

# INTRODUCTION

It is difficult to overestimate the significance of Hebrews for understanding the nature of the new covenant. No other document in the New Testament canon comments as directly and extensively upon this covenant as does Hebrews. Its description of Jesus as the great high priest of the believer is a unique contribution to New Testament Christology.

Yet Hebrews is perhaps as well known for the difficulties it presents as it is for its distinctive contributions to our understanding of the ministry of Jesus and the nature of our salvation. It is difficult to be certain about who wrote it, when and to whom. It is a letter and not quite a letter. Many find its line of argument intricate and complex, its theology abstract and obscure, and its use of the Old Testament puzzling if not problematic. This commentary will begin by addressing some of these considerations.

## AUTHORSHIP

Over the years, most of the debate about the authorship of Hebrews has focused on whether or not Paul wrote this letter. Arguments have been made for other possible authors as well. What we can know for certain about the author is best gleaned from the letter itself, but many will want to know how this debate affects our confidence in the authority and inspiration of the letter.

*Did Paul write the Letter to the Hebrews?*

Though few defend Pauline authorship of Hebrews today,<sup>1</sup> in the past this view has enjoyed the support of significant church leaders and traditions. The earliest extant copy of Hebrews (early third century) has been received as part of a collection of Paul's letters, in which it was placed after Romans. Pauline authorship was defended by notable church fathers in the East, e.g., Clement of Alexandria (c.150-c.215) and Origen (185-253) who, despite reservations, defended it as essentially Pauline, at least in part on the weight of what was then received tradition. Later, Jerome and Augustine helped to shift opinion in the West and the Sixth Synod of Carthage (419) established a tradition of support for Pauline authorship which lasted until the Reformation.

However, the weight of the evidence — both historical and textual — is far from clear. Early church opinion was far from universal. In the West, prior to Jerome and Augustine, such leaders as Irenaeus and Hippolytus of Rome did not accept Hebrews as Pauline. The *Muratorian Canon* (a list of documents accepted as New Testament Scripture, c. 170) included thirteen letters identified as Pauline but excluded Hebrews. When reformers such as Calvin and Luther reexamined the question centuries later, neither concluded that Paul was its author. Contemporary critics consider Pauline authorship implausible in light of clear differences between the vocabulary and style of Hebrews and epistles known to be Pauline. Further, it has been argued as improbable for Paul to refer to himself as the author does in 2:3 (“This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him”) in light of what he says of himself in Galatians 1:11-12 (“I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ”).

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<sup>1</sup>Carson, Moo and Morris note that the last major defense of Pauline authorship was written more than fifty years ago. *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), p. 395.

*Who else could have written the letter to the Hebrews?*

As early as the second century, Tertullian identified Barnabas as the author of the letter. Barnabas was a Levite (Acts 4:26), and there is much about levitical ritual in the epistle. He was also a Hellenistic Jew, a member of the Jerusalem church and a missionary partner of Paul (Acts 9:27; 11:30; 12:1-14:28). All of this evidence is circumstantial, however, and nothing but Tertullian's opinion connects him to the letter directly.

Clement of Alexandria first suggested that Luke translated a Hebrew text written by Paul. Calvin affirmed this possibility centuries later. There are some similarities in the Greek style of Luke-Acts and Hebrews. But there is little other evidence and there are also some differences in style. Calvin also suggested Clement of Rome as a possibility. However, Clement of Rome widely quoted from the letter himself. It is unlikely that he would quote himself and his use of the Old Testament is often at variance with that in Hebrews.

Luther was the first to suggest Apollos as the possible author of Hebrews, a view which continues to enjoy some popularity. He was a "learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures" who "vigorously refuted the Jews in public debate, proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ" (Acts 18:24-28). Presumably, he would have been capable of the careful handling of the LXX found in Hebrews. Also, he probably had some connection to the Pauline mission (1 Corinthians 1-4). But concluding that he was therefore the author of Hebrews is, at best, conjecture.

