

Hebrews

Authorship

This work does not name its author. Ancient tradition ascribes it to Paul, and many of its themes may be traced in the Pauline correspondence. There is also a strong tradition pointing to Barnabas, the early missionary partner of Paul, as the author. Others have been mentioned as possible authors including Clement of Rome, Luke, Silvanus, Philip the Evangelist, Priscilla, and Apollos.¹ The case for Barnabas seems credible, though it cannot be absolutely proven.

Date

Clement of Rome quotes from Hebrews around A.D. 95. From the nature of the references to the temple in Jerusalem (cf. 8:4, 13; 9:6-9; 10:1-3) it is most likely that it was written prior to A.D. 70, when that temple was destroyed and the sacrificial system was thereby suspended. Hodges suggests a date of A.D. 68/69, probably after the death of Paul (derived from the reference to Timothy's release in 13:23).²

Original Readers

The exact destination of the epistle cannot be known. From internal evidence it can be reasonably concluded that the readership is comprised of Jewish believers, living in some community, who are surrounded by a contingent of non-believing Jews that is large enough to pose the threat of persecution. Israel, Rome, and north Africa have been suggested. The inability to identify the recipients does not obscure the message of the book.³

Occasion

There is not enough evidence to suggest a historical event or situation occasioning this letter. There is, rather, the general picture of Jewish Christians living amidst unbelieving Jews who are pressuring them to return to the observance of their ancestral faith. This pressure prompted the author to respond out of concern for their spiritual stability.

¹ For a summary of the evidence see Zane Hodges, "Hebrews" in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, New Testament edition* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1983), 777-78. See also Donald Guthrie *New Testament Introduction* 4th ed. revised (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 668-82.

² Cf. Hodges, "Hebrews," 777. See also Guthrie, *Introduction*, 701-5. For arguments for a pre-A.D. 70 dating see John A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1976), 200-20.

³ Cf. Guthrie, *Introduction*, 696-700 for a discussion of the Israel and Rome as possible destinations and see Hodges "Hebrews," 778-80 for a discussion of north Africa as a possible destination.

Theme Statement

Maintaining confession of Christ will allow the believer to press on to maturity and receive a full inheritance.

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Theme Statement

Maintaining confession of Christ will allow the believer to press on to maturity and receive a full inheritance.

Theme Development

Hebrews is written to Jewish Christians who, having made an open profession of their faith (presumably through baptism), are being pressured to return to the traditional practice of Judaism. Because of stagnation in their spiritual growth, and some degree of persecution, they are in some danger of doing just that. The writer encourages them to maintain their confession by showing them Christianity's superiority to Judaism, the serious consequence of falling away, and the eternal reward of pressing on to maturity. Though they have received eternal life (and would never lose it), they could still experience temporal judgment by once again aligning themselves with Israel, which was currently under the wrath of God (cf. 1 Thess 2:15-16). The key to such endurance is understanding and continually affirming the superiority of the person and work of Jesus Christ.

I. Prologue: The Son of God is the culmination of divine revelation (1:1-4).

These opening bars of the symphony of the Son sound forth the finality of His revelation, by summarizing his future inheritance, past work of creation, and present ministry at God's right hand. He is the ultimate revelation of God, demonstrated by his exaltation above even the angels.

II. Part I: The superiority of Christ's work argues the foolishness of returning to Judaism (1:5–10:39).

The writer does not immediately reveal the hortatory purpose of his writing. Rather, he begins by focusing upon the superiority of Christ and then works into his various concerns and warnings. He thus establishes an exposition-admonition pattern, which continues throughout the book.

Beginning with the climactic element of the prologue, namely, Christ's position at the Father's right hand far above the angels, the writer develops the reasons for such an exaltation. Christ has been exalted because of who he is and because of what he has done.

A. The Son has been appointed as ruler above all because he became lower than the angels to accomplish our salvation (1:5–2:18).

The first exposition demonstrates Christ's superiority to the angels in his person (1:5-14). As Son, King, Creator, and Sovereign, Christ has been placed over and given charge of the angels, who themselves have been sent for the benefit of those who will inherit salvation. This is broader than merely justification. It includes the full experience of living the Christian life, deliverance from temporal judgment, and the preservation of the value of one's life for eternity (cf. 10:39). Because Christ is the superior messenger of this salvation, sufficiently authorized by divinely testimony, the believer ought to pay close attention. Neglecting his word will result in dire consequences (2:1-4). This is the first admonition. Additional exposition shows that Christ was also exalted by his work, namely, his willing subjection to life as a man (2:5-9), and to a perfecting by suffering as its necessary corollary (2:10-13), so that he might die as a satisfactory, substitutionary sacrifice for mankind's sin (2:14-18). No angel could ever have accomplished such a work.

