

The Book of Hebrews

מֵאֲנִי מִנֵּמ דַּא מִנֵּ ת אֶקְלֵא
צִמְאֵל לְנִתְאַתְצֵרְחָ דְרִתְסֵנִ סְק
אֵת פֶּקְלֵא תִסְנִ סֶרְבֵּאל
רֵךְ תֵּא סֶךְ תֶּאקְסֵנִצְ דִּמְמִצ
תֵּאֲתַפְלֵשׁ נִתְרִדְנֵהֶרְפֵר נִרְלֵד
תֵּאֲגִשׁ רֵלֵד מִלְלֵצ סֵס תֵּלֵשׁ



Introduction to the Book of Hebrews

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- Hebrews is one of the most beautifully written, powerfully argued, and theologically profound writings in the New Testament.¹
- The Book of Hebrews differs from most New Testament letters in that, while it **ends** like a letter, it does not **begin** like one: it lacks the customary opening greeting containing the names of the writer and the people to whom it was written.²
- But throughout the book, not just in the personal notes that occur at the end, it is clear that the book of Hebrews is addressed to a **particular** community in which the writer takes a very **personal interest**.²

¹ Johnson, Luke Timothy. *Hebrews* (p. 41). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation.

² F. F. Bruce. *The Epistle to the Hebrews*

Introduction to the Book of Hebrews

- But since neither the original writer nor the original readers are *identified* in the text, the book presents us with a number of *uncertainties*.¹
- As the commentator William L. Lane has well said, “*Hebrews is a delight for the person who enjoys puzzles.*”²
- But, like a Sherlock Holmes mystery, clues in the text can lead the interested investigator to feasible conclusions³

¹ F. F. Bruce. *The Epistle to the Hebrews*

² William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1–8, WBC (Dallas: Word, 1991), xvii.*

³ Guthrie, George H. *Hebrews* (The NIV Application Commentary Book 15) (p. 19).

The Original Readers, Date, and Purpose of the Book of Hebrews

The Original Readers of Hebrews

- There is a good bit of evidence in the text of Hebrews that would seem to suggest that the original recipients of this New Testament book had a ***rich background*** in ***Jewish worship and thought***:
 - The author seems to assume that his audience has an ***extensive knowledge*** of the Old Testament.
 - The author uses ***theological concepts*** that were popular in the Greek-speaking synagogues of the first century:
 - A veneration of Moses as one having special access to God (3:1–6)
 - Angels as the mediators of the Old Covenant revelation (2:1–4)
 - References to the divine Wisdom's role in creation (1:1–4).
 - A ***potential danger*** to this community seems to have been a temptation to ***reject Christianity*** and ***return to Judaism***.

The Original Readers of Hebrews

- As we look closely at the book of Hebrews, we can see that the author ***assumes*** that his audience has an ***extensive knowledge*** of the Old Testament:
 - The book of Hebrews is ***saturated*** with ***more overt references to the Old Testament*** than perhaps ***any other book of the New Testament***.¹
 - The author has ***filled*** his discourse with ***so many*** Old Testament references that they permeate ***every chapter***.¹
 - In a recent book on the NT use of the OT², G.H. Guthrie, who wrote the chapter on Hebrews, states that, by his count, there are roughly:
 - **Thirty-seven direct quotations** of OT passages
 - **Forty allusions** to OT passages
 - **Nineteen** cases where OT material is ***summarized***
 - **Thirteen** where an ***OT name or topic*** is referred to without reference to a specific context.

