

**Covenant History Series**  
***Hebrews—God's Last Word***

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Sunday, October 25, 2009

*Introduction*

**T**raditionally, Hebrews has been attributed to Paul. Today, however, the majority of scholarly opinion is against Pauline authorship.

But if Paul is not the author, who is? Those who have been suggested as alternatives include: Luke, Barnabas, Apollos, Silas, Clement of Rome, Epaphras, and even Priscilla.

Although the majority of modern scholars, both liberal and conservative, reject Pauline authorship, Paul still seems to me to be our most likely candidate.

*Recipients*

The next question which naturally arises is this: To whom was the letter originally addressed? Unfortunately, there are nearly as many questions concerning this as there are concerning the author, and for the same reason. It does not specifically name the recipients, as many of the other NT epistles do (*e.g.*, Rom. 1:1, 7; Gal. 1:1-2; Col. 1:1-2; 1 Pet. 1:1).

This much, however, seems to be clear: It was intended for a Jewish audience. We gather this largely from four lines of evidence.

*First*, although most scholars doubt the title "to the Hebrews" was a part of the original work, it is found in all of the oldest manuscripts. As Leon Morris observes, "We have no knowledge of any other title or any time when it lacked this one."<sup>1</sup>

*Second*, the author speaks of the revelations of God that were made in times past to "our fathers," and of the more recent revelation made to "us" in his Son (Heb. 1:1-2). The most natural way of understanding this is to assume that both the writer and the original readers were Jews. It was to the fathers of the Jewish people that God had spoken through the prophets, and to the Jewish people that he had spoken through his Son.

*Third*, the whole epistle presupposes an intimate familiarity with the Levitical system of worship, which would not have been true of most Gentile converts to the Christian faith.

*Fourth*, the warnings against apostasy do not appear to have in view a relapse into paganism, but an abandoning of the Christian faith in favor of a Christ-less Judaism. It does not seem likely that there would have been a widespread problem of Gentile Christians departing the faith in favor of Judaism. But it is not at all unlikely that Jews who had come to embrace Christ would be tempted to return to the fold of Judaism under pressure from their unbelieving countrymen.

If it is granted that the letter was written to a group of predominately, if not exclusively, Christian Jews, the next question is: *which* group of Christian Jews?

Some scholars have suggested that Hebrews was intended to be a circular letter, that is, that it was not originally intended for a particular church, but was written for Christian Jews generally. This would be similar to the epistle of James (Jas. 1:1).

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<sup>1</sup> Leon Morris, in *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 12, p. 4

On the other hand, it seems better to suppose that the author *did* have a particular church in mind, one with which he seems to have had personal links. The author, for instance, is familiar with, and makes reference to particular experiences his readers had, such as the circumstances under which they became Christians (10:32), their current state of mind (5:11-12; 6:9-11), what persecutions they suffered (10:32-34; 12:4), etc. In addition, the author indicates that he had previously been with them and hoped to be restored to them again (13:19, 23).

The original recipients would seem, then, to have been a group of Christian Jews with which he had a personal acquaintance.

I would suggest the possibility that the letter might best be viewed as having been written by Paul soon after his release from his first Roman imprisonment<sup>2</sup> to a group of converted Jewish priests in the Jerusalem church. We are told in Acts 6:7 that a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith. They would have had an extensive knowledge of the OT and the rituals of tabernacle worship, such as Hebrews presupposes about its readers. With their background and experience they ought to have been able to quickly rise to the rank of teachers and leaders in the church. Perhaps the admonition in 5:12-6:2 is best understood in this light, namely, of priests who were hesitating between their adherence to Christ and the practice of their priesthood. Hence also the frequent warnings against apostasy—not a falling away to paganism, but to unbelieving Judaism,

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<sup>2</sup> He seems to be at liberty to travel, since he contemplates a journey to see his readers 13:23, and he sends greetings on behalf of οἱ ἀπὸ τῆς Ἰταλίας "those from Italy" (13:24). Were these Italians living abroad or in their own country? The words could be taken either way. "Acts 10:23 has a similar expression for those still living in their homeland and Acts 21:27 for those living away from their homeland" (Leon Morris, *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 12, p. 157).

with its rejection of Christ and his once for all sacrifice (6:4-8; 10:26ff).

