Hebrews

Authorship

This work does not name its author. Ancient tradition ascribes it to Paul, and many of its themes may be traced in the Pauline correspondence. There is also a strong tradition pointing to Barnabas, the early missionary partner of Paul, as the author. Others have been mentioned as possible authors including Clement of Rome, Luke, Silvanus, Philip the Evangelist, Priscilla, and Apollos.¹ The case for Barnabas seems credible, though it cannot be absolutely proven.

Date

Clement of Rome quotes from Hebrews around A.D. 95. From the nature of the references to the temple in Jerusalem (cf. 8:4, 13; 9:6-9; 10:1-3) it is most likely that it was written prior to A.D. 70, when that temple was destroyed and the sacrificial system was thereby suspended. Hodges suggests a date of A.D. 68/69, probably after the death of Paul (derived from the reference to Timothy’s release in 13:23).²

Original Readers

The exact destination of the epistle cannot be known. From internal evidence it can be reasonably concluded that the readership is comprised of Jewish believers, living in some community, who are surrounded by a contingent of non-believing Jews that is large enough to pose the threat of persecution. Palestine, Rome, and north Africa have been suggested. The inability to identify the recipients does not obscure the message of the book.³

Occasion

There is not enough evidence to suggest a historical event or situation occasioning this letter. There is, rather, the general picture of Jewish Christians living amidst unbelieving Jews who are pressuring them to return to the observance of their ancestral faith. This pressure prompted the author to respond out of concern for their spiritual stability.


Message

Maintaining confession of Christ will allow the believer to press on to maturity and receive a full inheritance.

Outline

I. Prologue: The Son of God is the culmination of divine revelation. 1:1-4
   A. He is the conclusion of revelation in time. 1:1-2a
   B. He is the culmination of revelation in His person and work. 1:2b-3
      1. He is the future heir of all things. 1:2b
      2. He, in the past, created all things. 1:2c
      3. He is presently exalted above all things. 1:3
         a. This is because he is the glory and image of God. 1:3a
         b. This is because he upholds all things by His word. 1:3b
         c. This is because he purged our sins. 1:3c
   C. He is the capstone of revelation in the heavenly realms. 1:4

II. Part I: The superiority of Christ’s work argues the foolishness of returning to Judaism. 1:5–10:39
   A. The Son has been appointed as ruler above all because he became lower than the angels to accomplish our salvation. 1:5–2:18
      1. Exposition: Christ is superior to the angels in His person. 1:5-14
         a. He is over angels as a Son over his father’s servants. 1:5-6
         b. He is over angels as a King over his servants of judgment. 1:7-9
         c. He is over angels as the Eternal Creator over his limited creatures. 1:10-12
         d. He is over angels as a Sovereign over his servants of salvation. 1:13-14
      2. Admonition: Since the Son’s word is greater than angels’ we must pay close attention to it. 2:1-4
         a. Carelessness with the word will result in spiritual drift. 2:1
         b. Neglecting Christ’s accomplishment will bring serious consequences. 2:2-4
            1) Angelic proclamation issued in culpability. 2:2
            2) Christ’s declared salvation is even more binding. 2:3-4
               a) It was first declared by Christ. 2:3a
               b) It was confirmed to the original recipients. 2:3b
               c) It was attested to by divine testimony. 2:4
      3. Exposition: Christ is exalted above the angels by His work. 2:5-18
         a. Jesus has been exalted because of his subjection for the suffering of death. 2:5-9
         b. Jesus has been perfected through his suffering for the sanctification of his brethren. 2:10-13
         c. Jesus has become a High Priest through his sacrifice for the sins of humanity. 2:14-18
B. The Son has been honored above Moses as the builder of His house. 3:1–4:16
1. Exposition: Jesus was faithful as the builder of the priestly house of confession. 3:1–6
   a. Christ was faithful as Apostle and High Priest in His house. 3:1-2
   b. Christ was builder of His house. 3:3-6a
   c. Believers are members of His house by holding fast. 3:6b
2. Admonition: The priestly work of confession remains to be completed by faith. 3:7–4:16
   a. There is danger of failing to complete the work of confession through a heart of unbelief. 3:7-15
   b. Israel failed and did not finish their work. 3:16-19
   c. The work remains today for those who do not harden their hearts. 4:1-10
   d. Diligence is required to finish the work of confession. 4:11-13
   e. Grace is available for finishing the work of confession. 4:14-16