¹ Guthrie, George H. – *The NIV Application Commentary - Hebrews*; pp. 19-20

² Guthrie, George H. – *Commentary on the NT Use of the OT - Hebrews* (Carson and Beale); p.919

The Original Readers of Hebrews

- Although some scholars have taken these examples as an indication that original readers of Hebrews were **thoroughly Jewish**, one must remember that many **Gentiles** affiliated themselves with first-century synagogues, either as proselytes or God-fearers.
- Consequently, some Gentiles came to Christ with a **rich** background in Jewish worship and **extensive** knowledge of the Jewish Scriptures.
- Therefore, the exact mix of Jews and Gentiles in this church group must remain a mystery.
- However it **would seem** that, **prior** to accepting Christ, these believers had worshipped in a Jewish synagogue.
- A good case can be made that the believers addressed by Hebrews probably constituted a house church, or group of house churches, in or near the city of **Rome**.

The Original Readers of Hebrews

- Tradition has it that in 753 B.C., about the same time the OT book of Amos was written to the northern kingdom of Israel, a man named Romulus established a small settlement on the banks of the Tiber River in Rome.
- This event could not have had more far-reaching historical significance.
- By the mid-first century A.D. the city of Rome had a population of over one million people and was the capital of an empire spanning continents.
- Living among its citizens were between ***forty and sixty thousand Jews***, whose community had formed a ***significant*** segment of Roman society for over ***one hundred years***.

The Original Readers of Hebrews

- Many were Roman citizens, spoke Greek, and had Greek names, although they often gave Latin names to their offspring.
- Acts 2:10 reports that among those at the first preaching of the gospel were Jews from **Rome**:
 - *And they were amazed and astonished, saying, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?"⁸ And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language?⁹ Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia,¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and **visitors from Rome**,¹¹ both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians--we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God." (Acts 2:7-11)*
- It is likely that some of these converted to Christianity and returned to the empire's capital, establishing the church there.

The Original Readers of Hebrews

Although a number of destinations for the book of Hebrews have been suggested, **Rome** seems the **most likely**, based on available evidence:

- In Hebrews 13:24 the author addresses the audience with these words: “*Those who come from Italy send you greetings*” (Heb 13:24)
 - In the New Testament the phrase “*from Italy*” occurs in Acts 18:2, referring to **Aquila and Priscilla**.
 - This husband and wife team was residing in Corinth, Luke tells us, and, with other Jews, had been expelled “*from Italy*” (i.e., Rome) at the decree of **Claudius**.
 - Therefore, a **likely** interpretation of Hebrews 13:24 is that people from Rome, now residing elsewhere, were sending greetings back to the believers in Rome via the document we know as Hebrews.

The Original Readers of Hebrews

Although a number of destinations for the book of Hebrews have been suggested, **Rome** seems the **most likely**, based on available evidence:

- **Pastors** in the early NT Christian communities were normally referred to as “*elders*” or “*overseers*” (cf. Acts 14:23; 20:20; 1 Tim. 5:17, etc.), but of **all** the books in the NT, it is in Hebrews **alone** that they are called “*leaders*” (*hegoumenoi*) (13:7, 17, 24).
- **Outside** the New Testament the use of the word “*leaders*” to designate church leadership occurs in **two** early Christian documents:
 - 1 Clement
 - The Shepherd of Hermas
- **Both** of which we **know** to have been associated with the church at **Rome**.

The Original Readers of Hebrews

Although a number of destinations for the book of Hebrews have been suggested, **Rome** seems the **most likely**, based on available evidence:

- **First Clement**, a pastoral letter written from Clement of Rome to the church at Corinth sometime around the end of the first century, makes **extensive use** of the book of Hebrews.
- One section in particular (36:1–6) shows **direct literary dependence** on the book, and the rest of the document bears the marks of Hebrews' influence.
- Therefore, the **earliest evidence** of Hebrews' use in the ancient church locates the document in **Rome**.

The Original Purpose of Hebrews

- Evidence within the Book of Hebrews itself shows evidence of a community of believers who were becoming ***discouraged*** about Christian commitment.
- Especially from the ***exhortation sections***, we see reflected in Hebrews a community of believers who were ***struggling against spiritual lethargy***, which, if not addressed, could lead them to ***abandoning their Christian confession***.
- Our author's challenge was to ***encourage*** this group of discouraged believers drifting from real Christianity by bolstering their commitment to draw near to God and to endure in their commitment to Christ.

