

Book of Hebrews

Title:

When the various New Testament books were formally brought together into one collection shortly after A.D. 100, the titles were added for convenience.

This epistle's title bears the traditional Greek title, "To the Hebrews," which was attested by at least in the second century A.D.

Within the epistle itself, however, there is no identification of the recipients as either Hebrews (Jews), or Gentiles.

Since the epistle is filled with references to Hebrew history and religion and does not address any particular Gentile or pagan practice, the traditional title has been maintained.

Authorship - Date:

One of the great mysteries surrounding the Book of Hebrews concerns its authorship.

For some unknown reason the author remains anonymous to us, though he was known to his original readers (13:23).

Discussion of the author's identity dates back to the second century, but convincing evidence was lacking even then.

Indeed, the great critical scholar of the third century, Origen of Alexandria, had to concede that only God truly knows who the author of this epistle is.

The author, whether Jew or Gentile, had a superb knowledge both of Jewish Levitical thought and also of Greek literary style (which is often regarded as the finest in the New Testament).

Yet he does seem to be Jewish in that he apparently identifies himself with his Jewish readers by his writing: "Let us go forth therefore unto him without the camp" (see 13:13; and see the note on this verse).

These and other factors will help to show the strengths and weaknesses of the more common views of authorship.

Paul, Barnabas, Silas, Apollos, Luke, Philip, Priscilla, Aquila, and Clement of Rome have been suggested by different scholars, but the epistle's vocabulary, style, and various literary characteristics do not clearly support any particular claim.

It is significant that the writer includes himself among those people who had received confirmation of Christ's message from others (2:3).

That would seem to rule out someone like Paul who claimed that he had received such confirmation directly from God and not from men (Gal. 1:12).

Whoever the author was, he preferred citing Old Testament references from the Greek Old Testament (LXX), rather than from the Hebrew text.

Even the early church expressed various opinions on authorship, and current scholarship admits the puzzle still has no solution.

Therefore, it seems best to accept the epistle's anonymity.

Ultimately, of course, the author was the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:21).

The use of the present tense (in 5:1-4; 7:21, 23, 27-28; 8:3-5, 13; 9:6-9, 13, 25; 10:1, 3-4, 8, 11; and 13:10-11), would suggest that the Levitical priesthood and sacrificial system were still in operation when the epistle was composed.

Since the temple was destroyed by General (Later emperor), Titus Vespasian (in A.D. 70), the epistle must have been written prior to that date.

In addition, it may be noted that Timothy had just been released from prison (13:23), and the persecution was becoming severe (10:32-39; 2:4; 13:3).

These details suggest a date for the epistle around (A.D. 67-69).

Background – Setting:

Emphases on the Levitical priesthood and on the sacrifices, as well as the absence of any reference to the Gentiles, support the conclusion that a community of Hebrews was the recipient of the epistle.

Although these Hebrews were primarily converts to Christ, there were probably a number of unbelievers in their midst, who were attracted by the message of salvation, but who had not yet made a full commitment of faith in Christ.

One thing is clear from the contents of the epistle: the community of Hebrews was facing the possibility of intensified persecution (10:32-39; 12:4).

As they confronted this possibility, the Hebrews were tempted to cast aside any identification with Christ.

They may have considered demoting Christ from God's Son to a mere angel.

Such a precedent had already been set in the Qumran community of messianic Jews living near the Dead Sea.

They had dropped out of society, established a religious commune, and included the worship of angels in their brand of reformed Judaism.

The Qumran community had even gone so far as to claim that the angel Michael was higher in status than the coming Messiah.

These kinds of doctrinal aberrations could explain the emphasis in Hebrews chapter one on the superiority of Christ over the angels.

Possible locations for the recipients of the epistle include Palestine, Egypt, Italy Asia Minor, and also Greece.

The community that was the primary recipient may have circulated the epistle among those of Hebrew background in neighboring areas and churches.

Those believers probably had not seen Christ personally.

Apparently, they had been evangelized by "those who heard" Christ and whose ministries had been authenticated "by signs and wonders and by various miracles" (2:3-4).

