

God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, Hath in these last days spoken unto us by [his] Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds; (Heb 1:1-2)

We are going to begin a study of the book of Hebrews. And before we get into the book proper, it is appropriate to cover the questions of authorship, time and occasion of the writing, and the major themes of the book. For, of all the books in the NT, this one is the strangest. It comes to us like Melchizedek having neither author nor occasion, yet there are some things we can say about it. For example, Clement of Rome, who died in 99 AD wrote his first letter to the Corinthians before 70 AD and he makes extensive quotations from the book of Hebrews. So that book is accepted as canonical prior to 70 AD.

Authorship

Undoubtedly, a question that we can ask about Hebrews is, “Who do you think wrote it?” And we can make all kinds of speculations. The limits of historical knowledge preclude positive identification of the writer. No firm tradition concerning his identity exists from the earliest period. He was clearly known to the community to whom he wrote (13:19). The brief personal notes in chap. 13, however, are not sufficiently specific to establish his identity. While the use of the masculine pronoun in referring to the writer is found in 11:32, Hebrews is anonymous. It should be noted that acceptance of Hebrews as canonical is historically inseparable from its acceptance as Pauline, though so the development is of interest.

And so, following the writings of Clement of Rome, for many years the book of Hebrews was not quoted nor referenced, possibly for questions about its apostolic origin. It wasn't until the fourth century that the epistle won general acceptance. Eusebius (who died in May 339) wrote that,

Paul's fourteen epistles are well known and undisputed. It is not indeed right to overlook the fact that some have rejected the Epistle to the Hebrews, saying that it is disputed by the church of Rome, on the ground that it was not written by Paul. But what has been said concerning this epistle by those who lived before our time I shall quote in the proper place. (Eusebius. The History of the Church, p. 103)

Paul's fourteen epistles includes Hebrews in the mind of Eusebius but some rejected this and believed that the epistle was not written by Paul. But later Eusebius wrote that,

For as Paul had written to the Hebrews in his native tongue, some say that the evangelist Luke, others that this Clement himself, translated the epistle. (Eusebius. The History of the Church, p. 153)

And again,

He says that the Epistle to the Hebrews is the work of Paul, and that it was written to the Hebrews in the Hebrew language; but that Luke translated it carefully and published it for the Greeks, and hence the same style of expression is found in this epistle and in the Acts. (Eusebius. The History of the Church, p. 273)

And so, the idea of Eusebius was that Paul wrote to the Hebrews in Hebrew and that someone else translated it into Greek. Eusebius also references Origen and expressed the following of his writings:

11. In addition he makes the following statements in regard to the Epistle to the Hebrews in his Homilies upon it: "That the verbal style of the epistle entitled 'To the Hebrews,' is not rude like the language of the apostle, who acknowledged himself 'rude in speech' that is, in expression; but that its diction is purer Greek, anyone who has the power to discern differences of phraseology will acknowledge.

12. Moreover, that the thoughts of the epistle are admirable, and not inferior to the acknowledged apostolic writings, anyone who carefully examines the apostolic text will admit.'

13. Farther on he adds: "If I gave my opinion, I should say that the thoughts are those of the apostle, but the diction and phraseology are those of someone who remembered the apostolic teachings, and wrote down at his leisure what had been said by his teacher. Therefore if any church holds that this epistle is by Paul, let it be commended for this. For not without reason have the ancients handed it down as Paul's.

14. But who wrote the epistle, in truth, God knows. The statement of some who have gone before us is that Clement, bishop of the Romans, wrote the epistle, and of others that Luke, the author of the Gospel and the Acts, wrote it." But let this suffice on these matters. (Eusebius. The History of the Church, p. 288)

Here we have the words of a man who lived in the second century or who wrote about 200 AD. They are recorded for us by Eusebius since they don't exist anywhere else. Here Eusebius gives us the words of Origen. He notices that the language of Hebrews is above the language of the Apostle Paul. His Greek in his letters is just average whereas the book of Hebrews is excellent Greek. He says, "That the verbal style of the epistle entitled 'To the Hebrews,' is not rude like the language of the apostle, who acknowledged himself 'rude in speech' that is, in expression" but that the thoughts of the epistle are quite admirable. So, he gives his thought that the thoughts are the thoughts of the apostle but the words are not. And he gives his ultimate opinion that God knows who wrote the epistle to the Hebrews.

