

INTRODUCTION TO HEBREWS

CRUCIAL OPENING STATEMENT

As I have studied this book it has become more and more obvious that my theology has been molded by Paul's. It is very difficult for me to allow the plurality of the other NT authors to present their inspired thoughts because I tend to put them into Pauline categories. This is particularly evident in the emphasis of Hebrews on continuing in the faith. In the book of Hebrews faith is not a forensic position (justification by faith), but a faithful life to the end (chapters 11-12).

I am afraid that many of the questions I struggle with in Hebrews would have never been asked by its author (nor Peter, nor James). Hebrews is an occasional document, like all the NT books. I must let the author speak even when he/she makes me uncomfortable; even when he/she does not use my cherished categories or even radically disrupts those categories. I dare not substitute my systematic theology for an inspired NT author's message.

I prefer to repent of my theological dogmatism and live within a NT tension that I do not fully understand or like! I am afraid I view the NT through the filter of a modern evangelical, conventional grid. I want to affirm biblical promises; promises of God's love, provision, and keeping power; yet I am so convicted by the powerful warnings and mandates of the NT authors. I desperately need to hear Hebrews, but it is so painful! I want to explain away the tension. I suppose, in reality, I want to affirm a free salvation and a cost-everything Christian life. But where do I draw the line when the ideal is not met? Is eternal fellowship with God an initial faith response or a continuing faith response? Hebrews clearly states the mandate of a continuing faith response. The Christian life is viewed from the end, not the beginning!

This is not meant to imply a works-oriented salvation, but a works-oriented confirmation. Faith is the evidence, not the mechanism (which is grace). Believers are not saved by works, but unto works. Works are not the means of salvation, but the result of salvation. Godly, faithful, daily Christlikeness is not something we do, but who we are in Him. If there is no changed, and changing, life of faith there is no evidence, no security. Only God knows the heart and the circumstances. Assurance is meant to be a companion in a life of faith, not an initial theological assertion devoid of lifestyle evidence.

My prayer is that we will allow this inspired NT author to clearly speak and not relegate Hebrews to a theological footnote in a systematic theological grid, be it Calvinistic or Arminian.

OPENING INSIGHTS

- A. This book uses OT texts interpreted by rabbinical hermeneutics to communicate its message. In order to understand the original author's intent, this book must be interpreted in light of first century rabbinical Judaism, not modern western thought.
- B. This book begins like a sermon (no salutation or typical greeting) and ends like a letter (typical Pauline close of chapter 13). It is possibly a synagogue homily turned into a letter. The author calls his/her book "a word of exhortation" in 13:22. This same phrase is also used in Acts 13:15 of a sermon.
- C. This is an insightful New covenant commentary on the Mosaic covenant:
 1. a very authoritative view of the OT
 2. a comparison of the old and new covenants
 3. the only NT book which calls Jesus our high priest

- D. This book is filled with warnings against falling away (“shrinking back” cf. 10:38), or returning to Judaism (i.e. chapters 2,4,5,6,10,12; cf. *No Easy Salvation* by R. C. Glaze, Jr., published by Insight Press).
- E. Although it is an over-generalization, it is helpful to see Paul with his emphasis on salvation as a finished work of the sovereign God (i.e. justification by faith) assert security as an initial truth. Peter, James, and the letters of I and II John emphasize the ongoing responsibilities of the New Covenant and assert that security is daily, confirmed by a changed and changing life. The author of Hebrews, emphasizing a life of faithfulness (cf. chapter 11), asserts security from an end of life perspective. Modern western rational thinking tends to polarize these perspectives, while the NT writers, by one divine author (i.e. the Spirit), wants to hold them in tension and affirm all three. Assurance is never the goal, but the by-product of an active faith in the promises of God.

