

Hebrews Study Session 1

The book of Hebrews brings joy to anyone who loves puzzles. It is unique among all New Testament books. Its form is unusual. Its author is unknown. Its setting is uncertain. Its arguments are unfamiliar. As one author put it, Hebrews invites engagement in the task of defining the undefined.

While there is a lack of internal evidence answering many of the routine questions about this book everyone who studies would like to have answered, there are clues throughout the book that give a good deal of insight into the book and why it was written. Like all books of the Bible, it is important to have a basic grasp on why the book was written in order to glean the most truth from it. If you remember our study of Colossians, we spent a session discussing the history to that letter and diving into the heresy of Gnosticism that was springing up at the time when Paul wrote it. If you didn't understand the basics of Gnosticism, then you weren't going to get the full picture of the book. The same is true of Hebrews other than there are a lot more digging that has to be done in order to get to a reasonably solid foundation to launch our study.

Just so you know, the book of Hebrews was actually one of the very last books admitted into the Bible. There were a lot of red flags that Hebrews raised with Biblical scholars in the late 3rd and early 4th century. Before the New Testament was closed and canonized, the books and letters were circulated among the early churches. When it came time to decide which ones were divinely inspired and which weren't, the Christian scholars and church leaders had to come together and share their library of writings and letters and see which matched up with others. There were three criteria a book or letter had to have in order to even be considered divinely inspired and admitted into the canon of Scripture. 1) It had to be known to be written by one of the apostles or someone who first-hand, eye-witness experience with the Lord Jesus, (thus, Mark, who did know Jesus and was Peter's apostle was eligible and Luke/Acts were included because Luke interviewed several eye-witnesses to the Lord's life and was with Paul, who also had eye-witness status yet books like the gospel of Thomas was denied because it was not actually written by Thomas but was known by the ancient church to have been written much later than the first century), 2) They were doctrinally sound and historically accurate (this is why the Maccabees weren't included as they contained known historical inaccuracies), & 3) the book or letter had to have been in wide circulation among the early church. Those books which had been written by apostles, were by their nature copied and circulated widely. (The problem was that many books became circulated widely but could not be verified as to the other two conditions.) The early church fathers had to research each book to figure out who wrote it and where it originally was written and why. When all was said and done, the early church fathers came up with three groups of books: 1) divinely inspired, 2) not inspired but useful for edification and church use (the Shepherd of Hermas was in this category and almost made it into canon and Hebrews almost ended up in this category), 3) not inspired and heretical garbage. Hebrews, in the earliest copies from the mid-100 AD on found itself placed among the letters of Paul, usually between Romans and I Corinthians, though occasionally at the end of the letters to the church (after II Thessalonians) and before the Pastorals (I Timothy). By the 4th century, no one was sure Paul wrote Hebrews and it almost got relegated to the second group of non-inspired by useful but it was admitted to canon on the basis of having been written by Paul and it certainly was in wide circulation. In fact, Clement of Rome, one of the second generation church leaders, wrote his

first book of theology around 90-95 A.D. Hebrews is listed in his accepted books and quotes from it extensively. Thus, if it was this well known before 100 A.D. then it was certainly written well before that time to have circulated to that extent.

Q: Before we get into the introduction, I want to know if you have any questions about Hebrews. I'm going to be writing a new study each week from scratch. I want to answer any questions that you have about this book to the best of my ability. What you think is important, I may gloss over if you don't let me know it's important to you. So let's take some time so I can jot down any questions you have so I'll know to address them at some point.

Who was the author?

Q: Who do you think wrote the book of Hebrews? What have you been taught?

The truth is that no one knows for sure. If you were to read a stack of scholarly commentaries, you'd find as many opinions as there are books in your stack. The first commentary I picked up claimed that it had to be Paul and then gave the reasons why it was doubtful that it was one of dozen other speculations. The next commentary I read said that it could have been any one of the other dozen contenders but definitely wasn't Paul.