In the Reformation, Luther, at first, ascribed the book of Hebrews to Paul, but he soon came to reject that idea. He perceived the incompatibility with Hebrews 2:3,

How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation; which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard [him]; (Heb 2:3)

In which it is stated that the word of God was confirmed unto us by them that heard him. This is to be compared with the words of Paul in Galatians,

But I certify you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached of me is not after man. For I neither received it of man, neither was I taught [it], but by the revelation of Jesus Christ. (Gal 1:11-12)

These two statements cannot be brought into reconciliation so it is supposed that Paul is not the author of Hebrews. This, Luther says, is a very strong argument against Pauline authorship. Luther put forth the name of Apollos as the author.

Calvin also notes that this verse excludes Pauline authorship:

Moreover, this passage indicates that this epistle was not written by Paul; for he did not usually speak so humbly of himself, as to confess that he was one of the Apostles' disciples, nor did he thus speak from ambition, but because wicked men under a pretense of this kind attempted to detract from the authority of his doctrine. It then appears evident that it was not Paul who wrote that he had the Gospel by hearing and not by revelation. (Calvin, John. John Calvin's Commentary on the Bible)

Some people such as Owen and Pink believe that Paul wrote Hebrews because of 2 Peter 3:15, "even as our beloved brother Paul also according to the wisdom given unto him hath written unto you." The understanding that Paul must have written to the Jews is clear but 1 Peter is written to those who are scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia. However, it seems likely that the epistle to the Hebrews was written to a small group of people, in a house-church or several house-churches. The group to which Peter was writing would probably included those who were not Jews as well but the epistle to the Hebrews is, well, to the Hebrews.

There is also the passage in Hebrews 13, which also makes it unlikely that Paul was the author. It says,

Know ye that [our] brother Timothy is set at liberty; with whom, if he come shortly, I will see you. (Heb 13:23)

If Paul was the author, it would require that he be free while Timothy was held and there is no time during Paul's ministry when that was the case. Calvin comments on this verse:

Now, if this Timothy was the renowned companion of Paul, which I am inclined to think, it is very probable that either Luke or Clement was the author of this Epistle. Paul, indeed, more usually calls him his son; and then what immediately follows does not apply to Paul; for it appears that the writer was at liberty and at his own disposal; and besides, that he was then anywhere rather than at Rome; nay, it is very probable, that he was going round through various cities, and was then preparing to pass over the sea. Now all these particulars might have been suitable to the circumstances either of Luke or of Clement after the death of Paul. (Calvin, John).

It is clear from the text that the author had a relationship with Timothy but that he could not have been Paul yet this person was a member of Paul's group. He could have been Apollos or someone like him. For he was "an eloquent man, and mighty in the scriptures" (Act 18:24) and it is clear that Apollos was of Paul's party, "I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase" (1Co 3:6). Apollos is almost the same level as Paul, though of course Paul is an apostle, yet Apollos was just a step below. So Apollos is a likely source of the epistle to the Hebrews.

At the end of the day, we have to agree with Origen that "only God knows" who wrote this book! Yet there are at least three things we can know for sure about the person used by God to give us one of the richest writings of the New Testament. First, as already noted, the author was very well educated. The style of Greek, the use of many rhetorical devices, and the overall crafting of the book are remarkable. Second, the author seems to have had a lot of training in Jewish synagogues of the Mediterranean world. Many of the arguments in Hebrews are shaped by rabbinic techniques of argumentation. For instance, we see an "argument from lesser to greater" in Hebrews 2: 1– 4, which was a common method used by rabbis. The author at times pulls two Old Testament passages together based on a common

word (like the word “son” in the two texts quoted at Heb 1: 5), and this too was a technique used by the rabbis. In fact, the use of Scripture in general, and the “sermon” form of the book as a whole, suggest that the author had grown up and been trained in a synagogue setting. Finally, the author was a concerned Christian minister who cared deeply about the spiritual condition of the congregation to whom he wrote. He longed for them to endure in following Christ! So we should hear Hebrews as both a highly crafted theological discourse and a warm, relevant sermon on endurance in the Christian life.

It is interesting how the book developed over time and became canonical. If it had been known from the beginning that Paul was not the author, then the book might not have been included in the canon. But the doctrine is so marvelous that its exclusion would have been a tragedy.

Purpose

The second thing we want to consider is the purpose or occasion of the writing. Here again we have nothing given specifically for that purpose but let’s see what we can discern.