The Original Date of Hebrews

- If we are correct in thinking (based on the evidence we have) that the original letter of Hebrews was written to the church at **Rome**, then **several** points concerning the circumstance of the original audience help to **narrow down** the date when Hebrews was written:
 - The original readers of Hebrews had been Christians for a while. In Hebrews 5:11–6:3 the preacher rebukes the hearers' immaturity, an immaturity unreasonably prolonged considering the amount of time since their entrance to the Christian community.
 - According to 10:32–34 these believers had faced and persevered in a time of serious persecution in the past.
 - They had **yet** to suffer **martyrdom** for the faith (12:4) but were now facing a **more severe** time of trial (11:35–12:3; 12:7; 13:3, 12–13), in which some of their number were defecting.

The Original *Date* of Hebrews

- Although dating most New Testament literature is a difficult endeavor, with any conclusions considered tentative, the situation indicated by the data above suggests Hebrews was written in the mid-60s A.D. – just prior to the extreme persecution of the Roman church under Nero:
 - At this point the Roman church had been in existence for about three decades.
 - The conflict with the Jews and the Roman government in A.D. 49, which led to their **expulsion** by **Claudius**, would account for the earlier time of testing experienced by this community (10:32–39).
 - Then, beginning in A.D. 54, **Nero's** rising threat to the church would account for the fear of death and the waning of commitment indicated in Hebrews.

The *Author* of Hebrews

The Author of Hebrews

- Who, then, was the Christian minister called on by God to meet this exacting challenge?
- Few questions concerning the New Testament have fostered more curiosity and fewer firm answers than the query, “Who wrote the book of Hebrews?”
- This popular question has raised speculation since the second century, because Hebrews provides no personal introduction of the author to his audience.
- Earliest suggestions included such noteworthy people as Paul, Luke, Clement of Rome, and Barnabas.
- More recent proposals set forth Priscilla, Jude, Apollos, Philip, and Silvanus.
- As with the other background we have examined, we are almost entirely dependent on evidence *internal* to the book itself.
- So, what does the work reveal of its maker?

The Author of Hebrews Was a *Dynamic Preacher*

- It is widely recognized that Hebrews begins like a *sermon* rather than a *letter*.
- In Hebrews 13:22 the author himself calls his letter a “*word [or message] of exhortation*”, a designation used *elsewhere* to refer to a *sermon*.
- For example, we see in Acts 13 that Paul and Barnabas were offered an opportunity to preach at a synagogue in Pisidian Antioch:
 - *And on the Sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down. ¹⁵ After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent a message to them, saying, “Brothers, if you have any **word of encouragement** for the people, say it.” (Acts 13:14b–15)*
- The phrase “*word of encouragement*” in Acts 13:15 is the same in the Greek phrase as in Hebrews 13:22, with the exception that the Acts passage omits the articles.

The Author of Hebrews Was a *Dynamic Preacher*

- Therefore, the author of Hebrews crafted his work in the form of a first-century *sermon*.
- In fact, it may be our earliest and most complete sermon addressed to an established Christian community.
- By any informed estimation, Hebrews, with its striking rhetorical power and elegance, ranks among the greatest homiletical achievements of all time.

The Author Was Knowledgeable of the OT

- As we have already noted, he *fills* his sermon with a mixture of allusions to and quotations of Old Testament texts.
- We must remember that the “Bible” our author had in hand was a collection of *scrolls*.
- He did not have the benefit of chapter and verse demarcation or of a cross-referencing system.
- What he *did* have was a cultural heritage that emphasized the *memorization* of the Scriptures.
- His copious use of the Old Testament reveals a mind *saturated* with the Word of God and a heart committed to that Word as bearing the *utmost* authority.