AUTHORSHIP

- A. The Eastern Church (Alexandria, Egypt) accepted Paul’s authorship as is seen by its listing Hebrews in Paul’s writings in the early papyrus manuscript P⁴⁶. This manuscript is called the Chester Beatty Papyri and was copied at the end of the second century. It places Hebrews after Romans. Some Alexandrian leaders recognized the literary problems related to Paul’s authorship.
 - 1. Clement of Alexandria (A.D. 150-215, quoted by Eusebius) says that Paul wrote it in Hebrew and Luke translated it into Greek.
 - 2. Origen (A.D. 185-253) asserted that the thoughts are Paul’s but it was written by a later follower, such as Luke or Clement of Rome.
- B. This book is omitted in the list of Paul’s letters adopted by the Western Church called the Muratorian fragment (a list of NT canonical books from Rome about A.D. 180-200).
- C. What we do know about the author
 - 1. He was apparently a second generation Jewish Christian (2:3).
 - 2. He quotes from the Greek translation of the OT called the Septuagint.
 - 3. He uses ancient tabernacle procedures and not current temple ritual.
 - 4. He writes using classical Greek grammar and syntax (this book is not platonic. Its orientation is the OT, not Philo).
- D. This book is anonymous, but the author was well known to the recipients (cf. 6:9-10; 10:34; 13:7,9).
- E. Why there are doubts about Paul’s authorship
 - 1. The style is so different (except chapter 13) from Paul’s other writings.
 - 2. The vocabulary is different.
 - 3. There are subtle differences in word and phrase usage and emphasis.
 - 4. When Paul calls his friends and co-workers “brother” the person’s name always comes first (cf. Rom. 16:23; I Cor. 1:1; 16:12; II Cor. 1:1; 2:13; Phil. 2:25) but 13:23 has “our brother Timothy.”
- F. Theories of Authorship
 - 1. Clement of Alexandria’s in his book *Hypotyposes* (quoted by Eusebius) believed Luke translated into Greek Paul’s original writing in Hebrew (Luke used excellent Koine Greek).
 - 2. Origen said either Luke or Clement of Rome wrote it but followed Paul’s teaching.

3. Jerome and Augustine accepted Paul's authorship only to facilitate the book's acceptance into the Canon by the Western Church.
4. Tertullian (*De Pudic.*20) believed Barnabas (a Levite associated with Paul) wrote it.
5. Martin Luther said Apollos, an Alexandrian-trained intellectual associated with Paul (cf. Acts 18:24), wrote it.
6. Calvin said Clement of Rome (the first to quote it in A.D. 96) or Luke was the author.
7. Adolph von Harnack said Aquila and Priscilla (they taught Apollos the full gospel and were associated with Paul and Timothy, cf. Acts 18:26) wrote it.
8. Sir William Ramsey said Philip (the evangelist) wrote it for Paul while Paul was in prison at Caesarea.
9. Others have asserted Philip or Silas (Silvanus).

RECIPIENTS

- A. The title "to the Hebrews" addresses the Hebrew people, therefore, the book was written to all Jews (cf. Clement of Alexandria, quoted by Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.* VI, 14).
- B. The internal evidence following R. C. Glaze, Jr.'s *No Easy Salvation* asserts that a specific group of believing Jews or a synagogue is being addressed (cf. 6:10; 10:32-34; 12:4; 13:7,19,23).
 1. They seem to be Jewish believers because of the numerous OT quotes and the subject matter (cf. 3:1; 4:14-16; 6:9; 10:34; 13:1-25).
 2. They had experienced some persecution (cf. 10:32; 12:4). Judaism was recognized as a legal religion by the Roman authorities while later in the first century Christianity was considered illegal when it separated from synagogue worship.
 3. They had been believers for a long time, but were still immature (cf. 5:11-14). They were afraid to break completely with Judaism (cf. 6:1-2).
- C. The ambiguous text of 13:24 could imply it was written (1) from Italy or (2) to Italy, probably Rome.
- D. The location of the recipients is linked to the different theories concerning authorship.
 1. Alexandria - Apollos
 2. Antioch - Barnabas
 3. Caesarea - Luke or Philip
 4. Rome - Clement of Rome and the mention of Italy in 13:24.
 5. Spain - This was the theory of Nicolas of Lyra (A.D. 1270-1340)

