

INTRODUCTION TO HEBREWS

Message #1

Various Texts

The great preacher John Owen, who translated into English the commentary written in Latin by John Calvin, said **next to Romans, the most important Epistle in all of the New Testament is the Epistle to the Hebrews** (John Calvin, *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews*, p. iii). John Calvin himself said that Hebrews should “obtain in the Church the place and the honor of an invaluable treasure” (*Ibid.*, p. xx).

Adolph Saphir was born in Budapest, Hungary in 1831 to Jewish parents who raised him in a typical Jewish home. All of the members of this Jewish family came to faith in Jesus Christ and young Adolph decided he wanted to study the Bible and become a minister. Years later when Dr. Saphir decided to write a commentary, he chose Hebrews. He said that he was “attracted and riveted by the majestic ... style of this epistle.” He claimed that **the Epistle to the Hebrews deserved the same respect as Isaiah** (*Epistle to the Hebrews*, pp. 1-2).

When great students of Scripture say that Hebrews is as majestic a book as Romans and Isaiah and since we have just been going through Isaiah and Romans, it is fitting that we would undertake an exposition of the book of Hebrews.

QUESTION #1 – Why study the book of Hebrews?

We would like to give six reasons why we are going to study the book of Hebrews.

(Reason #1) - Because Hebrews is one of only sixty-six written books inspired by God.

There are five major proofs that we may offer that Hebrews is an inspired book of God:

- 1) It was quoted as an inspired book of God by early church leaders -
Clement of Rome-95, Hermas-115, Irenaeus-130, Clement of Alexandria-150;
Tertullian-170, Cyril-315, Eusebius-325, Jerome-340, Augustine-400
- 2) It was listed in the canon listings as a book in the Bible - Apostolic-300, Athanasius-367
- 3) It appeared in early translations as a book in the Bible - Old Syriac-400
- 4) It was listed as a book belonging in the Bible by all major church council meetings -
Councils of Nicea-325, Hippo-393, Carthage-397, and Carthage-419
- 5) It is a book in which God has preserved many Greek manuscripts
There are twenty-four very special early quality manuscripts dated from A.D. 300.
There are more than eighty minuscule (small case Greek) manuscripts
There are six lectionaries, early church worship books, that contain Hebrews.
There are twelve early Latin versions that contain Hebrews.
There is the Latin Vulgate Version.
There is the Syriac Version.
There is the Coptic Version.
There is the Ethiopic Version.

When we consider that there are only seven preserved manuscripts of Plato (400 B.C.), and only seven copies of Pliny's Natural History (A.D. 61-113), and only seven notebooks and one notebook of maps of the Journals of Lewis & Clark, we can certainly see **God did carefully preserve His precious written inspired Word in great abundance.** (For a good technical discussion of these matters pertaining to the Greek Text, see Paul Ellingworth, The New International Greek Testament Commentary, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, pp. 81-85.)

One of the great statements of the inspiration of the Bible is found in **Hebrews 4:12** which says the words are alive, so we had better go to work on understanding all 4,942 words in Hebrews.

(Reason #2) - Because Hebrews is a book that exalts Jesus Christ.

Every book in the Bible is sacred and every book exalts Jesus Christ, but Hebrews is in a league of its own. It presents a very "High Christology." As one commentator observed, "Throughout this document there is a sustained Christological focus, as our author wants to stress the superiority of Christ over angels and all other lesser beings who might garner human attention and worship" (Ben Witherington III, *Letters and Homilies for Jewish Christians*, p. 60).

In Hebrews we see how those O.T. types were a shadow of Jesus Christ (**8:5**). In Hebrews, we see that Jesus Christ is far greater than the prophets (**1:1-3**); far greater than the angels (**1:4-2:18**); far greater than Moses (**3:1-19**); far greater than Joshua (**4:1-13**); far greater than Aaron (**5:14-7:18**); far greater than Judaism and the old covenant (**7:19-10:39**); and far greater than all the great faith people of the O.T. (**11:1-12:3**).

