

## The Letter to the Hebrews

Although it ends like a letter, and periodically sounds like one as one progresses through it, the epistle to the Hebrews certainly does not begin like a letter. It does not say who its author is, and while many if not most Christians assume it to be Paul (with some plausible arguments), the fact remains that it does not say. From this perspective, there is a uniqueness and a certain mystery about Hebrews. Of its message, however, there can scarce be any doubt. Hebrews presents the once-for-all supremacy of Christ to all individuals, rituals and institutions that have preceded him. He is the brightness of God's glory and the express image of His person – absolutely unique amongst all creation. Everything that went before was but a foreshadowing, a pointing-forward, to the mighty reality of God-in-Christ.

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Let's first tackle some of the unusual features of the letter. That it is indeed a letter, the end makes plain. Although there is little by the way of explicit clues who the recipients were in the first four chapters, there are periodic hints from that point forwards, as the panel shows. The author evidently knew his readers, hoped to see them soon and to be reunited with them in some sense. He was familiar with their fine example of practical service ministering to the saints – indeed, they had ministered to him in the past, for which he was very grateful. But now he felt there was a risk that they may tire of persecution and of the chastening of the Lord, so the need for exhortation was strong. But the real clue about the audience comes in 5:11-14 and in the

overall subject-matter of the letter. The author upbraids them for not maturing spiritually as they ought in their understanding of God's Word. In fact, instead of maturing they were going back-

### Reconstructing the Audience

There are many, many exhortations in the letter that would apply to a general audience. The following contain particular clues that the author is addressing a specific community.

He says or implies the following about his readers:

- Unskillful in the word; need to be re-instructed in the basics; immature (5:11-14)
- Good record of love and ministry to saints; keep it up! no laziness! (6:9-12+)
- Suffered persecution joyfully; took care of author; be patient and continue (10:34-36)
- Don't buckle under persecution / chastening; not yet resisted unto blood (12:4-5)
- Perhaps they had some question marks about marriage and sex (13:4)
- Pray for the author so he may be 'restored' to them sooner (13:19)
- Personal greetings and signing-off imply a specific audience (13:20-24)

wards – returning to the shadows and types of Old Testament worship instead of embracing and growing in the reality of faith in Christ. Instead of being able to provide spiritual meat, then, it was necessary to go back to basics. The whole content of the letter, showing how Christ

is superior to every imaginable aspect of Old Testament worship speaks volumes about who the readership must have been and what their needs were. The letter to the Hebrews might not seem very basic in parts (if this is milk, how many can truly handle the meat?!), but the essence of the message is a basic one – the absolute priority and superiority of Christ in the purpose of God, particularly with respect to what went before in the history of God's people.

Most likely, then, the original readership was a group of believers who were primarily Jewish (or perhaps Gentile proselyte, though if we give its inherited title 'to the Hebrews' any weight, this latter seems less likely). It consisted of an ecclesia or ecclesias who had grown or converted from Judaism to Christianity, but were confused (to put it charitably) about how Christ related to what had gone before in Jewish worship, history and tradition, and were tempted to go back there. It goes without saying, though, that the letter was also intensely valuable to Gentiles who might have been tempted by Judaism or who were confused about the role of Jewish ritual. And it retains that intense value for any who want to understand how Christ relates to what went before, what the purpose was of those former things, and as a reminder of the massive significance of Christ.

## **An Unusual Letter**

Most letters say who they are written to; this one doesn't (although we've done our best to reconstruct this in the preceding paragraphs).

Most letters say who they are from; this one doesn't. I don't believe this topic is the best way to use the available space, but a few sentences are necessary. There are good thematic connections with Paul's other writings, and some linguistic ones; enough to at least support the common view amongst us that Paul is the author. Most scholars would not accept this conclusion, largely for linguistic reasons of both vocabulary and style. While it is true that there are stylistic differences, these are a precarious basis for ascribing authorship, as different times and circumstances can greatly affect the way in which people communicate. There are other theories of authorship – Apollos and Barnabus amongst them – but no incontrovertible evidence.

Whether we accept Pauline authorship or not (and it doesn't really make much difference to interpretation), the question remains, why doesn't it just say? This brings us back to the issue of the it-is-and-it-isn't nature of Hebrews as a 'letter'. It appears to be a letter with its opening chopped off, and it appears written in a rather unusual style – more speech than letter, at least in places. Could it be that much of the letter was a transcribed speech by Paul or some other early apostle or preacher, for instance, then re-crafted into a letter form? Could it be that it was a document written more as a treatise than a personal letter. Either of these would explain its heightened and rather polished style, and, were we to prefer Pauline authorship, would be a ready explanation of why it is a little different to the other Pauline writings we know.