Thus, the recipients could have been in a church outside Judea and Galilee or in a church in those areas, but established among people in the generation following those who had been eyewitnesses of Christ.

The congregation was not new or untaught ("by this time you ought to be teachers"), yet some of them still needed "milk and not solid food" (5:12).

The generation of Hebrews receiving this epistle had practiced the Levitical sacrifices at the temple in Jerusalem.

Jews living in exile had substituted the synagogue for the temple but still felt a deep attraction to the temple worship.

Some had the means to make regular pilgrimages to the temple in Jerusalem.

The writer of the epistle emphasized the superiority of Christianity over Judaism and the superiority of Christ's once-for-all sacrifice over the repeated and imperfect Levitical sacrifices observed in the temple.

Historical – Themes:

Since the book of Hebrews is grounded in the work of the Levitical priesthood, an understanding of the book of Leviticus is essential for properly interpreting Hebrews.

Israel's sin had continually interrupted God's fellowship with His both chosen and covenant people, Israel.

Therefore, He graciously and sovereignly established a system of sacrifices that symbolically represented the inner repentance of sinners and His divine forgiveness.

However, the need for sacrifices never ended because the people and priests continued to sin.

The need of all mankind was a perfect priest and a perfect sacrifice that would once and for all actually remove sin.

God's provision for that perfect priest and sacrifice in Christ is the central message of Hebrews.

The epistle to Hebrews is a study in contrast, between the imperfect and incomplete provisions of the Old Covenant, given under Moses, and the infinitely better provisions of the New Covenant offered by the perfect High-Priest, God's only Son and the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

Included in the "better" provisions are: a better hope, testament, promise, sacrifice, substance, country, and resurrection.

Those who belong to the New Covenant dwell in a completely new and heavenly atmosphere.

They worship a heavenly Savior, have a heavenly calling, receive a heavenly gift, are citizens of a heavenly country, look forward to a heavenly Jerusalem, and they now have their very names written in heaven.

One of the key theological themes in Hebrews is that all believers now have direct access to God under the New Covenant and, therefore, may approach the throne of God boldly (4:16; 10:22).

One's hope is in the very presence of God, into which he follows the Savior (6:19-20; 10:19-20).

The primary teaching that was symbolized by the tabernacle service was that believers under the covenant of law did not have direct access to the presence of God (9:8), but were shut out of the Holy of Holies.

The book of Hebrews may briefly be summarized in this way: Believers in Jesus Christ, as God's perfect sacrifice for sin, have the perfect High-Priest through whose ministry everything is new and better than under the covenant of law.

The epistle is more than a doctrinal treatise, however.

It is intensely practical in its application to everyday living (see chapter 13).

The writer even refers to his letter as a “word of exhortation” (see 13:22; compare Acts 13:15).

Exhortations designed to stir the readers into action are found throughout the text.

First century Jewish Christians were confronted with the anguish of having given up long held godly traditions only to experience increased persecution and unfulfilled promises.

Both family and foe now harassed them.

Further, Christ had not yet returned, and there were no apparent indications that His return and the restoration of Israel would ever occur.

The first generations of Christians had passed, and Israel was still unsaved.

Outwardly, Christ remained unvindicated before many of them.

The Book of Hebrews is an exhortation to Jewish Christians to hold fast to their faith in Christ.

Throughout the epistle, the author stresses the continuity and flow between the Old Testament revelation and the new faith in Christ, while emphasizing the superiority of both Christ and His New Covenant, using such words as better, perfect and heavenly.

By so doing, he assures the Jewish Christians of the biblical heritage that is therefore contained in the New Covenant.

(Hebrews contains 29 direct quotations from and 53 clear allusions to the Old Testament”).

He challenges them to run with endurance the race that is set before them (12:1), even as their Jewish ancestors had done (chapter 11).

The style of the epistle is one of encouragement, comfort, and warning.

The book leads one from superficial thinking to profound depths concerning the person and work of Christ.

Its argument is the superiority and finality of Christianity.

Its theme is the high priestly ministry of Christ in behalf of believers.