The Author of Hebrews Was Highly Educated

- In the ancient world when students went for advanced education, they studied ***rhetoric*** (the art of effective speaking), and it seems clear this author had ***extensive*** academic training in this subject.
- What he learned—the sign, in his culture, of an educated man—was a formal and highly stylized means of self-expression and argumentation.
- His use of the Greek language ranks at the top of New Testament authors; his rich vocabulary reveals the background of one widely read.
- Some have associated the author with the intellectual culture of Alexandria, a focal point for rhetorical education in the Roman world, because of his use of terminology also found in the works of Philo of Alexandria and *Wisdom of Solomon*.
- In short, our writer brought numerous skills gained through advanced education to his task.

The Author Was a Committed Minister of Christ

- The author of Hebrews was a committed minister of Jesus Christ and deeply concerned about the spiritual state of the group of believers he addressed.
- Drawing on his tremendous training in Old Testament thought, homiletics, and rhetoric, the author joins these to his understanding of the Christian tradition to carry out the pastoral ministry of encouraging a group of believers to stay the course of Christian commitment.
- He seems to have a detailed knowledge of the congregation's past and present situations (e.g., 10:32–34; 13:7–24) and, through the urgency of his message, communicates a deep concern for them.
- The discussion above offers a basic portrait of the preacher-minister-orator who wrote the book of Hebrews.

So Then, Who is the Author of Hebrews?

- The question of his *exact* identity is *unanswerable* – any suggestion remains a “best guess.”
- However, a *reasonable suggestion* is found in the New Testament figure *Apollos*, so believed by *Martin Luther* to be the author of Hebrews.
- In Acts 18:24–28 Luke describes Apollos as a Jew from Alexandria, who was “eloquent” (a term used of those with rhetorical training) and thoroughly versed in the Scriptures.
- Furthermore, he was a pastor who had received the gospel from eyewitnesses of Jesus’ ministry (Hebrews 2:3), was at home in the Greek-speaking synagogues of the Mediterranean, and had close acquaintances from Italy (see Heb. 13:24).

So Then, Who is the Author of Hebrews?

- But, although Apollos is a good candidate, in the end, along with the early church father **Origen** (185-254 AD), we must confess our ignorance as to who wrote the book of Hebrews: “*Who wrote the epistle, God knows the truth.*”
- **Whoever** he was, we owe him **respect** for his rhetorical craftsmanship, admiration for the depth of his theological reflection, and **gratitude** for this enduring word of exhortation.

High Level Outline of Hebrews

- I. **Prologue: We Have a *Definitive and Final Revelation* in the Son (1:1-4)**
- II. Don't Abandon the Son Since He is ***Greater than*** the Angels (1:5-2:18)
- III. Don't Harden Your Hearts Since You Have a Son and High Priest ***Greater than*** Moses and Joshua (3:1-4:18)
- IV. Don't Fall Away from Jesus' ***Melchizedekian*** Priesthood Since It Is ***Greater than*** the ***Levitical*** Priesthood (4:14-10:18)
- V. Concluding Exhortations and Warnings (10:18-12:29)
- VI. ***Epilogue: Final Exhortations*** (13:1-25)

Part I

**We Have a *Definitive*
and Final Revelation in
the Son**

(1:1-4)

Class Discussion Time



*Class Discussion Time

- We noted that the original readers of Hebrews had **yet** to suffer **martyrdom** for the faith (12:4) but were now facing a **more severe** time of trial (11:35–12:3; 12:7; 13:3, 12–13), in which some of their number were defecting.
- We live in a country that was originally founded on Christian principles and religious freedom, but in recent years, we have seen a rapid shift **away** from those founding principles and now live in a society that is becoming more and more **hostile** to Christianity – and so we, like these original readers of Hebrews, though we have yet to suffer martyrdom for our faith, we are undoubtedly face a **more severe** time of trial in the near future and may find ourselves tempted to abandon the faith.
- Do you believe you are ready to face such times, should they come? Explain your answer.
- What kind of things are you looking forward to as we begin our study of Hebrews? Are there any specific things that you are hoping that I will cover? If so, what are they?