

INTRODUCTION TO HEBREWS

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A. **The Epistle to the Hebrews is unique** among the books of the New Testament for the following reasons:

1. Its authorship is unknown.
2. Its exact date of writing is unknown.
3. The exact location where it was written is unknown.
4. The specific intended church audience, if any, is unknown.
5. The intended audience is certainly the Hebrew-Christian community.
6. There is no introductory salutation.
7. Its doctrinal content and literary excellence are nearly unequaled among New Testament books, with the possible exception of Paul's Epistle to the Romans and Luke's Gospel.
8. More than any other New Testament book it expounds the transition from the Old Testament Levitical economy to Christianity.
9. It contains 31 explicit Old Testament quotations, 4 implicit quotations, at least 37 allusions, 19 instances which summarize Old Testament material, and 13 more references where a Biblical name or topic is cited without reference to a specific context. This is a total of 104 references. This is second only to The Revelation of John, which has 249 Old Testament references. Note: Matthew has 96.
10. It is interesting to note that all the Old Testament quotations are exclusively drawn from the Septuagint (the second century Greek translation of the Old Testament), except possibly Hebrews 10:30.
11. The author uses the Old Testament as his argument for the messianic fulfillment of the New Testament.

B. **Authorship of Hebrews:**

1. Its authorship is unknown; however, there is much speculation as to who it might be. The list is long and it includes: Paul, Barnabas, Apollos, Luke, Clement of Rome, Priscilla and Aquila, Jude, Stephen, Jude, Silas or John Mark, or even Peter.
 - a. While the early church and church fathers attributed the writing of Hebrews to **Paul**; however, Origin remained unconvinced. Martin Luther and John Calvin plus many later scholars rejected Pauline authorship.
 - b. Conversely, the late Dr. J. Vernon McGee wrote a thesis defending Pauline authorship.
 - c. Some believe that Peter identifies Paul as the author in 2 Peter 3:15, 16, but this scripture is inconclusive.
 - d. While some features seem to be Pauline, such as the Hebrew background, theology, and many common elements, nevertheless, Paul did not sign this epistles as he did all of his other works.

- e. Also, there is no personal testimony nor are there the usual Pauline anecdotes. Plus, the Old Testament quotes are almost entirely from the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Old Testament), while Paul quotes from the Hebrew Old Testament, the Septuagint, and other sources. Note: There are some notable differences between the Septuagint and the Hebrew text.
 - f. **Barnabas**, another candidate for authorship, has an appropriate resume: a Hellenistic Levite of the Jewish diaspora connected to the Jerusalem church and a colleague and long-standing partner of Paul. In fact, he was an apostle in his own right. (Acts 14:14; 1 Cor. 9:6)
 - g. Martin Luther and many contemporary scholars including myself, believe that **Apollos** could have written Hebrews. He was a knowledgeable and “*eloquent man, ...mighty in the scriptures.*” (Acts 18:24-28)
He lived in Alexandria, Egypt, one of the greatest cities in the Roman Empire, a center of diaspora Hellenistic Judaism and the location for the translation of the Hebrew text into Greek, the Septuagint, in the second century BC.
2. So, who wrote Hebrews? Origin (AD 186-253) said it best, “Who wrote the Epistle, God only knows the truth.”
- C. **The exact date of its writing is also unknown**, possibly between AD 64-66:
1. The early church father, Clement of Rome, quoted from Hebrews in his First Epistle to the Corinthians (dated AD 95-96), so Hebrews must have been written before AD 95 at the latest.
 2. Also, the author speaks of the Levitical system as still functioning; therefore, the temple worship must still have been in existence. This worship all stopped with the destruction of the temple by Rome in AD 70. This makes the date of the epistle earlier than AD 70.
 3. The author mentions Timothy in the present tense in Hebrews 13:23. Since Paul led Timothy to the Lord in AD 50, the epistle must certainly have been written after that date, but while he was still on the mission field. Tradition records that Timothy later became the bishop of Ephesus in the late 80s until his death in the mid-AD 90s.
 4. The message of the epistle seems to be addressed to second -generation believers (Heb. 2:3) because the author says that they should already have become teachers of the word. (Heb. 5:11-14).
 5. The author implies that it has been nearly 40 years since the crucifixion which occurred in AD 30. (Heb. 3:17-4:1)
 6. Another implication on the part of the author is that the seeds of a Jewish revolt against Rome were being planted. In fact, there were multiple attacks against the Jews beginning in AD 64, culminating in an all-out revolt in AD 66.

