully man.	1:1-14; 2:5-18.
2	Jesus as Son of God reveals God the Father, is the agent of creation, and sustains all creation.	1:1-14.
3	Jesus serves as the eternal high priest, who as a man sympathises with human weaknesses, and yet who offered himself as the perfect sacrifice for sin.	1:3; 2:10-18; 4:15-16; 9:11-10:19.
4	Jesus is superior to angels, to Moses and the Mosaic covenant, and to the earthly tabernacle and its priesthood.	1:4-2:18; 3:1-6; 5:1-10; 7:1-10:18.
5	All humanity faces eternal judgment for sin.	4:12-13; 9:27-28; 10:26-31.
6	Faith is necessary to please God and to participate in his eternal salvation promises. Faith requires conviction about the unseen realities of God and his promises. Such faith produces perseverance.	4:2-3; 6:1, 12; 10:22, 38-39; 11:1-40.
7	Perseverance is necessary in the Christian life, and thus church participants are warned against a lack of endurance.	2:1-4; 3:7-4:13; 5:11-6:12; 10:19-39; 12:1-29.
8	God's promises are trustworthy, including his promise of eternal salvation.	6:13-20.
9	With the advent of Jesus Christ, the last days have begun, though they await consummation at his return.	1:2; 2:5; 4:9-11; 9:9-28; 12:22-29.

### Summary of Salvation History

Christ has accomplished final salvation, has brought the final word of God, and has become the final priest and the one atoning sacrifice to which the OT pointed.

### Writing Style

As previously stated, the book of Hebrews has affinities with the genres of both the epistle and the sermon. The first twelve chapters conduct a sustained theological argument about the superiority of Christ over a number of rivals and

about the need to persevere in following the vastly superior Messiah. While following many ancient customs of rhetorical argumentation, these chapters can remind the modern reader of an essay with a thesis, a series of subordinate generalisations, and supporting proof consisting of data and commentary on that data.

The book of Hebrews is one of the most stylistically polished books in the NT. The writer is a master of imagery and metaphor, allusions to the OT, comparison and analogy, contrast, and long, flowing sentences that build to a climax and often use parallel construction of clauses.

The rhetoric of the book is partly argumentative, as the author conducts a sustained theological exposition such as modern readers might expect in a debate or in a theology book. The persuasive strategy adheres to one of the classical ways of arguing a thesis, which is to repeat the main idea often and from a variety of angles. In addition to the rhetoric of argument and debate, readers will find in the book of Hebrews a persuasive rhetoric of exhortation in which the writer appeals to his readers not to abandon their faith.

The central motif of the book is the formula 'better', with the cluster of words 'better', 'more', and 'greater; appearing a combined total of 25 times. The comparative motif, in which one thing is declared superior to another thing, is the main rhetorical strategy of the book. A common rhetorical form by which the comparison is conducted is analogy, with something in the OT being declared similar to the person and work of Christ. But the analogies are not between two equal things; rather, the author argues from the lesser to the greater.

## Outline

### I. Jesus Is Superior to Angelic Beings (1:1-2:18)

#### a. The supremacy of God's Son (1:1-14)

##### i. Introduction: summary of the Son's person and work (1:1-4)

##### ii. Evidence of his status as Son (1:5-14)

#### b. Warning against neglecting salvation (2:1-4)

#### c. The founder of salvation (2:5-18)

### II. Jesus Is Superior to the Mosaic Law (3:1-10:18)

#### a. Jesus is greater than Moses (3:1-6)

#### b. Warning: a rest for the people of God (3:7-4:13)

##### i. The failure of the exodus generation (3:7-19)

##### ii Entering God's rest (4:1-13)

- c. The high priesthood of Jesus (4:14-10:18)
  - i. Jesus the great high priest (4:14-5:10)
  - ii. Pause in the argument: warning against apostasy (5:11-6:12)
  - iii. The certainty of God's promise (6:13-20)
  - iv. Return to main argument: the priestly order of Melchizedek (7:1-10)
  - v. Jesus compared to Melchizedek (7:11-28)
  - vi. Jesus, high priest of a better covenant (8:1-13)
  - vii. The earthly holy place (9:1-10)
  - viii. Redemption through the blood of Christ (9:11-28)
  - ix. Christ's sacrifice once for all (10:1-18)
- III. Call to Faith and Endurance (10:19-12:29)
  - a. A Call to Persevere (10:19-39)
    - i. Exhortation to draw near (10:19-25)
    - ii. Warnings against shrinking back (10:26-39)
  - b. By faith (11:1-40)
    - i. The meaning of faith (11:1-3)
    - ii. The Examples of Abel, Enoch, and Noah (11:4-7)
    - iii. The Faith of Abraham (11:-8-23)
    - iv. The Faith of Moses (11:24-28)
    - v. The Faith of Other Israelite Heroes (11:29-40)
  - c. Endurance until the kingdom fully comes (12:1-29)
    - i. The Example of Jesus (12:1-13)
    - ii. Warnings against Rejecting God's Grace (12:14-29)
- IV. Concluding Exhortations and Remarks (13:1-25)
  - a. Service Well-Pleasing to God (13:1-19)
  - b. Benediction (13:20-21)
  - c. Final greetings (13:22-25)