It is clear when we read the book of Hebrews that there is a purpose involved. The author is extremely serious and zealous for proving the superiority of Christ. There

When we turn to Hebrews 10:32, there is a section which seems to relate to the purpose of the book.

But call to remembrance the former days, in which, after ye were illuminated, ye endured a great fight of afflictions; ... Now the just shall live by faith: but if [any man] draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him. But we are not of them who draw back unto perdition; but of them that believe to the saving of the soul. (Heb 10:32, 38-39 KJV)

When we read this portion, there seems to be a call to faith – an encouragement in the faith to those who were called and struggling spiritually. Since the book is sent to the Hebrews, these were a very specific group of people. We also have a few words at the very end of the letter:

And I beseech you, brethren, suffer the word of exhortation: for I have written a letter unto you in few words. Know ye that [our] brother Timothy is set at liberty; with whom, if he comes shortly, I will see you. Salute all of them that have the rule over you, and all the saints. They of Italy salute you. (Heb 13:22-24)

It is clear that this was a very specific group of people to whom the author was writing since he says “I will see you” which seems to mean a few gathered into one place rather than a scattered group of millions.

Therefore we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we should let [them] slip. (Heb 2:1)

It is clear that the people addressed by the letter were intended to be driven on by it. They were not intended to fall away but to press onward to salvation. Likewise, the indictment in Hebrew 5:12 that

For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which [be] the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat. (Heb 5:12)

Indicates that the people had been Christians a long time yet were not yet far along in their spiritual growth. They needed milk, at least with respect to Melchizedek, they needed to hear the truth of Scripture regarding him. There was a lot of confusion about Melchizedek among the people of that time and there is a special need to pay careful attention to him.

Hebrews is one of the most beautifully crafted books in all of Scripture. Yet we need to understand that the theological depth, the exegetical brilliance in dealing with the old covenant Scriptures, the powerful examples, and stern warnings all work together for a single purpose— to encourage those who were struggling spiritually to endure in following Jesus. As with virtually every church, the community of faith to whom Hebrews was written evinced a spectrum of spiritual conditions, including those who had “one foot out the door” and were considering abandoning the faith altogether (3: 6, 14; 4: 1– 2; 6: 4– 12; 10: 26– 27). It is instructive to see how Hebrews addresses the problem. As the sermon develops, the detailed expositions on Christ and his superior work (1: 5– 14; 2: 5– 18; 5: 1– 10; 7: 1– 10: 18) lay the foundation for the author’s exhortations (2: 1– 4; 3: 1– 4: 16; 5: 11– 6: 20; 10: 19– 13: 24). In other words, the author uses Scripture and theology to lay down a firm basis for the exhortation to endure in faithfulness to Christ.

At the heart of Hebrews’ message stand two key themes:

- God has spoken through his superior Son!
- Listen and respond to his word of salvation!

Further, Hebrews unpacks the implications of how people respond differently to the message of Christ. For those who respond positively, enduring in the faith and standing with Jesus and his church, there will be a wonderful, eternal inheritance, a place in the heavenly city (Heb 9: 15; 12: 22). For those who reject the message, there will be judgment and devastation away from the presence of the Lord (2: 1– 4; 6: 7– 8; 10: 26– 31; 12: 25– 29).

Today we can draw this key teaching from Hebrews, a teaching that has inestimable relevance for our spiritual lives: Your perseverance in the Christian faith will be in direct proportion to the clarity with which you see who Jesus is and what he has accomplished on our behalf. If you and I really grasp (1) Christ’s identity, that he is the eternal Son of God, Creator of the world, Lord of all that is (1: 1– 14), who became incarnate (2: 10– 18), and who (2) lived and died for us as our high priest and great sacrifice for sins (2: 17– 18; 5: 1– 10; 7: 1– 28; 9: 1– 10: 18), it will help us greatly in enduring in the Christian life. This was the purpose for which Hebrews was written. (Osborne, Grant; Guthrie, George H.. Hebrews: Verse by Verse, pp. 21-22).

Dating

The fact that the book is quoted by Clement of Rome in his first letter to the Corinthians forces us to a very early date. That work is commonly given a date about 96 AD but based on internal evidence some scholars say the letter was composed some time before AD 70.