In fact, a key word of this book is "better." **Jesus Christ is better than everything**. He is better than the angels (**1:4**); He gives us a better hope (**7:19**); He gives us a better covenant (**7:22; 8:6**); He offers a better sacrifice (**9:23**); He offers us a better possession (**10:34**); He offers us a better place of residency (**11:16**); He offers us a better salvation (**11:40**); He offers us a better new covenant. In Hebrews you will see Jesus Christ as you have never seen Him before.

(Reason #3) - Because Hebrews is a book that is important to our doctrine and our faith.

Arthur Pink said, "The doctrinal importance of this book is exceeded by none, not even by the Roman Epistle" (*An Exposition of Hebrews*, p. 18). **Hebrews doctrinally attacks the two main enemies of Christianity, religious ritualism and rigid legalism**. As Pink says, in Hebrews both receive their "death blow." **This book takes us to a whole new level in our understanding of grace** (**Hebrews 2:9; 13:25**). Hebrews can give a believer full assurance of salvation (**Hebrews 6:11**). It will cause us to fix our eyes on Jesus Christ who is the author and finisher of our faith (**Hebrews 12:2**). As Saphir says this book is an "exhortation to steadfastness" (p. 3). You will be strengthened in your doctrine and your faith by Hebrews.

(Reason #4) - Because Hebrews is a book that is important to evangelism and apologetics.

This book will stabilize your faith and reinforce the fact that Jesus Christ is able to save any sinner to the uttermost (**Hebrews 7:25**).

Hebrews clearly says that there is no possibility of any salvation or forgiveness of sins without the shedding of blood (**Heb. 9:22**). If we are going to evangelize others, we better grasp this point. The value of Christ's shed blood has opened the door for the worst of sinners to have access into the Holiest places of God (**Heb. 10:19-20**). In Hebrews, you come face-to-face with eternal security (**Heb. 5:9**); eternal redemption (**Heb. 9:12**); and a promise of an eternal inheritance (**Heb. 9:15**). You will see Christ's deity and you will see His majesty.

This is a great evangelistic book to take to the lost world and it will blast the Arminian to eternal bits. John Calvin wrote an entire commentary on Hebrews and sent it to Sigismund Augustus, the king of Poland for the purpose of getting him to put Jesus Christ first in his nation (pp. xx-xxv). When you go through Hebrews, you'll proclaim and defend the Person and work of Jesus Christ as never before.

(Reason #5) - Because Hebrews is a book that is important to our maturity .
Hebrews 5:11-6:3

E. Schuyler English, the editor of the Scofield Reference Bible said that to read the book of Hebrews "is to breathe the atmosphere of heaven itself. To study it is to partake of strong spiritual meat. **To abide in its teachings is to be led from immaturity to maturity in the knowledge of Christian truth and of Christ Himself**" (Quote cited from J. Vernon McGee, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, p. 502). In **Hebrews 6:1**, the writer says go on to maturity and this book of Hebrews can take all of us to maturity.

(Reason #6) - Because a complete exposition of Hebrews has mostly been neglected in most churches.

Peter O'Brien said there is no question that Hebrews is a difficult book and as a result most have neglected to understand it and we may add, expound it (*The Letter to the Hebrews*, p. 1). Since every word of God is pure and since the Church is responsible to declare the whole counsel of God, we dare not neglect a book like Hebrews just because it is difficult.

QUESTION #2 – Who wrote Hebrews?

When all is said and done and all research is completed on this subject, we will probably have to conclude with the answer **we don't actually know** and as Origen said, **only God knows**.

The overwhelming evidence of the early Church, especially the first three centuries, is that it was written by the Apostle Paul . In fact, George Guthrie says that the opinion that dominated the churches following the second century was that it was written by Paul (*Hebrews*, p. 23). **The earliest statement we have concerning the authorship of Hebrews is from Clement of Alexandria (A.D. 150-215) who said that Paul originally wrote Hebrews in Hebrew and Luke accurately translated it into Greek for the Greek readers** (Eusebius, *The History of the Church*, p. 254). Paul Ellingworth said, "The ancient testimony to the Pauline authorship is incomparably stronger than any other ..." (*Epistle to the Hebrews*, p. 13). Zane Hodges made an interesting point when he said, "The tradition of Pauline authorship is very old and has never been decisively disproved" (*Hebrews*, p. 777).

