



## Introduction to the Book of Hebrews

### Theme

Jesus Christ is the best there is. He is the best of everything. His pre-eminence is the theme of the book of Hebrews. Furthermore, Jesus Christ is now our great High Priest, incomparably superior to any other.

Hebrews was written to people whose former religion was Judaism. Judaism was God-given and superior to all other religions, because it was the only way to know the One True God. The author presents Jesus Christ as excelling the most admirable facets of Judaism in every way. He is better than Moses, Joshua, the Covenant, the Priesthood and even better than angels. He also brings better promises and a better rest. "Better" occurs thirteen times in Hebrews.

### Purpose

Since Jesus Christ is the theme of the entire Bible, what is the purpose of Hebrews? Each book of the Bible points to Christ in some way, just as each piece of a mosaic contributes to the whole. All other books have an additional purpose for being written. Moses, in the first five books of the Bible, wrote the history of beginnings of peoples and laws, particularly God's people and God's laws. Moses' references to the Redeemer, Deliverer and ultimate Sacrifice are somewhat mysterious until viewed from the perspective of the New Testament. Jewish scholars spent their lives seeking references to the Messiah. Jesus said, *You search the Scriptures, ...these are they which testify of Me* (John 5:39). Even today readers do not readily see certain passages or types as representations of Christ. It is Paul who tells us that Christ is our Passover. Moses does not tell us.

So also in the historical, poetical, wisdom, and prophetic books, references to the coming Prophet (Deuteronomy 18:15,18), Priest (Psalm 110:4), and King (Zechariah 9:9) are there, but they were veiled before Jesus Christ came. It is the light of the New Testament that makes these prophecies crystal clear. They were not the obvious and expressed purpose of the Old Testament writings. It was left for Hebrews to be devoted to Him who said *A greater than Solomon is here* (Matthew 12:42).

Likewise, the New Testament writers present Jesus, but for other pressing, contemporary reasons. The evangelists give us His life, death, and resurrection. Acts gives us the early church. Paul presents doctrine and Christian living. Peter, James, and Jude write to believers who are under persecution and pressure. Revelation gives the final drama of good and evil.

Christ is on almost every page of Scripture. It is all because of Him; but only Hebrews is all about Him and particularly about Him as He is now, rather than as He was or will be.

The Holy Spirit is mentioned seven times: His personality (2:4), His inspiration (3:7), His impartation (4:4), His teaching (9:8), His deity (9:14), His testimony (10:15), and His grace (10:29) (The Student's Commentary on the Holy Scriptures, George Williams, Kregel).

### Recipients of the Letter

Hebrews is written to Jewish Christians. The recipients were facing opposition and seemed to be wavering in their commitment. Hebrews joins James and I Peter to form a trilogy of general letters to Jewish believers. Compare James 1:1 to I Peter 1:1. They are also written for our instruction as part of the sixty-six books which make up the canon of inspired books called the Bible (Matthew 4:4). God gave the Bible for all people and all times. See II Timothy 3:16-17 and II Peter 1:20-21. God gave the Bible without error in the original manuscripts (Matthew 5:18, John 17:17). Do you receive the Bible as God's Word to you? God, who made your mind, made it for the Bible and made the Bible for your mind. His words are to our minds what nutritious food is to our bodies. We need the Word of God as we need vitamins and minerals. *As newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the Word that you may grow thereby, if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is gracious* (I Peter 2:2-3).

### Author

The human writer of Hebrews is unknown. Speculation and educated guessing for nearly two thousand years has brought us no closer to knowing. Possibilities are Paul, the frontrunner but without evidence, Barnabas, Apollos, Aquila and Priscilla. There is also Mary. Who would be more likely to present His supremacy than His mother? Who would know more Old Testament prophecies or understand the Judaistic structure better than the humble, but pure and devout, maiden whom God chose to be *highly favored* among women (Luke 1:28, 31-33)? We do not know. We only know that early in the second century Hebrews was known and accepted by Clement and other church fathers.

