

The Epistle to the Hebrews

Author

The writer of this letter does not identify himself, but he was obviously well known to the original recipients. Though for some 1,200 years (from c. a.d. 400 to 1600) the book was commonly called “The Epistle of Paul to the Hebrews,” there was no agreement in the earliest centuries regarding its authorship. Since the Reformation it has been widely recognized that Paul could not have been the writer. There is no disharmony between the teaching of Hebrews and that of Paul’s letters, but the specific emphases and writing styles are markedly different. Contrary to Paul’s usual practice, the author of Hebrews nowhere identifies himself in the letter—except to indicate that he was a man (see note on 11:32). Moreover, the statement “This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him” (2:3), indicates that the author had neither been with Jesus during his earthly ministry nor received special revelation directly from the risen Lord, as had Paul (Gal 1:11–12).

The earliest suggestion of authorship is found in Tertullian’s *De Pudicitia*, 20 (c. 200), in which he quotes from “an epistle to the Hebrews under the name of Barnabas.” From the letter itself it is clear that the writer must have had authority in the apostolic church and was an intellectual Hebrew Christian well versed in the OT. Barnabas meets these requirements. He was a Jew of the priestly tribe of Levi (Ac 4:36) who became a close friend of Paul after the latter’s conversion. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the church at Antioch commissioned Barnabas and Paul for the work of evangelism and sent them off on the first missionary journey (Ac 13:1–4).

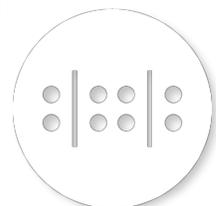
The other leading candidate for authorship is Apollos, whose name was first suggested by Martin Luther and who is favored by many interpreters today. Apollos, an Alexandrian by birth, was also a Jewish Christian with notable intellectual and oratorical abilities. Luke tells us that “he was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures” (Ac 18:24). We also know that Apollos was associated with Paul in the early years of the church in Corinth (1Co 1:12; 3:4,6,22).

One thing is evident: The author was a master of the Greek language of his day, and he was thoroughly acquainted with the pre-Christian Greek translation of the OT (the Septuagint), which he regularly quotes.

Date & Recipients

Hebrews must have been written before the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in a.d. 70 because: (1) If it had been written after this date, the author surely would have mentioned the temple’s destruction and the end of the Jewish sacrificial system; and (2) the author consistently uses the Greek present tense when speaking of the temple and the priestly activities connected with it (see 5:1–3; 7:23,27; 8:3–5; 9:6–9,13,25; 10:1,3–4,8,11; 13:10–11).

The letter was addressed primarily to Jewish converts who were familiar with the OT and who were being tempted to revert to Judaism or to Judaize the gospel (cf. Gal. 2:14). Some have suggested that these professing Jewish Christians were thinking of merging with a Jewish sect, such as the one at Qumran near the Dead Sea. It has also been suggested that the recipients were from the “large number of priests [who] became obedient to the faith” (Acts 6:7).



Theme

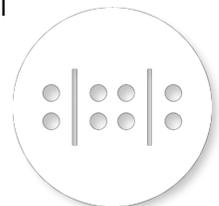
The theme of Hebrews is the absolute supremacy and sufficiency of Jesus Christ as revealer and mediator of God's grace. The prologue (1:1-4) presents Christ as God's full and final revelation, far surpassing the revelation given in the OT. The prophecies and promises of the OT are fulfilled in the "new covenant" (or "new testament"), of which Christ is the mediator. From the OT itself, Christ is shown to be superior to the ancient prophets, to angels, to Moses (the mediator of the former covenant) and to Aaron and the priestly succession descended from him. Hebrews could be called "the book of better things" since the two Greek words for "better" and "superior" occur 15 times in the letter (1:4 [twice]; 6:9; 7:19, 22; 8:6 [3 times]; 9:23; 10:34; 11:4, 16, 35, 40; 12:24). A striking feature of this presentation of the gospel is the unique manner in which the author employs expositions of eight specific passages of OT Scriptures:

1. 2:5-9: Exposition of Ps. 8:4-6
2. 3:7—4:13: Exposition of Ps. 95:7-11
3. 4:14—7:28: Exposition of Ps. 110:4
4. 8:1—10:18: Exposition of Jer. 31:31-34
5. 10:1-10: Exposition of Ps. 40:6-8
6. 10:32—12:3: Exposition of Hab. 2:3-4
7. 12:4-13: Exposition of Prov. 3:11-12
8. 12:18-24: Exposition of Ex. 19:10-23

Practical applications of this theme are given throughout the book. The readers are told there can be no turning back to or continuation in the old Jewish system, which has been superseded by the unique priesthood of Christ. God's people must now look only to him, whose atoning death, resurrection and ascension have opened the way into the true, heavenly sanctuary of God's presence. To "ignore so great a salvation" (2:3) or to give up the pursuit of holiness (12:10, 14) is to face the anger of the "living God" (10:31). Five times the author weaves into his presentation of the gospel stern warnings...and reminds his readers of the divine judgment that came on the rebellious generation of Israelites in the desert.

Literary Form

Hebrews is commonly referred to as a letter, though it does not have the typical form of a letter. It ends like a letter (13:22-25) but begins more like an essay or sermon (1:1-4). The author does not identify himself or those addressed, which letter writers normally did. And he offers no manner of greeting, such as is usually found at the beginning of ancient letters. Rather, he begins with a magnificent statement about Jesus Christ. He calls his work a "word of exhortation" (13:22), the conventional designation given a sermon in a synagogue service (see Ac 13:15, where "message of encouragement" translates the same Greek words as "word of exhortation"). Like a sermon, Hebrews is full of encouragement, exhortations and stern warnings. It is likely that the author used sermonic materials and sent them out in a modified letter form.¹



¹ These sections, *Author, Date, Recipients, Theme, and Literary Form*, are directly quoted from *The TNIV Study Bible* (Zondervan Publishers), p. 2050, 2051..