



Letter to the Hebrews

Chapters 1-6

Unfortunately, there is no way to know who wrote the letter to the Hebrews. The letter does not provide that information as do other letters in the New Testament. Some in the early church attributed it to the Apostle Paul, perhaps because “our brother Timothy” is mentioned (13:23) who was Paul’s young protégé. But the reference to Timothy could apply to any of the leaders in the Early Church.

The letter was written by someone highly educated as the letter is some of the highest quality Greek in the New Testament. Other candidates for authorship have included: Luke, Apollos, Pricilla and Aquilla, Silas and Phillip. And, any of these could have been serving as a scribe to an apostle, such as Peter. Though Hebrews 2:3, would seem to indicate that the author was not one of the 12 apostles. For these reasons, there is simply no way to know the name of the author.

The letter is anonymous.

Nor is possible to discern precisely to whom the letter was written, for the letter provides no such indication. Clearly, the recipients would have been Jewish Christians in need of remedial instructions related to the relationship of Jesus to the Mosaic Covenant:

It [the message of salvation] was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.
--Heb 2:3-4

For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. --Heb. 5:12

Much of the letter is devoted to teaching the relationship of Christ to the Mosaic covenant. This would have been a primary concern for Jews. We know they were Christians because the recipients were people who had heard the message (2:3-4, had been baptized and received the Holy Spirit (6:1-5). There is a concern for their growth and continuance in the faith (5:11-6:12). They also had some experience with suffering under persecution for the faith (12:4)

In the final greetings, we see this line: “Those who come from Italy send you their greetings. (13:24)” So, does that mean that the origination of the letter is from Italy? Or, more likely, the letter is written from some unknown origin and is extending greetings from those from Italy back to Italy, probably Rome. Either way there is a personally connection on the part of the author and audience to Italy.

It is quite likely that the letter to the Hebrews was written sometime before 70 AD. The letter speaks in the present tense of ongoing Levite priestly ministry and temple sacrifice (see 7:27; 8:5; 9:6-10). These practices would have all ceased following the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70 AD.



A letter discussing the temple and priestly practices following 70 AD would speak of these in the past tense. If they were Jewish Roman Christians, the recipients may very well have been living during the cruel persecutions of Christians by Emperor Nero (64-68 AD) when Peter and Paul were both martyred.

The Literary Structure of Hebrews

The Letter to the Hebrews		Chapters 1-13	
The Supremacy of Jesus Christ and the New and Better Covenant	Pay Attention: The Word of the Covenant: The Son of God	The Supreme Son of God	1:4-2:18
		The Supreme Covenant Mediator	3:1-4:13
	Draw Near: The Sacrifice of the Covenant: The Blood of Jesus	The Supreme High Priest	4:14-7:28
		The Supreme New Covenant	8:1-10:18
The Response: New Covenant Faithfulness	The Life of the Covenant: Faith in Jesus	The Call to Faith	10:19-12:29
		Living Sacrifices	13:1-25

The main message of the book is that the Jesus Christ is the supreme mediator of the New Covenant which is a clarion call to draw near to God through the blood sacrifice of Jesus and follow him by faith and in covenant faithfulness to the end of the age.

The writer will argue for Christ's superiority as the climax and fulfillment of all that has gone before in and through God's earlier covenantal mediators particularly through the creation, through angelic messengers, through Moses, through the Levite priesthood, and through the temple and its sacrifices (Chapters 1:1-10:18). The opening verses of the Book assert the central argument of the book:

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, ²but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. ³He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, ⁴having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs. –Hebrews 1:1-4



The author of Hebrews is asserting that Jesus is the climactic, final, authoritative, greatest, and supreme revelation of God. The readers may have been tempted to fall back into their Mosaic roots and not continue press forward into the full implications and life of the new and better covenant.

There are of course serious implications with the assertion of Jesus Christ as supreme. This message not only helps to properly contextualize the prior revelations and commands of God preceding the coming of Jesus Christ, it sets its hearers on a clear path way towards a life of holiness and godliness in the present. It also provides the foundation of a glorious hope in the fulfillment of the promised future for the people of God. The only appropriate response to God's revelation and covenant promise in Jesus Christ is faith and covenant faithfulness (Hebrews 10:19-13:25).

The Supremacy of Jesus Christ and the New and Better Covenant (1:1-10:18)

The first ten chapters of Hebrews focus on the Supremacy of Christ in all things pertaining to salvation and a relationship with God. The author essentially argues that Jesus is the supreme mediator of God in word and deed. Chapters 1-4 focus on Jesus as the Covenant Word of God in comparison to angelic messengers and Moses. These chapters call the believer to hear and obey the supreme word: Jesus Christ. Chapters 5-10, reflect on Jesus as both priest and sacrifice as the sacramental mediator of the New Covenant through his bloodshed on the cross. These chapters call the believer to "draw near" to God through the blood of Jesus Christ shed on the Cross.

Pay Attention: The Word of the Covenant: The Son of God (1:1-4:13)

The major theme of chapters 1-4 is a call to pay attention to the supreme revelation of the Word of God: The Son of God. According to the writer of Hebrews, Jesus is the supreme revelation of God. God has spoken in "at many times and in many ways...but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son..." (1:1) The revelation of God's word through Jesus is supreme over all other divine messengers and a messages, even over angels (1-2) and even over Moses (3-4).

