

Hebrews

Authorship: The author of Hebrews is unstated and unknown. This is the only New Testament book whose author is not fixed. Paul, Barnabas, Apollos and another co-worker of Paul have all been suggested over the years as viable possibilities for authorship.

Date: No one can say with certainty when Hebrews was written, but any time between the A.D. 40's and 60's fits the known facts.

Theme: We have a great high priest who is Jesus! The central plea of this epistle is for the believer to “press on unto perfection” (Hebrews 6:1), not to digress or turn back to his former ways. On the one hand, solemn warnings are interspersed throughout the letter showing the danger of neglect, unbelief, immaturity, and apostasy. One is not to turn away from the truth and the privileges of the Gospel. On the other hand, the superiority of Christ is emphasized to a degree not found in any other book in the New Testament. He stands above men, angels, and ceremonies – He is the final revelation of God (Hebrews 1:2) and the mediator of a new and better covenant (Hebrews 8:6).

Original Recipients: Second-generation Jewish Christians, probably living in or near Jerusalem, who had been Christians for some time (Hebrews 2:3-4; 5:11-14; 10:32) and had suffered persecution (12:3-4).

Background & Historical Situation: In the first century A.D., the practice of Judaism was sanctioned and protected by Roman law. Christianity, on the other hand, was not. Jewish Christians faced the dilemma of whether they should continue professing Christianity and risk danger or even death, or return to the safety and security of Judaism. This letter warned Christians against returning in any way to Judaism and encouraged them to go on to maturity in Christ. Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin nailed to the masthead of their movement three great principles from Hebrews: First, no sacrifice but Calvary. Second, no priest but Christ. Third, no confessional but the throne of grace.

Purpose: The many strong warnings in the book indicate that the first readers were in a state of extreme spiritual need, turning from Christ as the focal point of their faith, back to their former Jewish beliefs. The author is attempting to re-light the embers of a dying fire through teaching, warning and encouraging – all centered on Jesus Christ. Even the opening lines show us the author's intent to present a single theme: “He has spoken to us by His Son” (Hebrews 1:2).

Key Passage: “Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess” (Hebrews 4:14).

Outline:

I. The superiority of the Christian Faith (1:1-10:18)

- A. Jesus Christ Superior to the Prophets (1:1-4)
- B. Jesus Christ Superior to Angels (1:5-2:18)
- C. Jesus Christ Superior to Moses (3:1-4:13)
- D. Jesus Christ Superior to Aaron (4:14-10:18)

II. Exhortations to Persevere in Christian Faith (10:19-12:29)

- A. The Danger of Apostasy (10:19-31)
- B. Encouragements to Press On (10:32-39)
- C. Faith Defined and Exemplified (11:1-40)
- D. Jesus the Superior Example of Faith (12:1-4)
- E. The Meaning and Merit of Discipline (12:5-13)
- F. Warning Not to Turn Away from God (12:14-29)

III. Concluding Exhortations (13:1-19)

IV. Benediction and Greetings (13:20-25)

Sources:

Elwell, Walter A. and Robert W. Yarbrough. *Encountering the New Testament: A Historical and Theological Survey*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1998).
Jensen, Irving L. *Simply Understanding the Bible*. (Minneapolis, MN: World Wide Publications, 1990).
Willmington, Harold L. *Wilmington's Bible Handbook*. (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1997).