No mention is made in the book of Hebrews as to when it was written however, if it was written after the destruction of Jerusalem and the end of the cultic ritual, surely this would have been mentioned. The section of the argument about the priests in the holy temple would be unnecessary following 70 AD, for when the sacrifice of the temple ceased, so did that old way of which the author says,

In that he saith, A new [covenant], he hath made the first old. Now that which decayeth and waxeth old [is] ready to vanish away. (Heb 8:13)

If the cultic system is ready to vanish away then it has not yet vanished away. The cultic system must remain in place and therefore this document was written before 70 AD. Paul died in 64 AD and so the best guess for the writing of Hebrews is between 64 AD and 70 AD.

Key Theological Themes

The Trinity

The author begins immediately with Trinitarian language. He references God and the Son in 1:1-3 and in which v. 3 is one of the most gloriously revelational passages of the Trinity in the NT.

God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by [his] Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds; who being the brightness of [his] glory, and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high; (Heb 1:1-3)

Here we have the initial God who hath spoken by the prophets unto the fathers. But now he has spoken through his Son – by whom he made the worlds. That is an amazing description of Christ which brings to mind John 1:1-3. But then he reveals that the Son is the brightness of His glory which blows our minds. The Son is the brightness of the glory of God which is to say that nothing is visible of God apart from Him. God exists and is awesome but no man has ever seen him (John 1:18).

No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared [him]. (Jhn 1:18)

The Son is the brightness of the image, the outward representation of God's glory. Then also he is the express image of His person. The Son is the exact replica of the Father and there is no other. He upholds all things by the word of His power.

Then, in 3:7 we have mention of the Holy Spirit who speaks as God,

Wherefore (as the Holy Ghost saith, Today if ye will hear his voice, (Heb 3:7)

This passage is set forward from the Holy Spirit who is claimed to be God. Verse 9 moves from the third person to the first person. The text passes from the Holy Spirit talking to God speaking, but there is no difference made. The Holy Spirit likewise appears in 6:4, where the people have become partakers of the Holy Spirit; 9:8 where the Holy Spirit indicates, that He controls all revelation. In 10:15 also He is in control of revelation -- "But the Holy Spirit also witnesses to us" is clear Trinitarian language!

The rest of the Scripture has Christ called of God (v 5:4) and a Son – though He became "the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him". Verse 5:5 has "He who said to Him" which expresses the Father speaking to the Son, "*You are My Son, Today I have begotten You*". But this man, because he continues forever, has an unchangeable priesthood because he is a priest forever of the order of Melchizedek.

Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them. (Heb 7:25)

Because the Son is God and Man, he is able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him ... amazingly because he ever lives to make intercession for us. That is, the Son is able to express his care for the millions upon millions who are united to Him. That is something that no ordinary mortal would be able to do.

But this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God, from that time waiting till His enemies are made His footstool. (Heb 10:12-13)

His humanity and his deity are both expressed quite clearly in this book. It is “this man” who “sat down at the right hand of God” which only God can do. No simple man would be able to seat himself at the right hand of God – this assumes the deity of the Son. Yet he is called “this man”. This brings to mind Zechariah 6:13,

Even he shall build the temple of the LORD; and he shall bear the glory, and shall sit and rule upon his throne; and he shall be a priest upon his throne: and the counsel of peace shall be between them both. (Zec 6:13)

The Superiority of the Son

The text begins right away with making the Son equal to the Father. Then it steps through angels, Moses and the Promised Land, Melchizedek and the Priesthood. The text then enters into a comparison of the earthly sacrificial system and the High Priestly sacrifice of Christ.

The Son is exalted above angels. The author selects seven texts from the OT to begin his analysis. He begins with Psalm 2:7, stating that the Son is the Son of God and that all angels should worship him. His angels are spirit but the Son rules forever. He is the Creator, and the one to whom all things flow. The universe will wax old like a garment and He will put it away.

Then the testimony in which man is made a little lower than angels and Christ was made a little lower than the angels but has not yet put all things in subjection under his feet. The author then references Christ as the man who is seated at the right hand of glory as having passed from below the angels to above – and taken us with him. This union with Christ is salvation and His death releases us from the bondage that we suffered. In that Christ suffered we are able to endure the suffering that we undergo.

Next Christ is shown to be more glorious than Moses. But he who builds the house is greater than he who is built. Christ builds his own house but Moses was faithful in the house. Christ is a Son over the house where Moses was a member of the house.