Among others, arguments have been made for Peter, Jude, Stephen, Aristion, Priscilla, Silas, Timothy, Epaphras, Philip and Mary the mother of Jesus as possible authors of Hebrews. Two other possibilities remain. An associate of Paul could have written the letter for him (a view first suggested by Origen in 220). It is also possible that Hebrews was written by some other anonymous Christian unknown to us. The letter itself does not clearly identify its author. Perhaps the fairest conclusion is that advanced by Origen, in spite of his inclina-

tion to defend Pauline authorship: “who wrote the Epistle, God only knows the truth.”<sup>2</sup>

*How does the debate about authorship affect our view of the letter?*

It is important to note that, although the debate over authorship has extended over the centuries, the question of the letter’s canonicity (i.e., its inspiration and authority) has not. Even though church fathers in the East may have had doubts about its authorship, there is no evidence that they ever questioned its canonicity. Though the Muratorian Canon excluded Hebrews (as well as James and 1-2 Peter), all four books were included in the New Testament canon by the Synod of Hippo (393) and the Third (397) and Sixth (419) Synods of Carthage. Subsequent questions about its authorship during the Reformation had no effect at all upon the reformers’ view of its authority or inspiration.

It is clear that apostolicity, as well as other issues such as universality and the “rule of faith,” were important in the early decisions about the New Testament canon. We must keep in mind, however, that a document’s “canonical” status is the result of a human process which does not bestow divine authority or inspiration upon a document but recognizes the authority and inspiration which it inherently possesses because it has been “God-breathed” (2 Tim 3:16). In other words, if it is true that Hebrews is a divinely inspired and authoritative document, its inspiration and authority remain factual in an objective sense apart from our own inability to clearly discern the identity of its author. In his providence, God bore witness to the inspiration and authority of this letter in a manner that left little room for doubt, as Hebrews persistently silenced the questions of men who soon found that it “is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:16-17).

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<sup>2</sup>Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 6.25.14.

*What do we know about the author?*

Though the question of authorship is not determinative of either the letter's inspiration or authority, it is significant for our interpretation of Hebrews. Knowing as much as we can about the author can be helpful for discerning the meaning of a text. We may not be able to know the identify of our author with any degree of certainty, but there is much that we can know about him.

He was probably a Hellenistic Jew for he was both steeped in the LXX and possessed of an excellent vocabulary and a polished style for writing in the Greek language. Presumably, then, he was well educated. He was probably a second generation Christian (2:3) but one with direct connection to apostolic influence since he was a companion of Timothy (13:23) and thus possibly an associate of Paul. It is possible that he wrote from Italy, although 13:24 could also be taken to mean that the recipients were in Italy and some in his own party were from there as well. The rhetoric of the letter and his description of it as "my word of exhortation" (13:22) suggest that he was probably a preacher. His "short letter" reveals a compassionate pastor, a keen theologian and a superior logician who applies all the resources of revelation and rhetoric at his command so that his dear friends will "not drift away" (2:1).

**DATE, DESTINATION AND PURPOSE**

Three important facts suggest at least a general date for the letter. First, Clement of Rome cited Hebrews frequently. 1 Clement was written in A.D. 95 or 96 and thus Hebrews would not only have been completed but well circulated by this date. Second, there is thus little reason to doubt that the Timothy of 13:23 was the associate of Paul referred to elsewhere in the New Testament. Though we do not know how old Timothy was when he joined Paul in his work, it is unlikely that this reference would place the letter very late in the

first century. Finally, much is made of the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in A.D. 70. Although it is possible that the author would not have referred to this event if it had happened by the time of writing, it seems improbable that he would omit reference to an event that not only had a significant effect on the lives of first-century Jews (including Christians) but would have added great force to his own argument. Further, he refers to old covenant worship rituals in the present tense (8:4-5; 10:1-3).

Other considerations as to the probable date of the letter pertain to the identity and location of its recipients. The title "To the Hebrews" may have been added later and reflect later opinions about its contents but it accompanies the letter in all of the oldest Greek manuscripts and there is no evidence that the letter ever bore any other title. Some suggest that the phrase could be translated "against the Hebrews" but it is the same formula used in Paul's letters which were hardly "against" the Romans, Galatians, etc. The title of the letter thus suggests that its recipients were Jewish, and the content that they were both Jewish and Christian.