B. The Son has been honored above Moses as the builder of his house (3:1–4:16).

The second area of superiority is as Apostle and High Priest with respect to the house of priestly service (3:1-2). Moses was faithful in this house, referring to the tabernacle constructed in the wilderness, but Christ is its ultimate builder (3:3-4). By extension, "house" becomes a metaphor for that company of believers, within the totality of the body of Christ, who maintain a priestly ministry of open confession of Christ. This ministry is contingent upon holding "fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm to the end" (3:6). Though all believers have the

right and responsibility to participate in this special priestly ministry, not all do.⁴ The admonition with respect to the house of confession takes the form of learning from Israel's failure to fulfill their calling as God's priest-nation to the rest of the nations (3:7-4:16; cf. Exod 19:5-6). Israel continually, generation by generation, failed to complete the work of testimony entrusted to them by God (3:7-15; 4:8-10). Thus, because of unbelief, they did not enter into the rest of a completed work, the kind of rest that God enjoyed at the completion of creation (3:16-19). However, believers in Christ may, by associating themselves as his companions, complete such a work, if they "hold the beginning of [their] confidence steadfast to the end" (3:14-15). Israel failed to fully possess the land and complete their ministry of priesthood (4:1-8). Therefore, the priestly ministry of proclamational confession remains to be completed by the (present) people of God (4:9-10). Diligence is required to finish such a work (4:11) and God will most assuredly evaluate the effort (4:12-13). The key to its completion is holding fast the confession of Christ, for which there is the unfailing resource of grace (4:14-16).

C. The Son has been exalted above Aaron as a Priest according to the order of Melchizedek (5:1-10:39).

This section of the book, the largest one, deals with the superiority of the Melchizedekan priesthood to the Aaronic one. The central focus of Christ's priesthood has already been introduced (3:1; 4:14-16), but is now fully developed as it relates to the believer's present condition and future expectation. Two sets of exposition and admonition serve to warn and motivate the believer with respect to consistent, open identification with Christ.

1. Exposition: Christ is fully qualified as the High Priest of eternal salvation (5:1-10). Since every priest is taken from among men so as to be able to deal empathetically with their plight, so Christ became a man and was schooled through suffering (5:1-8). However, since Christ was also the Son, His perfectly obedient response resulted in the authoring of a complete salvation experience, fully orbed in quality and quantity (5:9). Beyond mere judicial release from the eternal penalty of sin, this salvation extends to the believer's present experience and rewardable effort. Obedience is required in order to benefit fully from such a salvation (5:9). However, these believers have become spiritually dull with respect to modeling their lives after the Savior's (5:11). This prompts a serious warning.

⁴ Cf. 1 Peter 2:5 for the concept of being built into a "spiritual house for a holy priesthood." The conditional clause in Hebrews 3:6 must not be dismissed. See Hodges, "Hebrews," 786.

2. Admonition: Protracted spiritual immaturity will result in spiritual retrogression and serious chastening (5:11–6:20). Obedience is necessary for a believer to share in this total salvation experience, yet some of them are still spiritual infants, only able to intake the milk of Christian truth (5:12-14). This is dangerous because it can lead to serious defection in the face of the threat of persecution, to permanent spiritual disability, and even to physical judgment (6:1-8). They need to press on to maturity (6:1) so that they may be able to discern good and evil and respond accordingly (5:14). They need to learn to live like Christ had (2:10-11; 5:8-9). If they fell away, coming to need reinstruction in the elementary truths of the faith, they may well not be able to recover (6:4-6). Not that they would lose possession of the gift of eternal life. Rather they would become stuck in a protracted immaturity, much like the nation of Israel throughout their history. This kind of life experience would be similar to burned earth (6:8).

However, the writer is confident that this will not likely happen to his readers (6:9). They had already proven themselves to a large extent and could be assured of the Lord's assistance in their spiritual pursuit (6:10-12) buoyed by Abraham's success and Jesus' accomplishments (6:13-20).