Here's the list of the most common suspects who wrote Hebrews: Paul, Apollos, Barnabas, Pricilla and Aquila, Jude, the deacon Philip, Silas just to name the top seven on the list. The reason people slant towards Paul is because the author is someone who had contact with the recipients in a certain area. Paul had such contact with almost everyone in the ancient world. He also had a pastor's heart and concern for churches and believers. He also had the background necessary to discuss the material presented in the letter. Those who argue against Paul say it is because the language in Hebrews is completely different from any of Paul's other writings. His other letters are all in rough, street-language Greek. He barrels through his arguments to make his point. Even by his own admission, he was not an elegant speaker or orator (II Corinthians 10:10 & 11:6). However, the writer of Hebrews was very eloquent. It is a masterpiece in its grammar and linguistics and style of arguments. The words the author of Hebrews uses are not the same as Paul uses in his other letters. We know from Scripture though that Apollos was an eloquent speaker and a strong debater of the Jews (Acts 18:24). Of course, the early church fathers attributed it to Paul though there is no documentation of why this was the way it was. The deal is that Hebrews is actually not a letter in the true sense. It is a sermon - the only sermon in the New Testament which is a full book. Paul's sermons may have been more polished than his letters to the churches, we just don't know.

There's only one piece of internal evidence that remotely gives us any indication of who may have written the book and when it was written. [**Hebrews 13:23**]. This one verse tells us that the writer of Hebrews knew Timothy as did the recipients of the letter. Timothy had been imprisoned but was now released. The author would come to the recipients' location if Timothy showed up. In other words, the author was close to Timothy. We know for sure Paul was close to Timothy. This was also fairly late in Timothy's ministry as Timothy had been the pastor of the Ephesian church prior to his imprisonment. However, Timothy, having traveled with Paul extensively and been the pastor of one of the largest and most central churches in the first century, was known by just about every Christian. This only whittles away the absurd prospects. What it will do for us in the long-run is help us with dating this book later.

In the end, we could spend hours on this topic and be totally confused and still not be certain as to who wrote the book. Here's what we know for sure. The Lord was directing the minds and hearts of those men back in the 4th century who put the New Testament together. The Lord in His providence ensured that it made it into our canon. Origen, the ancient historian and Christian theologian who began writing around 210 A.D., said this, *"Who wrote the epistle? God only knows the truth."* For this study, I'll more than likely attribute the work to Paul because that's to whom the earliest figures in church history attributed it. My beloved Pastor growing up once said this about Hebrews: *"Paul wrote Hebrews but if you want to be wrong, you can attribute it to anyone else."*

Who was the intended audience?

This is where things get interesting. The book of Hebrews was a sermon prepared for a specific group of believers who formed a primitive church body, probably a home church. There is only one external piece of evidence that gives us any hint about who this letter was sent to originally and that is the title of the book. In most of the ancient texts it reads *"To the Hebrews"*. Let's look at some of the internal clues and see what we can determine about these people. The question to ask after each passage is: What does this verse(s) tell us about the people who originally received this letter? We'll start with the clear ones and then to those references that may give us a clue but may not.

- 1) [Hebrews 13:19, 23] - (They were known by the author personally/ the author is looking forward to or anticipating seeing this group of people again)
- 2) [Hebrews 5:12] - (They had been believers for some time and should have been competent to teach others by this time but weren't)
- 3) [Hebrews 6:9] - (The author had a good opinion of them, that they were truly saved)
- 4) [Hebrews 13:18] - (The author desires them to pray for his ministry team)
- 5) [Hebrews 10:32-34] - (The recipients had in prior days gone by endured great sufferings for their participation in the gospel/ they showed sympathy for those who were jailed due to the faith/ they had their property seized as a result of their faith and they joyfully accepted this loss)
- 6) [Hebrews 12:4] - (The persecution against the believers who received this letter had not grown to the point of torture and death. It was merely social and legal in nature)

Now we look at a couple of pieces of information that may give us a few more clues to the original audience. But these are not clearly and spelled out as the things above are.