The letter itself indicates that its recipients were enduring persecution (10:33-34; 12:4; 13:3, 23). The more natural reading of 13:24 suggests that the author wrote *to* Italy rather than *from* Italy (for which the expression "those *in* Italy send you their greetings" would have been more appropriate). The Edict of Claudius had expelled Jews from Rome in 49 but many had returned by the time of the persecution begun by Nero in 64. Since our earliest quotes of Hebrews come to us from Clement of Rome, its circulation there was likely at an early date. The cumulative evidence thus suggests that the letter was addressed to Jewish Christians in Rome who suffered under the persecutions of Nero.

The combination of these circumstances and statements in the letter suggest its purpose. Though some have suggested that Hebrews was written foremost to combat an early Jewish perversion of Christian doctrine or as a generic tract to demonstrate the superiority of Christianity, key verses in the

letter suggest that it was addressed to a particular community with a view to responding to an urgent need. The following verses are all suggestive:

<b><i>Passage</i></b>	<b><i>Exhortation</i></b>	<b><i>End in View</i></b>
2:1	<i>We must pay more careful attention . . . to what we have heard</i>	<i>so that we do not drift away</i>
3:1	<i>fix your thoughts on Jesus (cp. 12:2)</i>	
3:6	<i>hold on to our courage and the hope of which we boast</i>	
3:12	<i>See to it . . . that none of you has a . . . heart that turns away from the living God</i>	
3:13	<i>encourage one another daily</i>	<i>so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness</i>
3:14	<i>. . . if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first</i>	<i>We have come to share in Christ . . .</i>
4:1	<i>let us be careful</i>	<i>that none of you be found to have fallen short of it [rest]</i>
4:11	<i>Let us . . . make every effort to enter that rest</i>	<i>so that no one will fall</i>
4:14	<i>let us hold firmly to the faith we profess</i>	
6:11	<i>show this same diligence to the very end</i>	<i>in order to make your hope sure</i>
10:23	<i>Let us hold unwaveringly to the hope we profess</i>	
10:35	<i>So do not throw away your confidence</i>	<i>it will be richly rewarded</i>
10:36	<i>You need to persevere</i>	<i>so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised.</i>
12:1	<i>Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us</i>	
12:2	<i>Let us fix our eyes on Jesus (cp. 3:1)</i>	
12:3	<i>Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men</i>	<i>so that you will not grow weary and lose heart</i>

Hebrews is, without doubt, a theologically valuable document which presents a well arranged argument in defense of the

superiority of the new covenant. Yet these verses suggest that the author had an immediate purpose in mind for his theology and his rhetoric – the encouragement of Christian brothers and sisters who, suffering under persecutions which threatened even martyrdom, were tempted to abandon their strength. In the midst of their suffering, our author sends his “short letter” and “word of exhortation” (13:22) that they might fix their eyes on Jesus (3:1; 12:2), whose greatness he demonstrates from their own beloved Scriptures and cherished heritage.

### FORM AND STRUCTURE

Since Hebrews includes some of the formal features of an epistle (e.g., personal greetings and closing formula) but not others (e.g., typical introductory greeting or address), there has been much debate as to whether it is more of a letter or a sermon. However, this particular formulation of the *genre* question probably reads a sharper distinction between written and oral communication back into an era when rhetoric rarely made such a rigid separation. Other epistles in the New Testament were clearly written in the knowledge that they would be read in the presence of congregations. It is thus possible to argue that, though written, they should be viewed primarily as oral documents. Writing lengthy treatises with significant oral features was a typical “rhetorical” practice for the ancients (e.g., the “template” or model speeches of Isocrates and others). Hence, Hebrews could well have been constructed as a “written homily,” i.e., a letter with sermonic features.

