

INTRODUCTION TO HEBREWS – ESV STUDY BIBLE

AUTHOR, AUDIENCE, and TITLE

The author of Hebrews neither names himself nor clearly designates his audience. The traditional title “*to the Hebrews*” reflects the ancient assumption that the original recipients were Jewish Christians.

The author’s identity has been a matter of significant conjecture throughout church history. In antiquity, authorship was attributed to figures such as Barnabas or especially Paul. However, several of the most astute church fathers recognized considerable differences in style and method of argument between this book and Paul’s named writings. Scholars have suggested other possible authors, such as Clement, Luke, or Apollos. However, most today concede that this author remains anonymous. It seems that the judgment expressed by Origen (a.d. 254) remains correct: “*Who actually wrote the epistle, only God knows*” (cited in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.25.14).

The author clearly knew his recipients and longed to be reunited with them (Heb. 13:19). They had a mutual friend in Timothy (13:23), and probably this was the same Timothy who ministered alongside Paul. The author was presumably male, since he refers to himself using a masculine participle (see 11:32: “would fail me to tell”). Since “us” included the author in 2:3 (the salvation “attested to us by those who heard”; also 2:1), it appears that he was not an eyewitness of Jesus. The author passed on the greetings of those “from Italy” (13:24). Scholars debate whether he was in Italy writing to the church elsewhere or was outside Italy (though accompanied by Italians) and writing back to an audience in Italy (possibly at Rome).

The audience’s social situation can be inferred from commands to “remember those who are in prison” and who are “mistreated” (13:3). Timothy himself had just been set free (13:23). Indeed, the author of Hebrews commended his audience for their former endurance of persecution, for their compassion on those in prison, and for having “joyfully accepted the plundering of your property” (10:32–34).

The author warned against “strange teachings” in the church (13:9), and these teachings may have been related to the use of ritual foods (13:9–10). Moreover, he repeatedly called his audience to persevere in the faith and cautioned them about the danger of leaving the Christian communion, as he sought to show the superiority of Christ to Mosaic sacrifices and rituals (chs. 3–10). Hence the early church was likely correct to assert that Jewish Christians (as well as Gentiles who had previously been drawn to the Jewish religion) were the intended audience for this book (see “our fathers,” 1:1). Furthermore, such an audience would have well understood the book’s many citations and allusions to the OT (and would have shared in the writer’s frequent use of the Septuagint – the Greek translation of the OT).

DATE

Hebrews was almost certainly written in the first century and probably before a.d. 70. Reasons for asserting a first-century date include the mention of Timothy (13:23), who was known to be active in the first century, and the influence of Hebrews (and its way of thinking) on *1 Clement* (written c. a.d. 96).

The crucial issue in dating the book concerns whether the destruction of the Jerusalem temple (a.d. 70) had already occurred. Hebrews speaks of the Jewish sacrificial system as if it were a still-present reality (Heb. 7:27–28; 8:3–5; 9:7–8, 25; 10:1–3; 13:10–11), which does not seem likely after the cessation of the Jerusalem temple sacrifices in a.d. 70. Admittedly, Hebrews focuses on the Mosaic tabernacle rather than the Solomonic (or the Herodian) temple. Nonetheless, if the writer was attempting to convince his readers of the inferiority of the Mosaic system (and possibly dissuade church members from returning to Jewish practices), an obvious argument would have been to mention the cessation of the temple sacrifices, if they were in fact no longer taking place.

THEME

CHRIST IS GREATER THAN ANY ANGEL, PRIEST, OR OLD COVENANT INSTITUTION; THUS EACH READER, RATHER THAN LEAVING SUCH A GREAT SALVATION, IS SUMMONED TO HOLD ON BY FAITH TO THE TRUE REST FOUND IN CHRIST AND TO ENCOURAGE OTHERS IN THE CHURCH TO PERSEVERE.