7. Therefore, this Epistle to the Hebrews was most likely written between AD 64 and AD 66.

D. The exact place where it was written is also unknown. The author is probably outside the land of Israel, possibly in Rome, Italy, as part of the diaspora within the Roman Empire. (Heb. 13:24)

E. The intended audience is primarily the messianic Jewish community:

1. Although many locations have been suggested, only two have any real validity:
 - a. Jewish believers who were originally from Italy but now were spread throughout the Empire in the diaspora. It may even be addressed to those who were in Rome since the epistle was first known there, and the closing salutation seems to indicate this. (Heb. 13:24) Also, the false teaching regarding foods is similar to that problem in the Roman Church. (Rom. 14:1-15:3)
 - b. Jewish believers in the Churches in Judea, probably outside of Jerusalem, who most likely would be speaking Greek (ie. the use of the Septuagint). (Gal. 1:22)
2. These Jewish believers were undergoing intense persecution, short of martyrdom at this time; however, they were close enough to Jerusalem to be incentivized to return to the entire sacrificial system.
3. The title of the epistle says it all: *“The Epistle to the Hebrews.”*
4. The first churches were predominately composed of Hebrew Christians throughout the first and well into the second century AD.

E. The occasion and purpose of the Epistle to the Hebrews:

1. The entire argument of the Book of Hebrews is based on the Old Testament Scriptures, given as a frame of reference, to a Messianic-Christian community to establish and confirm the supremacy of Christ and Christianity over angels, the Mosaic Covenant, the Old Testament priesthood, and the sacrificial ritual system. (Heb. 1:1-10:18)
2. The author of Hebrews also wants to warn those who have accepted Christ of the dangers of apostasy. (Heb.6:4-8; 10:26-31; 13:14-19)
3. To this end, the author exhorts his readers to break completely with Judaism and its rituals in favor of its total fulfillment in Christ. (Heb.12:18-13:17)
4. Therefore, the epistle is not basically evangelistic and not written to appeal to Gentile readers.
5. The author presents his material in a very logical and theological progression but he deviates from this logical development five times to warn these believers concerning what he has just stated.

6. These warnings are not addressed to unbelievers but to believing Jews. Also, these warnings are with respect to physical judgment (physical death which would come in AD 70) and not with respect to eternal salvation.

NOTE: It is often taught that the words “**save**” and “**salvation**” always have a spiritual sense. They do not! In fact, most of the time, in both the Old and New Testament, these words have a physical sense with regard to deliverance from adversity, judgment, or even physical death.

7. The author explains that this judgment would come as a result of their rejection of Messiah, **the unpardonable sin**, a national sin, not an individual sin, This judgment came in AD 70.
8. However, there is encouragement to press on to spiritual maturity. (Heb. 5:11-14; 10:33-39).

F. The author’s methodology:

1. The author wants to demonstrate the superiority of the Messiah, Christ, over the Law and the ritual system of Judaism.
2. The author is not contrasting what is good with what is bad, but rather, what is good, Biblical Judaism, with what is better, Messiah Jesus.
3. He explains how the whole sacrificial system was good because it was given by God, but Messiah Jesus is superior to the three pillars of Judaism of that day- angels, Moses, and the Levitical Priesthood.

G. The author’s vocabulary:

1. The author has an exquisite command of the Koine Greek language and an extensive vocabulary.
2. He uses 154 words that are not found elsewhere in the New Testament, and 90 words found only in one other New Testament writing. There are 10 words that are not found in any other Greek literature.
3. The author used 5 key words in his epistle:
 - a. **Perfection** -not meaning sinlessness but rather spiritual maturity. (Heb. 2:10; 5:9; 6:1; 7:11, 19, 28; 10:14; 12:1-2)
 - b. **Eternal** – meaning never ending as opposed to temporal, such as the Law, the sacrifices, the Aaronic Priesthood, etc. (Heb. 5:9; 6:2; 9:12, 14-15; 13:20)
 - c. **Forever** -used synonymously with eternal. (Heb. 1:8; 5:6; 6:20; 7:14, 26; 8:1; 9:24; 12:25-26)
 - d. **Heavenly** - used of things in heaven as opposed to things on earth. (Heb. 3:1; 6:4; 8:5; 9:23; 11:16; 12:22)
 - e. **Better** – used for a comparison to what is just good. (13 times)

H. The theme of the Book of Hebrews is the superiority of Jesus Christ.