C. The Son has been exalted above Aaron as a Priest according to the order of Melchizedek. 5:1–10:39
1. Exposition: Christ is fully qualified as the High Priest of eternal salvation. 5:1-10
   a. The general qualification of priests applies. 5:1-4
   b. A specially qualified priest has been provided. 5:5-10
      1) Christ was designated High Priest by divine decree. 5:5-6
         a) He was divinely exalted as Son-Priest. 5:5
         b) He was divinely decreed to be King-Priest. 5:6
      2) Christ was perfected as High Priest for eternal salvation. 5:7-10
         a) He was learned obedience through suffering. 5:7-8
         b) He authored eternal salvation for the obedient. 5:9-10
2. Admonition: Protracted spiritual immaturity will result in spiritual retrogression and serious chastening. 5:11–6:20
   a. The readership is charged with dull hearing. 5:11
   b. The readership is convicted of spiritual immaturity. 5:12-14
      1) They should be teachers rather than pupils. 5:12
      2) They need milk rather than solid food. 5:13-14
         a) They are unskilled in the word. 5:13
         b) They are unable to discern good and evil. 5:14
   c. The readership is admonished unto spiritual completion. 6:1-3
      1) They must go onward not backward with respect to spiritual formation. 6:1a
      2) They must not lay again spiritual foundations. 6:1b-2b
         a) The foundation for spiritual qualities had already been laid (repentance and faith). 6:1b
         b) The foundation for symbolic acts had already been laid (baptism and laying on of hands). 6:2a
c) The foundation for doctrinal truths had already been laid (resurrection and judgment). 6:2b
3) They must accept completion as God’s will. 6:3
4) They must realize that lack of positive progress can result in unrenewable apostasy. 6:4-8
   a) The reality of their experience had affirmed their spiritual enlightenment. 6:4-5
   b) The recovery from apostasy would not be possible. 6:6
   c) The results would be spiritual barrenness. 6:7-8
d) The readership receives encouragement over the prospect of realizing their full inheritance. 6:9-20
   1) Confidence in their prospect is expressed. 6:9
   2) God’s assistance in their success is assured. 6:10
   3) Diligence in their quest is exhorted. 6:11-12
   4) A model for their pursuit is presented.
      a) Abraham obtained God’s promise through endurance. 6:13-18
      b) The hope of obtaining such a promise is grounded in Jesus’ Melchizedekan priesthood. 6:19-20

3. Exposition: As a Priest of the order of Melchizedek Christ provided perfect salvation. 7:1–10:18
   a. Christ is a superior Priest. 7:1-28
      1) Melchizedek was greater than Levi. 7:1-10
         a) He was greater in his person. 7:1-3
         b) He was greater in his position. 7:4-10
      2) The new priesthood surpasses the old. 7:11-19
         a) It stems from the power of an endless life. 7:11-17
         b) It stems from introduction of a better hope. 7:18-19
      3) The new Priest is unsurpassable by anyone. 7:20-28
         a) He was confirmed by divine oath. 7:20-22
         b) He provides a complete salvation. 7:23-25
         c) He serves on the basis of a perfected life. 7:26-28
   b. Christ provided a superior service. 8:1–10:18
      1) Summary: Christ is a minister of the true tabernacle. 8:1-6
      2) Christ has mediated a superior covenant. 8:7–9:15
         a) The first covenant was irreparably broken. 8:7-13
            i) The first covenant was broken because of human inability. 8:7-9
            ii) The new covenant provides divine enablement. 8:10-13
         b) The first covenant had natural limitations. 9:1-10
            i) It was supported by a temporal tabernacle. 9:1-5
            ii) It was conducted without final perfection. 9:6-10
c) The new covenant has provided eternal redemption.  
   i) There is a greater tabernacle.  
   ii) There was a final purification.  
   iii) There is an eternal inheritance.  