PURPOSE, OCCASION, and BACKGROUND

The genre of Hebrews is unusual. The book is without an introduction or other early indications that it is a letter. Yet the final verses do pass on greetings and blessings (13:23–25), and the author speaks of having “written to you” (13:22). However, the author also identifies his work as a “word of exhortation” (13:22). The careful rhetorical progression of the book, along with its frequent practical exhortations, has led many to consider it a single sermon. Perhaps Hebrews is best understood as a sermon-like letter.

Hebrews frequently encourages the audience to endure and warns against leaving Christ (2:1–4; 3:7–4:13; 5:11–6:12; 10:19–39; 12:1–29). These warning passages are interspersed throughout the book (see chart to right) and have noticeable structural similarities (esp. in terms of exhortation and threatened consequence). Around these passages the argument of the book progresses carefully. Moreover, these specific exhortations themselves flow out of the surrounding material. Thus the book is unified in both structure and intent.

WARNING PASSAGES IN HEBREWS

2:1–4	<i>how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? (v. 3). do not harden your hearts. ... Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God (vv. 8–13).</i>
3:7–18	<i>For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened ... and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance (vv. 4–6).</i>
6:4–8	<i>For if we go on sinning deliberately ... there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins... How much worse punishment ... will be deserved ... ? (vv. 26, 29).</i>
10:26–31	<i>See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape ... much less will we (v. 25).</i>
12:25–29	

The warning passages exhort church participants to remain faithful. The more expository sections of the epistle show the superiority of Christ and his new covenant work to angels, Moses, the tabernacle priesthood, and the sacrificial system. The implication is that these are so inferior to Christ that it is futile to return to them (or to go anywhere else). Thus the book encourages the church to hold fast to its faith, because that faith is grounded in the most superior revelation – Jesus Christ himself.

The background of such exhortations must have been the **audience’s need to continue enduring through persecution and the trials of life** (e.g., ch. 12). They appear to have grown less attentive to Christian instruction (5:11–14); and some apparently have ceased regular attendance at their meetings (10:25). Nonetheless, the author reminds them of their past faithfulness and communal love in the midst of persecution (10:32–34). He encourages their faithfulness by careful exposition of the OT in light of the revelation in Jesus Christ.

The soteriology (salvation teaching) of Hebrews is rooted in its Christology—the Son of God became the heavenly high priest, who offered himself as a sacrifice once for all. Christ obtained salvation for all who approach in faith (6:1; 11:6; cf. 4:2), and such faith perseveres until it receives the promised eternal reward (6:12; 10:22, 38–39).

Key Themes

1. Jesus is fully God and fully man. 1:1–14; 2:5–18
2. Jesus as Son of God reveals God the Father, is the agent of creation, and sustains all creation. 1:1–14
3. Jesus serves as the eternal high priest, who as a man sympathizes with human weaknesses, and yet who offered himself as the perfect sacrifice for sin. 1:3; 2:10–18; 4:15–16; 9:11–10:19
4. Jesus is superior to angels, to Moses and the Mosaic covenant, and to the earthly tabernacle and its priesthood. 1:4–2:18; 3:1–6; 5:1–10; 7:1–10:18
5. All humanity faces eternal judgment for sin. 4:12–13; 9:27–28; 10:26–31
6. Faith is necessary to please God and to participate in his eternal salvation promises. Faith requires conviction about the unseen realities of God and his promises. Such faith produces perseverance. 4:2–3; 6:1, 12; 10:22, 38–39; 11:1–40
7. Perseverance is necessary in the Christian life, and thus church participants are warned against a lack of endurance. 2:1–4; 3:7–4:13; 5:11–6:12; 10:19–39; 12:1–29
8. God's promises are trustworthy, including his promise of eternal salvation. 6:13–20
9. With the advent of Jesus Christ, the last days have begun, though they await consummation at his return. 1:2; 2:5; 4:9–11; 9:9–28; 12:22–29