So was there originally a 'proper' opening to the letter (personal greetings, a 'to' and 'from', and the like) which became lost or was removed to give the letter a wider appeal? We don't know. I would like to think that the abrupt opening is deliberate in God's design, and probably in the author's design also. A great way of creating a literary effect is to take a conventional literary form

(like a letter, a limerick or a sonnet) but then change it – it is the breaking with convention which creates effect and adds impact. The opening to the letter to the Hebrews is so powerful precisely because it does not open like a ‘normal’ letter, but opens with the most powerful word of all: ‘God’. The opening of Hebrews commands attention like no other book in the Bible apart, perhaps, from Genesis and the Gospel of John. Our choices about Christ, the Law, Jewish ritual, Old Testament history and the like, are not dictated by personal preference, genetics, tradition or inclination. They are demanded of us by God Himself Who has spoken uniquely and decisively in His Son:

*“God, Who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by His son (literally ‘in son’ or ‘in one who is Son’ – a tremendously emphatic contrast), whom He hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also He made the worlds (= ‘ages’).” (Hebrews 1:1-2)*

In the light of this great truth, all concerns about who the author is or who the original readers were fade into their proper perspective!

## The Superiority of Christ

But if the theme of Hebrews is the superiority of Christ, to what is he superior? The answer is everything, with the exception of God Himself. In particular, though, Hebrews is concerned with his superiority to the things of the Old Covenant: the things of the Law, the sacrifices and the Priesthood. In fact, the list is extensive, and includes Christ being superior to the various items listed in the sidebar.

I want to immediately note three of the ways the writer stresses this superiority of Christ. A fourth – quotations from the Old Testament – deserves a section all of its own which will follow.

First, the writer repeatedly uses comparative value-loaded terms like ‘better’, ‘more excellent’ to characterize the new over the old. This is demonstrated in the Panel on the next page.

### Christ is superior to...

Prophets	1
Angels	1, 2
Moses	3
Joshua and the Sabbath	3, 4
High Priest	5
The Law	7
Abraham	7
Priesthood, Levites	7, 8
Tabernacle	8, 9
Covenant, testament	8, 9
Blood, consecration	9
Atonement by High Priest	9
Sacrifices, offerings	10
Mount Sinai	12
The Camp	13
Meats	13

Not only is it stated that Christ is superior to that which has gone before, a number of implicitly derogatory terms are used to describe those old institutions. Here are just a few examples from chapters 9-10, but the exercise of picking out these pejorative adjectives and adjectival phrases could be extended throughout the letter:

- A worldly sanctuary (9:1)
- Carnal ordinances (9:10)
- A tabernacle ... made with hands ... of this building (9:11)
- Holy places made with hands (9:24)
- The law has a shadow of good things (10:1)

Even the sentence structure is moulded to make the point. Greek sentences have a certain flexibility in word order for emphasis. In Hebrews we often find quite long sentences which build to a climax by deliberately placing the reference to Christ in

final, culminating position. There is nothing to be compared with him, and even the very sentences of the letter must await their completion and fulfillment on his climactic appearance.

In these and other ways, God's unparalleled communication with mankind in the person of His son is demonstrated.

### Christ is Better

- 1:4 better than the angels, a more excellent name
- 3:3 more glory than Moses
- 6:9 persuaded better things of you
- 7:7 the less is blessed of the better
- 7:19 a better hope
- 7:22 Jesus was made a surety of a better testament
- 8:6 a more excellent ministry, a better covenant, better promises
- 9:11 a greater and more excellent tabernacle
- 9:14 how much more shall Christ's blood purge you
- 9:23 better sacrifices than these
- 10:34 you have a better and enduring substance in heaven
- 11:4 a more excellent sacrifice than Cain

### Quoting the Scriptures

Hebrews has an abundance of explicit Old Testament quotations; the Hebrew Bible is again and again the proof-text for the author's point. He shows, in example upon example, context after context, that a future and more perfect revelation of God than that which the Old Testament and its institutions provided was implicit in those very institutions and that very word of God. It could not be otherwise (from an Old Testament perspec-

## The Phasing of Time

There are a number of interesting ways in which Hebrews deals with the subject of time. The future and the concept of the potential of remaining time are dealt with in chapter 4 and at the end of chapter 11. In 9:8,9 there is the concept of 'not yet'. Finally, there is the powerful contrast between the 'now' under Christ, and the 'then' of the things that went before. In particular, with respect to the sacrifice of Christ the author emphasises the 'once for all' nature of what Christ did, versus the repetitive offerings of the priests under the old law (compare 7:27; 9:26,27,28; 10:14).

tive) than that Christ should come and be 'better' than what had gone before. Christ's supremacy is latent and implicit in passage after passage of Hebrew Scripture.

So it is, then, that Hebrews contains more Old Testament quotations, proportionately speaking, than any other New Testament book. A typical list, sourced from the United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament, is included in the table. On top of these references could be added a further set of verbal links, allusions and echoes that continue the point.