This is to propose a variation of Deissmann’s suggestion that Hebrews could have been an example of Christian literary art (i.e., a kind of treatise). Guthrie’s criticism – that the writer’s purpose was too serious to be regarded in this light<sup>3</sup> –

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<sup>3</sup>See Donald Guthrie, “Hebrews, Epistle to” in *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Vol. 2. Ed. by G. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), p. 664.

assumes that literary art cannot be addressed to particular communities and urgent occasions, when in fact, rhetoric is chiefly defined by (1) its “addressed” nature and (2) its “contingent” character. The fact that it is addressed to specific communities, their circumstances and the demands of those circumstances is precisely what, according to Aristotle, distinguishes “rhetoric” from its counterpart “dialect.” It is quite in keeping with at least one significant ancient rhetorical tradition to regard Hebrews as a written homily – an extended written treatise with significant oral features, addressed to a particular community with a view to responding to an urgent need.

Of what import is this conclusion? There is little value in examining Hebrews for exact correspondence to any particular classical scheme of rhetoric as some have done<sup>4</sup> for (1) a strong case has been made that there is no single classical tradition of rhetoric<sup>5</sup> and (2) our uncertainty about the identity of the author makes it impossible for us to do anything more than speculate about the possible significance of any such similarities.

There are several values, however, in recognizing the “rhetorical” nature of the document. First, this encourages us to keep in mind that, above all, Hebrews is an attempt to *persuade* its recipients (to take action, i.e., a case of deliberative rhetoric). Close attention should thus be paid to its argumentative dimensions. Also, as we attempt to follow the writer’s development of thought, we should be alert for the use of rhetorical devices which signal transitions from argumentative sections to hortatory sections that address the contingencies of the community’s situation. Further, apart from the complexities which separated competing rhetorical traditions in the ancient world, it is not inappropriate to look for evidence of the kinds of *topoi* (argumentative commonplaces) more

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<sup>4</sup>Lindars describes the work of C. Spicq (*L’Épître aux Hébreux*) in his “The Rhetorical Structure of Hebrews.” *New Testament Studies* Vol. 35 (1989), p. 383.

<sup>5</sup>See Thomas Conley’s *Rhetoric in the European Tradition* (New York: Longman Press, 1990).

widely employed and with which a well educated author was likely to be familiar. This should aid our understanding of the nature of the proofs employed by our author. Finally, it reminds us to seek the relevance of the subject matter of Hebrews in relationship to particular sets of life circumstances (persecution, suffering, temptation, and discouragement among them).

Hebrews is organized around a series of quotations from the Old Testament which are not only presented as argument but also developed with a variety of exegetical procedures (see below). If we use these quotations as a guideline for discerning its structure, the following picture of Hebrews emerges.

*Chapter One* is an introduction. This chapter is full of Old Testament quotations demonstrating Jesus' superiority over angels.

*Chapter Two* appeals to Psalm 8. Jesus rescues man by coming down beneath angels, joining man in flesh and blood, dying, and then returning to his place of exaltation above the angels. All who cling to him in faith return with him to the throne.

*Chapters Three and Four* deal with Psalm 95. God offers rest to all who trust him. The land of Canaan was not that rest, for this Psalm spoke of a rest long after the Israelites who wandered in the desert hardened their hearts and lost the rest which God offered to them. God's rest is still available for all who believe him.

*Chapters Five, Six and Seven* are organized around Psalm 110. Jesus is a priest like Melchizedek, who was also superior to the priesthood of the old covenant. Jesus, in fact, is a priest forever by God's oath.

*Chapter Eight* introduces Jeremiah 31. The new covenant, created by Jesus our great high priest, is superior to the old covenant. It is founded on better promises than the old covenant, which was a mere copy and shadow of this new covenant.

*Chapters Nine and Ten* treat Psalm 40. Jesus' living sacrifice

of himself through obedience is far superior to the Old Testament sacrifices of dead bulls and goats repeatedly offered in the old tabernacle. Jesus took this sacrifice into the very presence of God, thus fully taking away sins and cleansing our consciences.