7) [Hebrews 13:14] - (The original audience was probably located in a city - as the author was making his point of the believer's reward in terms of a city - which the readers would have been familiar. Also, the concerns raised in Hebrews 13:1-6 are more typical of a group of people living in a city than on a farm.)

8) [Hebrews 13:24] - (The recipients lived in Italy - those ministry companions of the author who were from Italy knew this church personally and wished to greet them through the author. As we'll see, they were probably in Rome or a city close to it.)

With a little history of the first century churches and how they operated there is one more piece of information we can learn about these people. The very early churches met in houses and due to that were rarely larger than about 20 people due to the limitations of how many people you

could squeeze into an ancient house. Now there were often many such house churches around a city and they would share a common group of ministry leaders who would travel to each house to minister to those there. So there were three players in the ancient house churches: 1) the host or benefactor who opened his home to the church, 2) the church membership who came, often daily, for worship and teaching, & 3) the church leadership or ministry team which circulated to each house church in an area.

9) [**Hebrews 13:17, 24**] - (the fact that the author is mentioning a need to obey their spiritual leaders may indicate a problem that existed between the host/membership and the leadership - if such a problem did exist, it doesn't seem to be too serious or the author probably would have spent a little more time on it/ notice that the author greets the church membership and leadership separately in v.24)

10) [**Hebrews 13:7**] - (these believers were not "original" believers but were converts or "second generation" to the faith. They heard the word from those who became their leaders.)

Then lastly, there is one more point about these people that we can know and this one is fairly certain but unless you have firm grip on Greek and Hebrew, you'd never get it. There were two types of Jews (Hebrews) in the first century. There were Judean or native or Hebraic Jews. They lived in area of ancient Israel. These people spoke Hebrew (or Aramaic dialect of Hebrew) primarily in their homes and they used the Hebrew Scriptures. (Which remember at this time the only Scriptures were the Old Testament.) The second group of Jews were called Hellenistic Jews. This means they were Jews, with lineages just as pure as those Jews in Israel but they had been scattered through the various exiles and dispersions of the Jews over the centuries into the "Greek-speaking" lands. (Hellenistic means Greek in culture.) While these Jews understood Hebrew, it wasn't their primary language, Greek was their primary language. Greek was the universal language of the world at that time. They had a copy of the Old Testament which was translated from Hebrew into Greek called the Septuagint (LXX - it means 70 and it gets its name from the 70 scholars who did the translation). Why I'm dragging you down this road is because ALL the Old Testament references in Hebrews are taken from the LXX and not the Hebrew Scriptures.

In addition to this, Moses is elevated in Hebrews. He is shown as the supreme example of perfection in the sense of the access and relationship to God. It's impossible to exaggerate how important Moses was in the thinking of the Hellenistic Jews. While Moses was a major figure in Judaism in general, his place as a high priest in the minds of the Hellenistic Jews was amplified over that of other saints in the Old Testament. Whereas the native Hebrews possessed a more balanced view of Moses and the other Old Testament prophets and figures. As we'll see often in Hebrews, the author compares Jesus and Moses to explain the differences between the new and old covenants. He does this to show that the most revered of all ancient saints is below the rank held by Jesus, as God's Son.

There is another tradition that the LXX follows that the Hebrew Old Testament didn't and it concerned angels. In the LXX, the angels were used in the transmission of the Law at Sinai. In the Hebrew text, only in Deuteronomy 33:2 do we see angels being mentioned at all in regards to the Law being given and that merely that they were present. But sometime before the first century the Hellenistic Jews had the idea that the Lord used angels to actually help transmit the Law to His people. [**Hebrews 2:2**] We see the author speaking of this reference to angels. He wouldn't use this reference if he weren't a Hellenistic Jew or making his appeals to Hellenistic

Jews. Thus, we can know that the recipients and the author are all Hellenistic Jews which means they aren't living in ancient Israel so they share cultural and language traits with the Greek speaking world.