Here are the things we know about the author:

- the author has great familiarity with the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) and shares facts as if common knowledge
- the author has household knowledge of Old Testament personalities

- the author is well acquainted with temple rituals and sacrifices,
- the author assumes everyone knows Timothy (Hebrews 13:23),
- the author is involved with church life (Hebrews 13:7).

One thing is sure. The author was known to the readers and either did not think it necessary to sign the letter, or perhaps thought it too dangerous to do so.

### Date

Dating is difficult since the author is unknown. If the Temple and its ordinances were still operating, as seems to be the case, Hebrews was written prior to 70 A.D. when the Romans destroyed the Temple, thus ending all sacrifices (Hebrews 10:1-4). If Paul had already been martyred, it was written after 65 A.D., the date usually given for his death, (because Timothy had not yet been imprisoned at the time of Paul's last letter) (II Timothy 4:11, 14, 18, 21). For these reasons Hebrews was probably written from 65 A.D.-70 A.D.

### Meaning for Us

Why should we study Hebrews? What meaning and relevance does it have for us in today's world? There are several reasons.

- First, the whole Bible is meant for us and mastering its contents should be the first priority of our lives. When you stand before the Lord will you have to confess that you did not take the time to read His entire letter to you? Hebrews is an important, unique part of God's revelation. *For the Word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart* (Hebrews 4:12).
- Second, as no other book, Hebrews is uniquely about the Lord Jesus Christ, whom we love as Savior and Lord. In it we are told twice to, *Consider Him* (Hebrews 3:1 and 12:2-3).
- Third, Hebrews helps us face the same dangers as those faced by its first readers (see Hebrews 2:1, 6:1, 11:6), dangers of drifting, dropping out, failing to mature, and walking by sight rather than by faith.
- Fourth, Hebrews presents Jesus in His role as our Great High Priest. No other book even mentions Christ as High Priest. Did you know of your need for a high priest? You may know what He did on the cross and what He will do when He returns, but do you know what He is doing right now in interceding for you (Hebrews 2:17) and being available to you as Counselor and Friend (Hebrews 4:15-16)?

- Fifth, there are wonderful promises for you to grasp and take to God for fulfillment. You can take these promises to Him just as you would take a check to the bank to be cashed.
- Sixth, there are answers to questions most of us have encountered, such as reincarnation. Hebrews 9:27 says, *And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment.* The constancy of Christ is explained *Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever* (Hebrews 13:8). You can be glad that the Lord who saved you is the same Lord who loves you today and will be the same when you see Him later in the flesh! More reasons will be apparent as we proceed. At the end of the study you will have discovered your own reason to study Hebrews.

### Outline

The book of Hebrews divides into two parts. If not written by Paul, it benefits from the structure of Paul's letters, for the first part is doctrinal and the second part is practical. The first part is one of the greatest sections of Christology in the entire Bible. It may even be the greatest. Chapters 1-10 describe the excellence, superiority, supremacy, and pre-eminence of Christ over the best there was until He came.

Chapters 11-13 are practical, being concerned with Christian living. This section is introduced by chapter 11, the "faith chapter", also known as the "Faith Hall of Fame". There we find courageous Old Testament men and women who challenge us to live by faith in the promises of God.

#### I. The Pre-eminence and Priesthood of Christ - Hebrews 1 - 10

- A. Pre-eminence of Christ - 1:1 - 6:20
- B. High Priesthood of Christ - 7:1 - 10:39

#### II. The Practice of Living by Faith - Hebrews 11:1 - 13:25

- A. Past Heroes of Faith - 11:1-40
- B. Points, Peaks and Pitfalls of Faith Living - 12:1 - 13:25

An even simpler outline would be:

#### I. Looking at Jesus (Hebrews 1-10) II. Living for Jesus (Hebrews 11-13).

### Applications

1. Will you give God thirty minutes a day for this study?
2. Will you believe that God will reward you for this step of faith and that *He is the rewarder of those who diligently seek Him* (Hebrews 11:6)?