The Supreme Son of God (1:1-2:18)

Angels are clearly important in the divine economy. He has used them in powerful ways to serve the elect of God (1:14). However, it is important to put them in their proper relationship to the Lord Jesus. Angels serve the Lord Jesus, not the other way around. They are creature, while Jesus is the creator, sustainer and redeemer of all things (Heb. 1:1-3). His name is greater than theirs (1:4). Scripture has continually testified that angels serve the Son of God and those who will "inherit salvation".

The implication of Jesus supremacy over the angels is that his message is supreme over theirs and the people of God must remain attentive to the "great salvation" proclaimed "first by the Lord" (1:3):

Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. ² For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, ³ how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, ⁴ while God also bore



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witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will. –Heb. 2:1-4

Jesus is in the process of bringing “many sons to glory” through his and their suffering (2:10). Jesus will actually deliver us from the evil angelic being Satan (2:14) and the power of death which Satan holds. Because Jesus was made like us, even in weakness, suffering and temptation, he is better equipped to minister to our needs when we are under the same trials (2:18).

The Supreme Covenant Mediator (3:1-4:13)

Just as Jesus is supreme to angelic messengers of God’s word, so to is he supreme out of all human mediators of God covenant. Moses is the supreme example prior to the coming of the Lord, but Jesus is greater than Moses.

For Jesus has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses—as much more glory as the builder of a house has more honor than the house itself. ⁴ (For every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God.) ⁵ Now Moses was faithful in all God's house as a servant, to testify to the things that were to be spoken later, ⁶ but Christ is faithful over God's house as a son. And we are his house if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope. –Heb .3:3-6

The people of God have a history of rebelling against the human mediators of God’s covenant. As great as Moses was, people hardened their hearts to his message and leadership. Because Jesus is greater than Moses, the danger of hardening your heart to his message is even greater.

The Israelites who hardened their hearts to Moses lost the privilege of entering into the Promised Land—Sabbath Rest (3:16-19). Jesus is leading us to an even greater Land of Promise—an even greater Sabbath Rest. It remains for the people of God to enter into that ultimate promise of God (4:9).

Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience. ¹² For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. ¹³ And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account. –Heb. 4:11-13

Just as in the days of old, the key to entering into the Rest of God is in hearing and obeying the Word of God. Jesus is the living and active Word of God (cf. Rev. 1:12-16).

Draw Near: The Sacrifice of the Covenant: The Blood of Jesus (4:14-10:18)

The first four chapters, give those who are paying attention their eschatological marching orders. Jesus is leading his New Covenant people into God’s Sabbath rest. That which was hinted at through angels Moses and the prophets, is now able to be pursued in fullness by those who hear and obey the word of



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Jesus Christ. Hebrews 1-4 is a call to pay attention to and obey the living and active word. Hebrews 5-10 is a call to draw near to God through the person and work of Jesus as High Priest and atoning sacrifice on the cross.

He introduces this section with the charge which he will develop through the next five chapters:

Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. Hebrews 4:14-16

The challenge for the Hebrews is that they are slipping away from a relationship with God rather than drawing in. There are several reasons for this. One, they are immature. This immaturity is due to an inattentiveness and hardness of heart toward the Word (see chapters 1-4). The root problem is deeper in that it is related to human weakness and the sin nature. Jesus is the only one who can help us overcome human weakness and sin. He has fought the battle over these two forces and won the victory. He alone can help us—only the believer must “draw near”, not “fall away”.

The Supreme High Priest (4:14-7:28)

One of the good things about a human high priest is they can “deal gently” (5:2) with the struggles of the “ignorant” and the “wayward” because they too have a human nature and a sin nature. That is why the Aaronic priesthood had to sacrifice for their own sins before offering sacrifices for the people (5:3). It is an awesome job. That is why it is not a self appointed position, but a divine calling (5:4).

Jesus was divinely called to this very position as a high priest in the order of Melchizedek. He too is able to “deal gently” with us because he suffered in human weakness (5:8).

Excursus on Christian Maturity and Apostasy (5:11-6:20)

The writer of Hebrews, begins to develop this more fully, but then digresses into some concerns that he has for the readers of Hebrews. They have become “dull of hearing” because of their lack of diligence in delving deeper into the “word of righteousness” (5:13). At this point he would have expected that they become teachers feeding others solid food. Instead, they need remedial training and “baby milk” (5:11-14).

In spite of their immaturity, the writer is going to press on into deeper things for the sake of their growth and salvation.

Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, ² and of instruction about washings, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. ³ And this we will do if God permits.
—Heb. 6:1-2



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The concern is that the “dullness of hearing”, the need for “baby milk”, all could be the early warning signs of impending apostasy from the faith. Apostasy is when a person who has heard the word and responds favorably, and then not only fails to grow and continue in maturity but falls away from the faith. It is possible to have just enough external exposure to and experience with the faith to become immune to it:

For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt. For land that has drunk the rain that often falls on it, and produces a crop useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned. —Heb. 6:4-8

The writer is confident that this is not them. Although there is some evidence in their life of apostasy from the gospel—dullness and spiritual stagnation, there are other signs of life. These are “things that belong to salvation.” The evidence he see is in their good works and loving character toward the saints, the people of God. Ultimately, the key for these Christians is to return their focus and attention back to the promises of God through which they can “draw near” to God.

The struggles facing the Hebrews, may have led to a lack of hope. But their hope can be strong as they renew their attention to the promises of God, if they will but trust him (6:13-19). Jesus has shown us the way in to a deeper relationship with God.

¹⁹ We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain,²⁰ where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek. —Heb. 6:19-20