We cannot say for sure, but this seems to me to be the best way to account for the epistle as a whole.

### *Date*

We cannot date the letter very precisely. The chief indication we have of its date is that the letter says nothing about the destruction of Jerusalem, which occurred in AD 70. Instead, it seems to suppose the ongoing ministrations in the temple. It can hardly be supposed the author would have neglected to mention the destruction of the temple if it had already occurred. His point throughout is to show that Christ has fulfilled all the types and shadows of the Law, which, as a consequence have become "obsolete" (8:13). Could there have been a more powerful argument proving the point than the destruction of the temple, if it had occurred? I think not. Therefore, since the fact is not mentioned, it seems we must regard the letter as having been written prior to AD 70. The sense of urgency that pervades the book (8:13; 10:15) seems to indicate a date not long before the event, at a time when things were quickly escalating toward war with Rome, and Jews were increasingly being called upon to cast their lot in with those wishing to revolt.

### *Characteristics and Themes*

Though we usually refer to Hebrews as a letter, or an epistle, "important features of a letter are lacking."<sup>3</sup> Though it has a traditional epistolary conclusion, it does not have such an opening. A number of scholars have thought that Hebrews is best understood as a

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<sup>3</sup> Leon Morris, in *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 12, p. 3

work originally composed as sermon. The writer refers to his work as a “word of exhortation” (13:22). This phrase is used in Acts for a sermon (Acts 13:15).

The theme of Hebrews is the excellence of Christ and of the salvation to be had in him. The author repeatedly says that Jesus is “better” or “superior” or “greater than” what was found in the OT. In Christ we have:

- a better hope (7:9)
- a better covenant (7:22; 8:6)
- better promises (8:6; 11:40; 12:24)
- a better sacrifice (9:23)

Jesus is said to be superior to the angels (1:4) and worthy of more glory than Moses (3:3). He officiates as priest in a greater and more perfect tabernacle (9:11).

From the way in which the author makes his case, it is clear that his chief purpose is to confirm in the faith those Jewish believers (perhaps the priests mentioned earlier) who were being tempted to forsake their Christian commitments and return to Judaism. He seeks to show, in a very methodical fashion, the superiority of Christ to everything that preceded him:

- ☞ Had God once spoken to Israel by the prophets? So he had; but now, in our day, he says, he has spoken to us in his Son (1:1-2).
- ☞ Was the Law given through the ministry of angels (2:1; cf. Acts 7:53)? Indeed, it was; and it made the Law all the more glorious. But Christ is greater than the angels (1:3b-2:9).
- ☞ Was Moses a faithful servant in the household of God? Without doubt; but Jesus is greater than Moses inasmuch as a Son is greater than a servant (3:1-6).

- ☞ Did Joshua lead the people of Israel into the land of Canaan and give them rest? Yes, but Jesus will lead us into a still greater rest and more permanent (4:9)
- ☞ Was Aaron the man whom God appointed to be Israel's high priest? Yes, he was; but the high priesthood of Christ is superior to that of Aaron, for Christ is a priest after the order of Melchizedek, and is holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens (chaps. 5-7).
- ☞ Had God made a covenant with Israel in the days of old? Yes, but in Christ he has made a better covenant based upon better promises (8:6)
- ☞ Did the Levitical order of worship have offerings and sacrifices? Yes, but it was impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to really take away sins, although Christ did this once and for all by the sacrifice of himself (chaps. 9-10)

Over and over again, the author shows the superiority of Christ over everything in the OT. He shows that the redemptive purpose of God finds its fulfillment in Christ. Jesus is God's last and final word. Christ is the culmination of God's redemptive activity, and if one rejects him, one cannot hope to be saved.

*Brief Outline*

- I. Christ is Superior to the Angels (1:1-2:18)
- II. Christ is Superior to Moses (3:1-4:13)
- III. Christ is Superior to Aaron (4:14-7:28)
- IV. Christ's Sacrifice is Superior to the Sacrifices of the Law (8:1-10:18)
- V. Exhortation to Perseverance and Faithfulness (10:19-13:19)
- VI. Conclusion (13:20-24)