When piled together, these quotations provide a magnificent monument to the wonder of God's revelation in Christ. Chapter 1 is a prime example; from v4 onwards it constitutes what can almost be described as a list of Old Testament citations with mere connecting comments all that is needed from the author to draw out the point. The applications (for instance of Psalms 45 and 102) are bold, challenging, and exciting. The gauntlet is thrown down to anyone who would claim any other view than the one the writer puts forward. And even before we reach the quotations proper from v4, terms like 'express image' and '' are rich with Old Testament allusion and power. There is no denigrating of the Old Testament here. Hebrews' role is rather to bring out the enormous power inherent in it as it speaks so eloquently of the Lord Jesus Christ.

### Old Testament Quotations

The following is a generally accepted list of OT quotations in Hebrews, sourced from the United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament. The asterisked ones are considered by the UBS editors to follow the Septuagint against the Hebrew.

Hebrews	Old Testament
1:5a	Ps 2:7
1:5b	2 Sam 7:14
1:6	Dt 32:43*
1:7	Ps 104:4*
1:8-9	Ps 45:6-7
1:10-12	Ps 102:25-27*

1:13	Ps 110:1	8:5	Ex 25:40
2:6-8	Ps 8:4-6*	8:8-12	Jer 31:31-34
2:12	Ps 22:22	9:20	Ex 24:8
2:13a	Is 8:17*	10:16-17	Jer 31:33-34
2:13b	Is 8:18	10:30	Dt 32:35-36
3:7-11	Ps 95:7-11	10:37-38	Hab 2:3-4*
3:15	Ps 95:7-8*	11:5	Gen 5:24*
4:3,5	Ps 95:11	11:18	Gen 21:12
4:4	Gen 2:2	11:21	Gen 47:31*
4:7	Ps 95:7-8*	12:5-6	Prov 3:11-12*
5:5	Ps 2:7	12:20	Ex 19:12-13
5:6	Ps 110:4	12:21	Dt 9:19
6:13-14	Gen 22:16-17	12:26	Hag 2:6*
7:1-2	Gen 14:17-20	13:5	Dt 31:6,8
7:17,21	Ps 110:4	13:6	Ps 118:6*



## Exhortation

Finally, Hebrews is rich in exhortation. The format of this exhortation is somewhat different from most of the New Testament letters – in particular the letters of Paul to ecclesias. The usual pattern is for such letter to be divided into two parts, first the doctrine, then the practical advice (the vestige of such a format can be seen in Hebrews 12-13 where the concentration of exhortation does pick up). But the general structural principle of Hebrews is that the practical conclusions for daily living are interspersed throughout the argument, so that the whole letter is woven through with a compelling sense of what difference the supremacy of Christ ought to make to the believer's outlook and behaviour. And time after time this exhortation is introduced by the lag line 'therefore, let us...' as shown in the table.

I want to pick out three aspects of the exhortational parts of Hebrews that seem to be closely tied to some of the distinctive features of the letter we have been considering and its powerful demonstration of the better way in Christ.

In a book shot through with so much Old Testament it is inter-

### 'Let Us Therefore...'

This table shows the repeated way in which the author draws practical lessons and conclusions from the points that have been made by using terms like 'therefore' and 'wherefore'. There are other occurrences of the terms 'wherefore' and 'therefore' (like 2:17; 3:10; 13:12) where the writer uses the term to draw a conclusion in an argument, but not to draw out an exhortational point. Such passages are omitted from the table.

Therefore we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we should let them slip. (2:1)

Wherefore, holy brethren ... consider the Apostle and High Priest of our profession, Christ Jesus. (3:1)

Wherefore (as the Holy Spirit saith), Today if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts, as in the provocation

... (3:7-8)

Let us therefore fear, lest, a promise being left us of entering into his rest, any of you should seem to come short of it. (4:1)

Let us labour therefore to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief. (4:11)

Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need. (4:16)

Therefore leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection; not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith toward God. (6:1)

Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus ... Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith... (10:19-22)

Let us hold fast the profession of our

faith without wavering... (10:23)

Let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works. (10:24)

Wherefore ... let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily best us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus... (12:1-2)

Wherefore lift up the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees. (12:12)

Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and Godly fear. (12:28)

Let us go forth therefore unto (Jesus) without the camp, bearing his reproach. (13:13)

By him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name. (13:15)

esting to find that the Old Testament also provides a basis for practical exhortation for the believer under the dispensation of Christ. The Old Testament still carries an exhortational imperative for disciples.

Like small children we need to be weaned and to grow and develop in our understanding. We considered before the strictures of chapter 5. To return to the Law and its rituals - though it may seem powerful, sacred and intellectually rewarding, is a refusal to grow up in the way that God has ordained. This raises the question of what the writer considers the meat of the word to be.

In two important passages (chp 6 and chp 10:26-35) the seriousness of going backwards is stressed forcefully. We can go backwards by returning to our old sins. We can go backwards by turning away from Christ. We can go backwards by returning to the shadows of the Law. But these actions are tantamount to crucifying afresh the Son of God. It was bad enough to do it the first time.