When was Hebrews written?

[**Hebrews 2:3-4**] - The author and the original recipients heard the word from others and believed. The fact that the author thought enough time had elapsed since their initial salvation that they should be teachers of the faith by now but aren't shows that there was a time lapse between the time of their salvation and the time of Hebrews being written.

Then we already read in **Hebrews 10: 32-34** where the recipients were mistreated and had their property confiscated. We know exactly when this historical event happened. It was done by the edict of Emperor Claudius in 49 A.D. At this point in history, Christianity was not seen by the lost world as anything other than a sect of Judaism. However, the emperor saw that those Jews who followed Christ seemed to be causing an uproar among the "normal Jews" he exiled all Christian Jews out of Rome. Since this was done in Rome and the surrounding cities, it is why we think this church was in Rome or close by as these early Christians were on the business end of this imperial edict. By 50 A.D. this edict was in full force. Priscilla and Aquila were in Rome at the time and we know they were ended up in Corinth after this (Acts 18:1-2 - they just landed in Corinth when they met Paul). The church which received Hebrews probably stayed in Italy but got pushed, like most Christians, just outside the city far enough to be in compliance with the edict. So it's likely that a good amount of time had passed after the confiscation of their property and the receiving of this letter. So the earliest it's believed to be written is about 60 A.D.

We also believe that it was before 70 A.D. as there are no mentions in the text about the sacrifices not being offered. Now to be fair, the text also doesn't deal with the Temple but constantly refers to the Tabernacle. Thus, we can't be sure about this. However, we can be sure that Clement wrote his book that quoted extensively from Hebrews in 90 - 95 A.D. Thus, it was in general circulation and well known and considered authoritative long before that time. Another historical fact that plays into this consideration is that the persecution of Christians by Nero took place in 64 A.D. That persecution had Christians tortured and killed so the phrase in **Hebrews 12:4** about not yet shedding blood for their faith would place Hebrews between 60 - 64 A.D.

Why was this book written?

Let's consider what we've already looked at so far. These were people who had been believers for some time now - some of them probably twenty years or so. They are living in a city near Rome or on the outskirts of Rome in Italy. The Roman empire is growing increasingly hostile towards Christianity. However, the Roman empire tolerates Judaism. While this group of believers had taken off and shone brightly in the early years after their salvation, over time and varying degrees of social and economic persecution, their zeal wavered and they began to grow cool in their faith. It is very likely that Hebrews addressed Hellenistic Jews who converted to the Christian faith but over time became hesitant about cutting themselves off decisively and fully from the Jewish faith which was tolerated by Rome while Christianity wasn't. When we go through this book keep in mind that this was a sermon written to these early Christians wavering between staying in the Christian faith or returning to the Jewish faith. This is why much of the

theological content of Hebrews consists of comparing Moses to Jesus and the old covenant of the law to the new covenant of grace and the superiority of Jesus and grace. **[Hebrews 13:22]** The author considered this sermon a word of exhortation or encouragement to those early believers struggling in their faith.

What is the main theme of this book?

[Hebrews 4:14] - Jesus is our great high priest.

In order to get this across the author uses a phrase in the Greek that is only used in the book of Hebrews but in the book of Hebrews is used 12 times. This is the comparative adverb (superior or better). If you ever want to do an interesting study, look at all 12 of the examples in Hebrews of the use of “superior” or “better”. Another way the author makes the case for Jesus being superior to angels, Moses, Joshua and everyone else is the use of the word “new”. In Hebrews, the author is not putting down Judaism but showing it’s obsolescence. In Jesus there is a new priesthood, a new covenant, and a new sacrifice. God did work in and through the old covenant but had always planned a better covenant that is built upon Jesus, the great high priest. Knowing these things (the things in Hebrews), why would anyone return to Judaism? That new covenant is now the one God has established to relate to mankind and it is only available through His Son, Jesus Christ.

Q: Are there any questions, comments, rebukes or rebuttals?