*Chapter Eleven* develops a theme from Habakkuk 2, that the righteous will live by faith. This principle by which we live is illustrated by numerous examples of people living by faith.

*Chapter Twelve* treats Proverbs 3. We must accept the discipline God brings upon us, for God disciplines those he loves.

*Chapter Thirteen* is the conclusion. It is full of exhortations on how to give ourselves to God in the life of faith.

Remove the introductory and concluding chapters for a moment and an interesting picture of the structure of the main body of thought emerges. The new covenant (chapter 8) is central, tying together his priesthood (chapters 5-7) and his sacrifice (chapters 9-10). This is prepared for by the offer of rescue (chapter 2) and rest (chapters 3-4) and followed by the response of faith (chapter 11) and the endurance of discipline (chapter 12) which he expects from us.

There are many other uses of the Old Testament woven into this main structure of the book but the central focus is on Jesus the superior priest who brings his superior sacrifice to God. This is the core of the new covenant. By this means he offers rescue and rest. From us he expects faith and endurance.

In a homespun way the structure of the letter may be compared to a wide-brimmed Texas hat or a sombrero. The high sides of the hat are his priesthood (chapters 5-7) and his sacrifice (chapter 10). The crown tying all together is the new covenant (chapter 8). The wide brim on one side is his offer of rescue (chapter 2) and rest (chapters 3-4). The wide brim on the other side is our expected faith (chapter 11) and endurance (chapter 12). The whole treatise is introduced (chapter 1) and concluded (chapter 13) with a generous collection of Old Testament connections.

## USE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

The author draws his quotations of the Old Testament not from any Hebrew text but from the Septuagint (LXX), a Greek translation which was read by Jews and Christians throughout the world in the first century and which he regarded as an accurate expression of the word of God. There is little conclusive evidence as to whether he followed any particular manuscript or tradition of the LXX.<sup>6</sup>

His methods of interpretation are varied. They include:<sup>7</sup>

- Etymology (determining the meaning or significance of a word by dividing it into its constituent parts) and/or the literal sense of a word or phrase
- *qal wa-homer*, a rabbinical method of arguing from lesser to greater
- *gezerah shawah*, another rabbinical method which established a relationship between two passages of Scripture on the basis of similar wording, using one passage to expand the meaning of the other
- Typology, a method of viewing a place, person, event, etc. in the Bible as a pattern (or “type”) of a later place, person, event, etc. (“antitype”). The “type” takes on a significance beyond its historical referent which is later recognized as a result of its similarities with the “antitype”
- Homiletical Midrash, a kind of hortatory running commentary which applies a passage to the experience of an audience

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<sup>6</sup>See Ellingworth, *Commentary on Hebrews*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), p. 38.

<sup>7</sup>See Andrew Trotter, *Interpreting the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker), pp. 187-196.

# OUTLINE

## **I. JESUS IS SUPERIOR TO THE ANGELS – 1:1-14**

**A. The Preeminence of the Son – 1:1-4**

**B. The Son Superior to the Angels – 1:5-14**

## **II. JESUS RESCUES MAN – 2:1-18**

**A. Warning Not to Ignore Such a Great Salvation – 2:1-4**

**B. Jesus Became a Man to Bring Men to Glory – 2:5-18**

## **III. GOD OFFERS REST TO ALL WHO TRUST HIM – 3:1-4:16**

**A. Jesus Is Superior to Moses – 3:1-6**

**B. Psalm 95:7-11 – 3:7-11**

**C. Hold Firm to the End – 3:12-15**

**D. Unbelieving Israelites Fell in the Desert – 3:16-19**

**E. A Sabbath-Rest for the People of God – 4:1-5**

**F. A Sabbath-Rest Remains – 4:6-11**

**G. The Message from God Does Its Part to Save Us – 4:12-13**

**H. Jesus, the Great High Priest – 4:14-16**

## **IV. JESUS IS SUPERIOR TO THE PRIESTHOOD OF THE OLD COVENANT AND A PRIEST FOREVER BY GOD'S OATH – 5:1-7:28**

**A. Requirements of the High Priest – 5:1-4**

**B. Jesus Fulfills the Requirements and Offers Eternal Salvation – 5:5-10**

**C. [Excursus: Responding to God] – 5:11–6:12**

1. Still Infants – 5:11-14
2. On to Maturity – 6:1-3
3. Those Who Fall Away – 6:4-8
4. Confident of Better Things – 6:9-12