J. Vernon McGee wrote an entire thesis on the Pauline authorship of Hebrews and claimed that after inductively studying all aspects of it, he couldn't believe any could believe anyone else wrote it.

Clement of Alexandria, Eusebius and Origen all said it was probably written by Paul. In fact, Origen who lived in Rome from A.D. 210-211 defended Pauline authorship on the basis that the weight of tradition was so strong (Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, p. 5).

Ray Stedman said that when he was in seminary there was a standing joke concerning this book in which students would ask, "Who wrote the epistle of Paul to the Hebrews?" He said it was kind of on par with the question, "Who is buried in Grant's tomb" (*Hebrews*, p. 10).

Here is a manuscript fact that cannot be denied by any. **When one carefully studies the copies of the original Greek New Testament, this book is always linked to the writings of Paul. Paul's writings and epistles begin with Romans and end with Philemon.**

In the formation of the Greek New Testament, ten manuscripts place it immediately after Romans; six manuscripts place it immediately after II Corinthians; one manuscript places it after Galatians; two manuscripts place it after Ephesians; over ninety manuscripts place it after II Thessalonians; three manuscripts place it after Titus; twenty-five manuscripts place it after Philemon. As Metzger says, most printed editions of the Greek New Testament have followed a traditional sequence and place it at the end of the Pauline canon (Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, pp. 591-592).

By way of simple textual observation, we may observe that the book of Hebrews is certainly linked by the early Church to the writings of the Apostle Paul.

Ever since fourth century, many suggestions have been offered other than Paul: **1)** Luke - Paul's doctor friend; **2)** Tertullian was the first to say it was written by Barnabas - Paul's traveling companion; **3)** Another view was it was written by Clement of Rome (A.D. 30-100); **4)** Peter; **5)** Stephen; **6)** Jude; **7)** Apollos - the great orator of Acts 18 (Martin Luther was the first to build a case for him); **8)** Philip the deacon and evangelist of Acts 6; **9)** Silas; and **10)** Priscilla, who was married to Aquila. Priscilla is the easiest to rule out because the writer uses the masculine pronoun "me" in **Hebrews 11:32**, which eliminates the possibility of it being written by a woman.

Those who deny Pauline authorship do so on the basis of the internal statement found in **Hebrews 2:3-4** and also on the basis of major differences between the vocabularies of Paul in his other writings and Hebrews.

However, this could be explained if, as Clement said, Paul wrote it in Hebrew and Luke translated it into Greek. We do know Paul did address the Jews in Hebrew (**Acts 22:2**) so this is certainly a possibility. **Truth is, everything we learn about the writer comes from within the book.**

There are at least six authorship facts we may observe:

Authorship Fact #1 - The author wrote Hebrews as a written exhortation . **13:22**

In this verse, the verb “urge” (παρακαλω) and the noun “exhortation” (παρακλησεως) both come from the same verb (παρακαλεω). What this means is that this book was written to be an entreaty which would be an encouragement and comfort to the readers (G. Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, p. 340). This book of Hebrews can and will encourage us and comfort us in our faith.

Ben Witherington says that these verses (**vv. 22-24**) prove that Hebrews does have the elements of a letter, but it also have elements of a homily. Daniel Harrington called Hebrews “the greatest Christian sermon ever written down” (*Hebrews*, pp. 20-21). It was this fact that caused many to assume this was written by Apollos, who was a great orator and defender of Jesus Christ (**Acts 18:24-28**).

Authorship Fact #2 - The author knew intimate details about Timothy . **13:23**

Obviously Timothy had been imprisoned somewhere and had been released.

Authorship Fact #3 - The author was in Italy . **13:24**

We certainly know that the Apostle Paul spent much time in Rome.

Authorship Fact #4 - The author had a tremendous grasp of the Old Testament.

The writer quotes extensively from the Septuagint, rather than the Hebrew O.T. His favorite books he uses in Hebrews are the Pentateuch (Genesis-Deuteronomy) and the Psalms. It is clear when you read **Hebrews 11** that the writer was very knowledgeable of books of the O.T. including Joshua, the books of Samuel and the Prophetic books.