DATE

- A. Just before the destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman General (later Emperor) Titus, in A.D. 70
 1. the author mentions Paul's companion Timothy by name (cf. 13:23)
 2. the author refers to sacrifices continuing (cf. 8:13; 10:1-2) in the Temple
 3. the author mentions persecution which may fit Nero's day (A.D. 54-68)
 4. the author encourages the readers not to return to Judaism and its rituals
- B. After A.D. 70
 1. the author uses the rituals of the tabernacle, not Herod's temple
 2. the author mentions persecution
 - a. possibly under Nero (cf. 10:32-34)

- b. later possibly under Domitian (cf. 12:4-13)
 - 3. the book may relate to the revival of rabbinical Judaism (writings from Jamnia) late in the first century
- C. Before A.D. 96 because the book is quoted by Clement of Rome

PURPOSE

- A. The Jewish Christians are encouraged to leave the synagogue and identify publicly (fully) with the church (cf. 13:13).
- B. The Jewish Christians are encouraged to take up the missionary mandate of the gospel (cf. Matt. 28:19-20; Acts 1:8).
- C. The Jewish unbelievers in fellowship with these Jewish Christians are the focus of chapters 6 and 10. Notice the presence of three groups, “we,” “you,” and “they.” They are warned to personally respond to the abundant and clear evidence in the lives of their Christian friends and co-worshippers.

- A. This supposed historical reconstruction is taken from *No Easy Salvation* by R. C. Glaze, Jr.

“The problem was not that of tension between the Christian majority and the non-Christian minority. The very opposite was true. The Jewish Christians of this congregation had so compromised their faith and sense of stewardship that the two groups could worship together as one congregation. Neither group seriously troubled the conscience of the other. No longer did the preaching of the Christian group result in conviction and decision on the part of the unsaved members of the synagogue. The Christians were in a state of stagnation because of their unwillingness to accept the full demands of courageous Christian living. The unbelievers had become hardened by continual rejection to the point of utter indifference. These groups had now become compatible bedfellows.

The reluctance of the Christian group to ‘press on unto perfection’ (6:1) was motivated by two phenomena: high regard for the traditions of Judaism and unwillingness to pay the price of full identification with Christianity, which was becoming more and more a Gentile movement” (p. 23).

BRIEF OUTLINE OF HEBREWS

1:1-3	Superiority of the Son over the prophets
1:4-2:18	Superiority of the Son over the angels
3:1-4:13	Superiority of the Son over the Mosaic Covenant
4:14-5:10;	
6:13-7:28	Superiority of the Son over the Aaronic Priesthood
5:11-6:12	Superiority of the believing Jews over the unbelieving Jews
8:1-10:18	Superiority of the Son over the procedures of the Mosaic Covenant
10:19-13:25	Superiority of the Son advocated and revealed in believers

READING CYCLE ONE (see p. vi)

This is a study guide commentary, which means that you are responsible for your own interpretation of the Bible. Each of us must walk in the light we have. You, the Bible, and the Holy Spirit are priority in interpretation. You must not relinquish this to a commentator.

Read the entire biblical book at one sitting. State the central theme of the entire book in your own words.

1. Theme of entire book
2. Type of literature (genre)

READING CYCLE TWO (see pp. vi-vii.)

This is a study guide commentary, which means that you are responsible for your own interpretation of the Bible. Each of us must walk in the light we have. You, the Bible, and the Holy Spirit are priority in interpretation. You must not relinquish this to a commentator.

Read the entire biblical book a second time at one sitting. Outline the main subjects and express the subject in a single sentence.

1. Subject of first literary unit
2. Subject of second literary unit
3. Subject of third literary unit
4. Subject of fourth literary unit
5. Etc.