

Aquifer Open Study Notes (Book Intros)

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Hebrews

Have you ever known a person who turned his or her back on Christ and the church and simply walked away? Perhaps you have struggled to maintain your own Christian commitment in the face of disillusionment, spiritual confusion, loss of perspective, or outright persecution. The book of Hebrews points us to Christ. It provides light to help struggling Christians see Jesus clearly and stand firm.

Setting

As Christianity spread throughout the Mediterranean world, the first followers of Jesus Christ faced grave challenges. The Greco-Roman society misunderstood and mistrusted both Jews and Christians and considered them “atheists” because they did not believe in the Greek or Roman gods. Opposition to Christianity also arose from within traditional Judaism. Many Jews rejected Jesus as the Messiah. Those who converted to faith in Christ—from a Jewish or Gentile background—often paid a high price in their jobs, family connections, friendships, and other social associations. Persecution of Christians was common.

The believers to whom Hebrews was addressed probably belonged to a group of house churches in Rome in the early 60s AD. The Christian community in Rome was likely founded in the AD 30s when those present at Pentecost ([Acts 2:10](#)) made their way home. Roman believers had demonstrated courage and endurance ([Heb 10:32–34](#)), but by the time Hebrews was written, the spiritual fervor of some had grown cold ([5:11–14](#)), and their theological perspective was skewed ([2:1](#)). Some had even abandoned Christ and the church ([6:4–8](#)).

Summary

Hebrews is an energetic, well-crafted pastoral response to the needs of struggling people. In the style of a first-century sermon, the author alternates between *exposition* on the person and work of Christ and *exhortation* of the hearers to obedience and endurance. Through a detailed discussion on God's Son, along with warnings, challenges, examples, and reminders of God's faithfulness, the author calls the readers to persevere in following Christ.

Following an introduction to the whole sermon ([1:1-4](#)), the author's exposition of Christ's superiority develops in two great movements. The first movement ([1:5-2:18](#)) explains the Son's relationship to the angels. The angels are servants ([1:6-7, 14](#)), but the exalted Son ([1:13](#)), with his unique relationship with the Father ([1:5](#)), is the Lord, creator, and sustainer of the universe—indeed, he is God ([1:8-12](#)). The author exhorts the hearers to pay careful attention to the message of salvation they have been taught ([2:1-4](#)), and then resumes the exposition. The exalted Christ's position was temporarily lower than the angels when he became human ([2:5-9](#)); Jesus took on flesh and blood in order to die to set us free ([2:10-18](#)). The first exposition is followed by exhortation ([3:1-4:13](#)) that focuses on the need for faithful obedience and a continued promise of rest for God's people.

The second movement of the exposition ([4:14-10:18](#)) addresses the position of the Son, our High Priest, in relation to the Old Testament sacrificial system. After introducing this theme [4:14-16](#), the author addresses the Son's appointment as the superior High Priest ([5:1-10](#)) and confronts the community with their spiritual immaturity ([5:11-6:20](#)). A discussion of Melchizedek's superiority to the Levitical priests ([7:1-10](#)) lays the groundwork for presenting Jesus as the superior High Priest according to the order of Melchizedek ([7:11-28](#)). In short, Jesus was not appointed according to the conventions of the Old Testament law, which said that priests should come from the tribe of Levi. Rather, he was appointed by God with an oath, on the basis of his indestructible life. The exposition then considers the superior offering of this appointed High Priest ([8:3-10:18](#)). Like the earthly priests, this superior priest had to make an offering for sins, but his offering was a new-covenant

offering ([8:7-13](#)) that was superior to the old ([9:1-10:18](#)).

The final main section ([10:19-13:25](#)) is an exhortation that challenges the hearers to respond in faithfulness to the message about Christ. The book ends with a benediction and a formal conclusion ([13:20-25](#)).

Authorship

Unlike many other letters of the New Testament, Hebrews does not begin by identifying its author and recipients; many scholars today believe that this is because the book was originally written as a sermon. Since the earliest centuries of the church, the authorship of Hebrews has been much discussed. The book circulated with Paul's letters, and some church fathers in the eastern half of the Mediterranean world (such as Origen and Clement of Alexandria) argued that Paul was the author. Others, especially around Rome, did not think Paul had written the book.