Next the rest of entering the land is compared to Christ. The people entered the land but the people did not rest because the rest was promised for later. The people did not believe and therefore did not achieve the rest. A later rest was spoken of which was brought forward by Christ (Heb 4:10). Christ entered that rest and so we enter the rest through him. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (Heb 4:16)

Next Christ is said to be the great High Priest according to the order of Melchizedek. The argument is made that,

Therefore, if perfection were through the Levitical priesthood (for under it the people received the law), what further need [was there] that another priest should rise according to the order of Melchizedek, and not be called according to the order of Aaron? (Heb 7:11)

Whence it is clear that there is a need for another priest, and glory be to God, after the order of Melchizedek. He is the great High Priest who is over all:

Now [this is] the main point of the things we are saying: We have such a High Priest, who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens (Heb 8:1)

The author arrives at the point that Christ is the High Priest and then proceeds to show how the covenant had to be replaced.

For if that first [covenant] had been faultless, then no place would have been sought for a second. (Heb 8:7)

The first covenant is found to have been a temporary covenant and that it would be replaced with a permanent one.

In that He says, "A new [covenant]," He has made the first obsolete. Now what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away. (Heb 8:13)

The comparison of the sacrifice of Christ with the OT sacrifices is brought forth. The OT sacrifices were made year by year but Christ's sacrifice was one time because the blood of bulls and goats could never take away sin.

And every priest stands ministering daily and offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God, (Heb 10:11-12)

But this man, after he had offered one sacrifice of sins forever, sat down... the death of Christ is efficacious for sins. And again the change in covenant is set forth – the death of Christ must be understood in covenantal terms.

Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh, and [having] a High Priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. (Heb 10: 19-22)

This is the end of the road – we enter heaven by the new and living way, Jesus Christ himself is our entrance into the kingdom. We are united to him and our hearts are sprinkled and our hearts are given full assurance of faith.

Word

We begin at the very beginning with the word:

God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by [His] Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds; (Heb 1:1-2)

There were many prophets who did not have their words captured but those which were captured is the word of the Lord that comes to us. God spoke by the prophets but now has spoken by His Son. The word of God comes to us through the NT prophets that express to us the gospels, and the letters, and the writings.

Then we have the famous passage in Hebrews 4,

For the word of God [is] living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. (Heb 4:12)

In which the word is given first place in the redemption of men. It is the word which pierces to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. As such, it begins with the character of the word of God as “living and powerful” for it stems from the living God. We don’t often think of God’s word as living. We come to the Word and treat it as if it was a dead thing, but we must be extremely careful as we approach God’s word because it is living and powerful.

Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares [us], and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, (Heb 12:1)

The witness is from Scripture and yet it is sufficient to cause us to set aside every weight and the sin which so easily ensnares. The great cloud of witnesses is only from Scripture and yet it has the power to dominate our lives and control the way we live.

The author explicitly quotes the OT 35 times which over 13 chapters is about 3 per chapter. He quotes explicitly and even gives such expressions as “God says” or “He says” to give the words directly to the Lord. Then, he also uses Scripture without directly quoting, in the story of Melchizedek, the earthly sanctuary and the heavenly.

Faith

This is a word of exhortation, as the author describes it in Heb 13:22.

And I appeal to you, brethren, bear with the word of exhortation, for I have written to you in few words. (Heb 13:22)

And so the structure of the letter is written with this in mind – there are five exhortations/warnings woven into the text and these are used to encourage the people, to promote them to following the way, to press them on.

First warning: Heed the Revelation that Comes through the Son (2: 1– 4)

Second Warning: Listen to God’s Voice While It Is Still Possible (3: 7– 19)

Third Warning: There Is Only One Way to Be Renewed (6: 4– 8)

Fourth Warning: The Reality of God's Judgment (10: 26– 31)

Fifth Warning: Don't Miss God's Final Word (12: 25– 29)

These warnings press the teaching home and make the reader pay attention and it even brings them to repentance as they read along. Then, there is the section that strongly promotes faith – Hebrews 11 – it is all about faith. Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. (Heb 11:1) begins the section and it continues “by faith”, “by faith” and “by faith” – the teaching is clear that we need faith.

Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares [us], and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of [our] faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (Heb 12:1-2)

This ties it all together – the cloud of witnesses, every weight, every sin that so easily ensnares because of Christ – because Christ endured the cross, for the joy that was set before Him, and He has sat down at the right hand of God. Wow! That is amazing. That is grace – this is the amazing book of Hebrews!!