**D. God's Oath Makes His Purpose Sure – 6:13-20****E. Melchizedek Like the Son of God – 7:1-3****F. Melchizedek Greater than Abraham – 7:4-10****G. Jesus Is High Priest Based on His Resurrection which Introduces a Better Hope – 7:11-19****H. Jesus Is High Priest Based on God's Oath which Produces a Better Covenant – 7:20-22****I. Jesus' Resurrection Creates a Permanent Priesthood – 7:23-25****J. Jesus' Death Provides the Perfect Sacrifice – 7:26-28****V. THE NEW COVENANT BROUGHT BY JESUS OUR HIGH PRIEST IS SUPERIOR TO THE OLD COVENANT – 8:1-13****A. Our High Priest Reigns and Serves in the True Tabernacle, Prefigured by Old Testament Shadows – 8:1-5****B. Our High Priest Is Mediator of the New Covenant, Promised through the Prophet Jeremiah – 8:6-13****VI. JESUS' SACRIFICE OF HIMSELF IS SUPERIOR TO THE SACRIFICES OF THE OLD COVENANT AND SETS US FREE FROM SIN – 9:1–10:39****A. The Tabernacle and Its Tools – 9:1-5****B. The Day of Atonement – 9:6-10****C. Jesus' Sacrifice Cleanses Our Conscience – 9:11-14****D. Jesus' Death Inaugurates the New Covenant – 9:15-22**

**E. Jesus' Sacrifice Was Once for All – 9:23-28**

**F. Old Covenant Sacrifices Could Not Take Away Sin – 10:1-4**

**G. Christ Offered His Body to Make Us Holy – 10:5-10**

**H. Our High Priest Now Reigns – 10:11-14**

**I. Witness of the Holy Spirit through Jeremiah – 10:15-18**

**J. Let Us Draw Near to God and Spur One Another On – 10:19-25**

**K. The Judgment of God on Those Who Keep Sinning – 10:26-31**

**L. Reminder of Earlier Suffering – 10:32-34**

**M. The Need to Persevere – 10:35-39**

## **VII. GOD EXPECTS US TO SHOW FAITH – 11:1-40**

**A. The Nature of Faith – 11:1-3**

**B. Faith Illustrated by Abel, Enoch, and Noah – 11:4-7**

**C. Faith Illustrated by Abraham – 11:8-19**

**D. Faith Illustrated by Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph – 11:20-22**

**E. Faith Illustrated by Moses – 11:23-28**

**F. Faith Illustrated in Israel – 11:29-38**

**G. God Planned to Make Them Perfect with Us – 11:39-40**

## **VIII. GOD EXPECTS US TO ENDURE DISCIPLINE – 12:1-29**

**A. A Call to Perseverance – 12:1-3**

**B. The Word of Encouragement – 12:4-6**

**C. God Disciplines His Children – 12:7-11**

**D. Practical Actions – 12:12-17**

**E. Terrifying Mt. Sinai – 12:18-21**

**F. Mt. Zion, the Heavenly Jerusalem – 12:22-24**

**G. A Kingdom which Cannot Be Shaken – 12:25-29**

**IX. CONCLUDING EXHORTATIONS – 13:1-25**

**A. Keep Loving Each Other – 13:1-3**

**B. Stay Pure – 13:4-6**

**C. Remember Your Leaders – 13:7-8**

**D. Counterparts to Old Covenant Practices – 13:9-16**

**E. Obey Your Leaders and Pray for Us – 13:17-19**

**F. Benediction and Closing Exhortations – 13:20-22**

**G. Personal Greetings – 13:23-25**