Almost all scholars today agree that Paul was not the author of Hebrews. First, in [2:3](#), the author is depicted as having received the Good News from the original witnesses who followed Christ, and this does not sound at all like Paul (see [Rom 1:1](#); [1 Cor 15:8](#); [Gal 1:11-16](#)). Second, the style, theological images, and vocabulary are quite different from Paul's; for example, Hebrews uses 169 words not found elsewhere in the New Testament.

Through the centuries, many other possible authors for the book have been suggested, such as Philip, Priscilla, Luke, Barnabas, Jude, and Clement of Rome. One of the most popular ideas, since Martin Luther first made the suggestion, is that Apollos wrote it. Luke describes Apollos in [Acts 18:24-26](#) as an eloquent man from Alexandria who was a powerful orator and preacher.

Although we cannot identify the author of Hebrews with certainty, a careful study of the book reveals much about them. First, the excellent Greek in which the book is written and its expertly crafted forms of expression point to a highly educated person. Second, the author of Hebrews must have been a dynamic preacher, one trained in interpretation and exposition, who had memorized large portions of the Old Testament. Third, and most importantly, this author was a deeply concerned Christian leader who addressed their readers urgently and with passion. Hebrews is not simply a theological treatise, but a pastoral appeal that vies for the hearts and minds of those who are struggling in their Christian commitment.

Recipients

The author writes, “Greet all your leaders and all the believers there. The believers from Italy send you their greetings” ([Heb 13:24](#)). The author seems to have been writing back to Italy, and probably to Rome, sending greetings from Italian Christians who had traveled abroad.

Those addressed in this letter seem to have had some background in Jewish worship. The author’s use of the Old Testament and the theological concepts that are presented would have been familiar to those of the synagogue in the Mediterranean world. This does not necessarily mean that all of the recipients were Jews, since many Gentiles were part of the synagogue as “God-fearers” who worshiped the God of Israel.

Occasion of Writing

Some in the Christian community were evidently struggling to maintain their commitment as they were being persecuted. Passages such as [Hebrews 10:32–39](#) suggest that this group of believers, which had faced persecution in the past, was facing it again. In the crucible of having to stand for Christ and the church in the face of public opposition, some were faltering spiritually and others had apparently turned their backs on the faith altogether. The author thus challenges this group of professed Christ followers to endure in their public profession of Christ.

If we are correct that Rome is the destination for this book, this word of exhortation might have been precipitated by the persecution that occurred under the emperor Nero, whose intense persecution and martyrdom of Christians in the mid-60s AD is well known. It is also possible that Hebrews was written after AD 70. This seems less likely, however, because at the time Hebrews was written, apparently no one in the community had faced martyrdom (see [12:4](#)), but the pressure of persecution was on the rise.

Meaning and Message

God has spoken about his Son and through his Son ([1:1-3](#)), and there are dire consequences for those who do not listen and respond with obedience to that word ([2:1-3](#)). In the end, Jesus, the creator and sustainer of the universe ([1:2-3](#)), will put away the created order like a person rolls up an article of old clothing ([1:10-12](#)).

Jesus is supremely worthy of our commitment, worship, and endurance in the faith. He is superior to the angels ([1:5-14](#)), to Moses ([3:1-6](#)), and to the Levitical priesthood of the old covenant ([5:1-10](#); [7:1-28](#)).

Jesus has made a new, heavenly covenant, offering himself once for all through his own death ([8:3-10:18](#)). In his incarnation he endured as a faithful Son ([3:1-6](#); [5:7-8](#); [12:1-2](#)), and in his exaltation he reigns as the supreme Lord of the universe ([1:2-4](#), [8-13](#)). Jesus thus provides us with a superior basis for persevering in the Christian life and having hope for the future.

We can also look to positive examples of others who have been faithful in their journey to God's eternal city (see [6:13-15](#); [10:32-39](#); [11:1-40](#)), and to negative examples of those who fell through disobedience (see [3:7-19](#); [6:4-8](#)). And we can embrace God's promises to us concerning our inheritance as his children ([4:3-11](#); [6:13-20](#); [12:22-24](#)).

Because of Jesus, we can live as faithful members of the Christian community in our relationships and in our worship ([13:1-17](#)). Our perseverance in the Christian faith will be directly proportional to the clarity with which we understand who Jesus is and what he has accomplished on our behalf.