

THE BOOK OF HEBREWS

Aim of the Lesson: Forsake the world and be true to Jesus Christ.

Introduction: This epistle was written to the Hebrew Christians, who were tempted to return to Judaism to avoid additional persecution and pressure from their fellow countrymen. The writer of Hebrews exhorts them to go forward with Christ, and not backward to Judaism, because Christ is superior in every way to Judaism. He is superior to the prophets because He is the final and complete message from God. He is superior to the angels because He is God and they worship and serve Him. He is superior to Moses because he was a servant in the house of God, but Christ is the builder and Lord over the house. He is superior to Aaron because He is of an older and permanent priesthood and He ministers under a better covenant, offers a better sacrifice and ministers in a better sanctuary. He encourages the Jewish Christians to live with confidence because they now have access to God through Jesus Christ, their great high priest. He encourages them to live with endurance and not draw back, so they would receive the reward of God's promises. He encourages them to have faith in God like the great heroes of the Bible who trusted God and won outstanding victories. He encourages them to accept God's discipline and have hope in God like Jesus Christ, who endured the cross, despising the shame and is now seated at the right hand of the throne of God. He encourages them to practice love in their Christian life and in their Christian worship. Though this epistle is written to Hebrew Christians, who were tempted to return to Judaism, it has many applications to Gentile Christians, who are tempted to return to the world.

I. AUTHORSHIP

The writer is not identified in this epistle, so there have been many speculations about the author of Hebrews. Since the writer does not identify himself at the beginning of the book as Paul's custom was, there are some that doubt that Paul wrote this letter. Furthermore, the style is somewhat different than Paul's other letters. The writer introduces the work in the fashion of Genesis and the Gospel of John with the name of God Almighty. Perhaps it was inevitable that a human personality should recede before that Holy Name.

For the sake of brevity, however, consider these reasons as evidence that Paul is the author of Hebrews.

- (1) The tradition of the early church said Paul wrote this epistle. This was fairly well established until the 3rd century, when other names were advanced as possible authors. The testimony of those who knew Paul and lived near his generation in time is a strong reason to accept Paul as the author rather than the guesses of those who are centuries removed.
- (2) The weight of internal evidence also points to Paul as author:
 - a. The general development of the epistle is similar to Romans, in proceeding from doctrine to practical matters and closing with personal words.
 - b. Timothy is mentioned as an associate in the ministry.
 - c. The author was in bonds when he penned this letter [Heb 10:34], which relates to Paul.
 - d. The closing verses are very characteristic of Paul's personal style of writing.
- (3) The peculiarities of doctrine are manifestly Pauline; even those who dispute Paul's authorship admit that "the thoughts are the apostle's" and that "the general cast of thought is Pauline." As he does in his other epistles, Paul amply discusses many points of doctrine to support the general theme that Christianity is superior to Judaism.

There are many other names suggested as possible authors for the book of Hebrews, as Barnabas, Luke, Apollos, Philip and others. They cite various differences in style, expression, or construction as reason to question the authorship of Paul. It should be kept in mind that writing to a different group of people with a different background, having a different purpose in mind and using a different approach, may account for many of these subtle differences from Paul's other writings. But the message of the book is not diminished by not

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II. READERSHIP

The readers were Jewish Christians. The theme of the epistle, Christianity is superior to Judaism, is most appropriate for this audience. The author assumes that these readers were well acquainted with the patriarchs, prophets, priest, covenants, and Levitical ritual.

Notice the references about the readers within the text that reveal the circumstances of the recipients.

- (1) They had received the gospel from personal disciples of the Lord [2:3].
- (2) The Spirit had done "signs and wonders in their midst" [2:4].
- (3) They were true believers [3:1], but had not grown sufficiently [5:11-12].
- (4) They were still working and laboring in love on behalf of the saints [6:10].
- (5) They had endured suffering [12:4] and had helped those who were imprisoned for the gospel [10:32-34].
- (6) They were warned not to follow the doctrines of false teachers [13:9].
- (7) They were united in a specific church that the author hoped to visit soon [13:19, 23], but some had stopped coming to the services [10:25].

III. DATE

Two major factors about the date when this letter was written focus on the destruction of the temple [A. D. 70] and the time of intense persecution. Since the writer makes no reference to the temple being destroyed, it is assumed Hebrews was written before A. D. 70. If it had been destroyed, mention of it in the letter would be expected since it would bolster the writer's argument that Judaism was replaced by a new and better system. Moreover, the Nero persecutions commenced about A. D. 64. The wars began in A. D. 66 that climaxed with the destruction of Jerusalem and of the temple. Furthermore, if we accept Paul as the author, we must consider A. D. 67, when his life was taken from him, so the date for the writing of Hebrews would be no later than the middle of the sixties.

IV. CIRCUMSTANCES

This epistle is remarkably appropriate for the Christians of our day, since the readers were Christians suffering from apathy. The author writes to combat a drift away from the things they had learned [2:1]. He labeled them dull of hearing and ones who had become spiritual babes again [5:11-14]. He warned that they were prey to an evil heart of unbelief, in falling away from the living God [3:12]. He saw in them a tendency toward worldliness [13:5].

Perhaps we would be more sympathetic to their unique dilemma if we considered the emotional trauma of the decision they had to make. The Jews had a lustrous heritage nationally and spiritually and it was a source of great pride to them. Particularly impressive was their imposing temple, rich with ritual and solemn significance, which was ordained by God Himself. The very priests who still ministered daily in those hallowed precincts followed a pattern prescribed by God's own command. With these thoughts in mind, any Christian Jew who chanced to gaze again upon those rituals, rich with the dignity of the ages, was subject to the temptation to doubt his decision to follow Christ, who offered none of these rituals. It was not easy to turn away from the sanctuary where generations of Jews had worshipped. Certainly they knew that they could return to the fold at any time, and that was a constant snare. For this reason, five passages appeal for a rededication of their lives to avoid the danger of turning back to Judaism and its dead works.

Finally, consider that these people had already undergone persecution, and though they had not yet suffered martyrdom [12:14], the danger was ever present.

V. THEME

The theme of the book is captured in two words. The first word is "better," which appears 13 times. Christ is better than Judaism (or the world) in every way. The second word is "perfect," which appears 14 times. The epistle is written to encourage the believers to be perfect (mature) in Christ. These believers were acting like babies and they needed to become strong for the Lord by putting their full trust in Him.