



THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS

INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK

WHAT KIND OF LITERATURE IS HEBREWS?

- It is self-characterized in Hebrews 13:22 as a “...word of exhortation...”, the 1st century phrase for a sermon (e.g., Acts 13:15).
- Also includes a personal closing, typical of a letter
- One commentator calls it an “epistolary homily” (a letter-like sermon)

SPECIAL FEATURES OF THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS

- It tells us that it is really a sermon rather than a letter
- Very polished Greek vocabulary, grammar, and rhetorical value

WHEN WAS IT WRITTEN?

- No later than AD 70 (the Temple is apparently still in service)
- No earlier than the beginning of Timothy’s joining Paul’s ministry as a young man, approximately AD 50
- Clement of Rome references it several times in AD 95 in a letter to the church in Corinth

WHAT WAS GOING ON THAT PROMPTED THE WRITING OF THIS LETTER

- It would appear from the warnings that are given in the Hebrew letter that a number of Jewish Christians were considering returning to the synagogue and turning their backs on Christianity
- Could the separation of Christianity from Judaism (thus, no longer being a protected faction under the legal umbrella of Judaism) be the cause of the persecution and the temptation to return to the synagogue?

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE LETTER?

- To prove the superiority of Christianity over Judaism
- To encourage wavering Jewish disciples to remain faithful and not fall back again into the now obsolete and ineffective faith of Mosaic Law

- To encourage these wavering disciples in the midst of the opposition and persecution they were experiencing

TO WHOM WAS IT WRITTEN?

- The book uses many references to Mosaic law and Temple worship, strongly implying an expected Jewish audience.
- The polished Greek language (vocabulary and grammar) and rhetorical style implies an expected well-educated Hellenist audience, who appreciated polished speakers and speeches.
- “Those of Italy greet you” implies
 - Nothing; just a common church greeting from Rome or nearby
 - It was being written from Rome or somewhere nearby to people who were also of Italy
- Those who were feeling the consequences of the separation of Judaism from Christianity
 - Christianity was considered by the Roman Empire as a faction of Judaism for several decades
 - Judaism enjoyed a special legal status and protection from the Roman government
 - Since Christianity was considered part of Judaism, it was protected for several decades.
 - But under Nero, Christianity was recognized and persecuted as a separate group; some Jewish Christians sought the old protection of the synagogue
- The original audience knew Timothy, were concerned about him, and could expect him to return there with the author

WHO WROTE THIS “LETTER”?

- Since this is not in the strict form of a letter (epistle) there is no author’s name given in it, either at the beginning or at the end. All we have are a few personal remarks at the end.
- Clues...
 - Reference is made to the Temple service still active — 9:6ff and 13:10 (Who was alive then?)
 - Likely written from Rome — 13:24 (Who went to Rome?)
 - Timothy is an associate, who has been “released” — 13:23 (Who was an associate of Timothy?)
 - Possibly written from prison — 13:23 (Who had been imprisoned?)
 - The Greek vocabulary used in Hebrews is more polished and eloquent than much of the rest of the New Testament, implying one or more possibilities...
 - The **writer** was well educated (Paul, Apollos, Luke, Barnabas)
 - The “word of exhortation” may be a **team** effort by Paul and others (e.g., Apollos, Luke, etc.)
 - The **scribe** was well educated (Luke)
- Possibilities...
 - Paul?

- There are a few themes found in Hebrews that are first encountered in Paul's letters
- Early Christians often ascribed it to Paul
- Timothy was Paul's usual companion and protege
- Apollos?
 - Was an associate of Paul and Timothy
 - Was an educated (Alexandria, Egypt) and polished Jewish speaker
- Others?
 - Luke
 - Barnabas
 - Silas

OUTLINE

- I. 1:1,2 — Christ is greater than the prophets
- II. 1:3–2:18 — Christ is greater than the angels
 - A. Warning #1 — 2:1-4 — we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard
- III. 3:1 — Christ is greater than Moses
 - A. Warning #2 — 3:7–4:8 — do not harden your hearts
- IV. 4:8 — Christ is greater than Joshua
 - A. Warning #3 — 4:8ff — be diligent to enter the better rest
- V. 4:14 — The order of Melchizedek, Christ is greater than the Aaronic priesthood
 - A. The perfect high priest
 1. Able to identify with humanity
 2. Priesthood of Melchizedek conferred on Jesus
 - B. Warning # 4 — 5:11–6:8 — the danger of falling away
 - C. 6:13 — Giving us better hope (who enters the veil as a forerunner for us as a priest of the order of Melchizedek)
 - D. 7:22 — Ministering under a better covenant
 - E. 9:11 — Offering a better sacrifice
- VI. 10:19 — Let us draw near
 - A. Hold fast, stimulate one another to love and good works, assemble without fail
 - B. Warning #5 — 10:26ff — if we go on sinning willfully, there remains no more sacrifice for sin
 - C. "We are not of those who shrink back to destruction but of those who have faith to the preserving of the soul."

VII. 11:1ff — Think of the triumph of the faithful!

- A. (Hebrews 11:1, 2) Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the men of old gained approval.
- B. The list
- C. (Hebrews 11:39, 40) And all these, having gained approval through their faith, did not receive what was promised, because God had provided something better for us, so that apart from us they would not be made perfect.

VIII. 12:1ff — Application

- A. Cloud of witnesses
- B. Fix eyes on Jesus
- C. A Father's discipline
- D. 11:12ff — Practical encouragements for tough times
 - 1. Warning #6 — 12:14-17 — No one should come short of the grace of God
 - 2. Warning #7 — 12:25-29 — Do not refuse Him who is speaking to you
- E. 13:20ff — Personal remarks, blessings, and closing