3. Exposition: As a Priest of the order of Melchizedek Christ provided perfect salvation (7:1–10:18).

The reason for the writer's confidence in his readers' positive response lies not in their ability but, rather, in the new covenant ministry of Jesus as a Melchizedekan priest. It is an eternal priesthood that provides and enables a completed experience. After fully developing the superiority of Christ as a priest (7:1-28) the writer dwells on the superiority of Christ's service (8:1–10:18). The goal of this service is to “. . . save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him . . .” (7:25), that is, to deliver them into a full and complete experience of all the benefits of salvation. This points beyond eternal justification to present sanctification. The superiority of Christ's service centers in his mediation of the new covenant (8:7–9:15). While the first covenant was broken due to human inability (8:7-9) the new covenant provides divine enablement (8:10-13). This new covenant is not vexed with natural limitations (9:1-10) but operates out of the greater, heavenly tabernacle and provides a conscience purged from dead works to serve the living God (9:11-14). This is the only sure provision for obtaining the promised inheritance (9:16). Because of Christ's superior sacrifice (9:16-28) he is able to effect a superior experience (10:1-18). What the Old Testament believer could never have, namely, a sense of the final, full, complete forgiveness of sins (10:1-4), Christ has provided for the believer

under the new covenant through the sacrifice of his own body (10:5-10). This means that believers have been finally and forever set apart to God, secure in the knowledge of their acceptance and forgiveness of sins, perfected as it were in their approach (10:11-18).

4. Admonition: Failure to maintain faithfulness will result in temporal judgment for the believer (10:19-39).

The believer now has boldness to enter God's presence because of Jesus' sacrifice (10:19-20) and because he has a High Priest of access (10:21). Therefore, the believer should come into his presence (10:22). This drawing near "with a true heart and full assurance of faith" is what will sustain steadfast confession of Christ as the believer's hope (10:23). Believers are to encourage one another to this end in light of the exigencies of the time (10:24-25).

However, great privilege brings with it great responsibility. Deliberate defection from the faith, through a "confessional rejection" of the work of Christ, will open one up to the prospect of temporal judgment (10:26-31). In light of who Christ is and all that he has done, no greater insult to the grace of God could be perpetrated than to return to Judaism (10:28-29). Endurance is needed to avoid such insult and, in the process, to obtain the reward granted for faithfulness (10:32-39). The readers had already endured mistreatment for the cause of Christ (10:32-34). Now they needed to endure to the end unto the pleasure of God (10:38) and the eternal benefit of their own souls (10:39).

III. Part II: The superiority of Christ's reward argues the blessedness of faithful endurance (11:1-12:29).

Having focused on the superiority of Christ's person and work as the motivation for maintaining a confession of faith, the writer now turns to the superiority of Christ's reward. Throughout time, the faithful have been looking forward to "something better" than what this world can offer. Their example serves as further motivation for these beleaguered believers in their struggle to remain openly loyal to Jesus Christ.

A. Spiritual certainty and divine approval are gained by faith (11:1-40).

Maintaining one's confession requires faith. Faith is being sure about what God has promised and seeing things from God's perspective. Examples of old demonstrate that faith obeys divine directives and gains God's approval (11:4-16). Furthermore, faith overcomes the obstacles that are part of divine testing, also approved by God (11:17-40). Faith discounts the present appearance of lack and need and fixes its hope on the promise of God held out for the

future (11:39-40). Hence, present distress must not be allowed to deter one from maintaining confession of Christ.

B. Admonition: Perseverance must be maintained in order to realize the completeness of God's intentions (12:1-29).

The final admonition is to endure in the "race" of life. Faith will be fostered by looking to the One who authored and perfected faith, in spite of the most humiliating treatment (12:1-2). In order to gain the promised inheritance it is necessary to be disciplined through suffering (12:3-11). This will produce the kind of character needed to honor the Father and thus receive divine approval. This will require diligence because failure is always a possibility (12:12-17). Since the believer has come to the Mediator of the new covenant (12:18-24) great care must be taken to respond to the heavenly mandate to serve God acceptably (12:25-29). To not do so invites the displeasure of the One who has so graciously provided believers with His kingdom (12:28-29).

IV. Epilogue: Concluding Exhortations and responsibilities (13:1-25).

The personal exhortations with which the writer concludes can be understood as confessional ramifications with regard to personal conduct (13:1-6) and assembly life (13:7-17). By maintaining identification with the church, believers are indicating their willingness to bear the reproach of Christ (13:10-13), indicating the fact that they are looking to the Lord's future reward (cf. ch. 11). The spiritual sacrifices to be offered are all things that somehow will contribute to their confession of Christ. Even submission to church oversight becomes a confessional matter (13:17).

The writer's benediction is a fitting summary of his exhortation, focusing as it does on the great Shepherd of the sheep, the everlasting covenant, and his desire that they become complete in their works unto the pleasure of the Lord.

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