There are thirty-five explicit O.T. quotations in Hebrews: fourteen from Psalms; thirteen from Genesis-Deuteronomy; one from I Chronicles; two from Isaiah; one from Jeremiah; one from Habakkuk; one from Haggai; one from Proverbs; and one from Zechariah. Plus there are many allusions to other books.

It is interesting to note that many O.T. allusions come from the Septuagint and the Septuagint was written in Alexandria, which is another argument used by some who claim Apollos wrote Hebrews since he was from Alexandria and was a mighty eloquent man in the O.T. Scriptures (**Acts 18:24**).

Authorship Fact #5 - The author had a deep grasp of how Jesus Christ had replaced the O.T. Law. **10:1-4**

John Calvin believed this was one reason Satan had attacked the authorship of the book because this is a book that clearly explains that Jesus Christ is the end of the law (*Hebrews*, p. xxvi).

Authorship Fact #6 - The author was totally committed to communicating truth about Jesus Christ.

Adding all this up, we are on relatively safe ground if we say that Hebrews was either written by Paul or by someone who had been very close to Paul.

QUESTION #3 – When was Hebrews written?

There are four internal observations we may make to help us determine a date:

Observation #1 - It was written during the days of Timothy. **Heb. 13:23**

Observation #2 - It was apparently written before the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70 because the present tense of the verbs indicate sacrifices were being offered. **Heb. 7:27-28; 8:4, 13; 9:6-9; 10:1-3; 13:10-13**

Observation #3 - It was apparently written before a major outbreak of executing Christians which would place the time before A.D. 64. **Heb. 12:4**

Observation #4 - It was written after the infant days of the Church and after the initial surge against Christianity. **Heb. 10:32-34**

Taking these facts into consideration, we **think a date somewhere around A.D. 63-64 to be appropriate.** As George Guthrie observed, “the situation indicated by the data ... suggests Hebrews was written in the mid-60s A.D. (*Hebrews*, p. 22). **This would make it about one year before Nero’s major persecution broke out against Christians and about seven years before the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed.**

QUESTION #4 – To whom was Hebrews written?

It is obvious that Hebrews was written “to Hebrews” (Προς Εβραίους). **All Greek manuscripts and all ancient versions give this title to the book.** There is no evidence that this book was ever known by any other name. This has always been recognized as one written to Jewish believers. We may also observe that this book was written to an established church with established leaders (**Heb. 13:7, 17, 24**).

The only thing ever questioned is whether or not these Jewish believers lived in or out of Palestine? Acts 6:1 makes a distinction between Jews who were native Hebrews, who lived in Palestine, and those who were Hellenistic Jews who lived outside Palestine in the Gentile world. Some have said that it was written to Jewish believers who were in the church in Jerusalem and some have said it was written to Jewish believers who were in Rome. As O’Brien said, “Jerusalem and Rome are the most common proposals, with Rome considered the most plausible” (*The Letter to the Hebrews*, p. 14).

Regardless, this is a great book for those who are Jews and those who are non-Jews because this book will force everyone to examine what they actually believe about Jesus Christ.

There are four internal facts we may observe:

(Fact #1) - They had been believers for quite some time. **Heb. 5:12; 10:32**

These were not recent converts or newborn Christians. They could remember back to their former days when they first came to faith in Jesus Christ and they should be developed by now.

(Fact #2) - They had endured some trouble and had suffered for their faith. **Heb. 10:32-33**

There were two periods of suffering for Jewish Christians in Rome. The first started at the hands of Claudius in A.D. 49 when Jews were expelled from Rome until A.D. 54 when Claudius died. The second period was in the mid to late 60s when Nero was in power. The trouble described in this book fits well with the time of Claudius. If we date this book in A.D. 63-64, then about 15 years had transpired since the Claudius persecution.

(Fact #3) - They had not yet faced martyrdom but were facing hostile trials. **Heb. 12:3-4, 7**

(Fact #4) - Their faith was dimming and the lights were going out.

There seems to have been two main dangerous threats to these believers' faith:

(Dangerous Threat #1) - Some were in danger of not progressing in their Christian lives.

God does not want His people to be a bunch of baby Christians. He wants them growing to become mature. There was a real danger in the Hebrews of not progressing.

This danger is spotted by the many challenges not to drift away (**2:1**), not to neglect (**2:3**), not to come up short when it comes to understanding your rest (**4:1**), not to lose their confidence (**10:19, 23**), not to become dull of understanding (**5:11**), or sluggish (**6:12**). **Some of them had apparently even stopped going to church (Heb. 10:25). They were not progressing.**

(Dangerous Threat #2) - Some were in danger of actually reverting back to a works system of Judaism rather than the faith system in Jesus Christ.

Some were in danger of turning away from the living God and Jesus Christ (**3:12**). Some were in danger of not trusting God and turning back like the Exodus generation did (**3:16; 4:11**). Some were in danger of mentally and spiritually reverting back to Judaism to the point that they would actually embrace a religious works system that would hold Jesus Christ in contempt (**6:6**).

This may be seen in the challenges not to drift away (**2:1**); or fall away (**3:12**); or throw away your faith (**10:35**); or come up short when it comes to God's grace (**12:15**).

These believers needed a good shot in the arm and Hebrews is that shot in the arm. This book is written to a group of Jewish Christians who had endured traumatic things because they were Christians and they needed some encouragement.

These believers needed their faith shored up. Without a shored up solid faith, we cannot possibly please God (**Heb. 11:6**). What this writer does is challenge them to focus their attention on Jesus Christ - who He is, what He accomplished, and what He is doing. By focusing on the Person and work of Jesus Christ, your faith will be strengthened.

Instead of falling away in faith, fix your thoughts on Jesus (**3:1**); hold firm to your faith (**4:14**); leave elementary things and go on to maturity (**6:1**); draw near to God (**10:22**); hold fast to your faith (**10:23**); don't shrink back (**10:39**); must run the race (**12:1**); keep loving each other (**13:1**) and keep your sights focused on the Author and Finisher of your faith.

QUESTION #5 – What is the theme of the book?

R. Kent Hughes rightly observed, “No New Testament book has had more background research than Hebrews and none has spawned a greater diversity of opinion” (*Hebrews*, p. 18). **The only thing everyone has actually agreed on is the theme of the book which is the supremacy and finality of Jesus Christ. The theme of the book has never been in question; it is the superiority and the supremacy of Jesus Christ over everything.**

Jesus Christ is God's perfect Divine Son (Heb. 1-2); Jesus Christ is God's Perfect High Priest (Heb.3-5); Jesus Christ is God's perfect High Priest King (Heb. 7); and Jesus Christ is God's perfect final Sacrifice (Heb. 10).

You cannot possibly look at Jesus Christ in Hebrews without seeing His Deity . With the possible exception of the book of Revelation, no other letter focuses on the present glory and greatness of Jesus Christ like Hebrews. However, you also cannot possibly look at Hebrews and not see Jesus Christ is coming back and the writer knew it. He spoke of these being the “last days” (**1:2**); “the consummation of the ages” (**9:26**); Christ appearing “a second time” (**9:28**); a coming day of judgment (**10:25-31**); and a future inheritance (**2:5; 6:5**) after God shakes the heavens and the earth (**12:26-27**). **This book causes us to face Jesus Christ by faith before we face Him in Person.**

This book will force you to answer some very serious questions:

- 1) Do you really believe Jesus Christ is God the creator and final arbitrator of all things?
- 2) Do you really believe that Jesus Christ is your own personal High Priest?
- 3) Do you completely trust in His sacrificial work to save you from all your sins?
- 4) Do you so focus on Jesus Christ that you reflect a new life which has moved far from the old?
- 5) Do you really believe the written Word of God is the living Word of God?
- 6) Do you purpose to lay hold of better things?

A relationship with Jesus Christ is better than any other relationship you can ever have. Some of the Hebrew believers were beginning to shrink back from their faith and commitment to Jesus Christ. Don't let that happen to you. Take a journey with us through Hebrews and see if you don't come to believe that your relationship with Jesus Christ is superior to everything.