3) Christ has offered a superior sacrifice.  
   a) The death of Christ was necessary for remission of sins.  
   b) The death of Christ was necessary to put away sin.  

4) Christ has effected a superior experience.  
   a) The old covenant could not perfect its worshippers.  
   b) Christ perfects new covenant worshippers.  
      i) The offering of a perfect body once for all sanctifies the worshipper.  
      ii) The one offering has perfected forever those who are being sanctified.  
      iii) The law written on the heart validates the final remission of sins.  

4. Admonition: Failure to maintain faithfulness will result in temporal judgment for the believer.  
   a. Boldness of access to God enables and expects faithfulness to the believer’s calling.  
      1) The believer has a new confidence of approach to God.  
      2) The believer is exhorted to maintain open identification with Christ.  
      3) The believers are expected to encourage each other.  
   b. The failure of willful apostasy renders the believer culpable of judgment.  
      1) Confessional rejection of Christ’s work leads to a the prospect of judgment.  
      2) Confessional rejection of Christ insults the principle of grace.  
   c. Endurance is needed for receiving the promised reward.  
      1) The readership had already endured suffering.  
      2) The readership must maintain their confidence.  

III. Part II: The superiority of Christ’s reward argues the blessedness of faithful endurance.  
   A. Spiritual certainty and divine approval are gained by faith.  
      1. Prologue: Faith is the means of perceiving God’s ways and appropriating God’s promises.  
      2. Faith obeys divine directives and results in God’s approval.  
      a. Abel obtained divine approval through a better sacrifice.  
      b. Enoch was translated because he pleased God.
c. Noah became an heir of righteousness through faith. 11:7

d. Abraham sojourned in the land of promise by faith. 11:8-10

e. Sarah conceived by faith in the promise. 11:11-12

f. Summary: Living with respect to a promised homeland resulted in divine approval. 11:13-16

3. Faith overcomes divine testing and results in God’s approval. 11:17-40
   a. The patriarchs overcame testing by faith. 11:17-22
   b. Moses forsook Egypt to follow God by faith. 11:23-29
   c. Various saints overcame great obstacles by faith. 11:30-38
   d. Summary: Living by faith without receiving the promise resulted in divine approval. 11:39-40

B. Admonition: Perseverance must be maintained in order to realize the completeness of God’s intentions. 12:1-29
   1. Introductory admonition: The race must be run with endurance with a focus on Jesus. 12:1-2
   2. Perseverance in difficulty is required in order to development proven character. 12:3-11
   3. Diligence in spiritual vitality is required in order to guard against personal catastrophe. 12:12-17
   4. Responsiveness to divine directive is required in order to serve God acceptably. 12:18-29
      a. The believer has come to the things pertaining to the new covenant. 12:18-24
      b. The believer must respond to the heavenly mandate in order to serve God appropriately. 12:25-29

IV. Epilogue: Concluding Exhortations and responsibilities. 13:1-25
A. Exhortations on matters of personal conduct. 13:1-6
   1. Love the brotherhood. 13:1
   2. Entertain strangers. 13:2
   3. Remember prisoners. 13:3
   4. Honor marriage. 13:4
   5. Be without covetousness. 13:5-6

B. Exhortations on matters with corporate ramifications. 13:7-17
   1. Keep a focus on those who have lived by faith. 13:7-8
   2. Guard against doctrinal defection. 13:9
   3. Maintain identification with Jesus Christ. 13:10-16
   4. Obey spiritual overseers. 13:17

C. A personal request for mutual benefit. 13:18-19

D. A summary benediction of spiritual aspiration. 13:20-25
Message

Maintaining confession of Christ will allow the believer to press on to maturity and receive a full inheritance.

Argument

Hebrews is written to Jewish Christians who, having made an open profession of their faith (presumably through baptism), are being pressured to return to the traditional practice of Judaism. Because of stagnation in their spiritual growth, and some degree of persecution, they are in some danger of doing just that. The writer encourages them to maintain their confession by showing them Christianity’s superiority to Judaism, the serious consequence of falling away, and the eternal reward of pressing on to maturity. Though they have received eternal life (and would never lose it), they could still experience temporal judgment by once again aligning themselves with Israel, which was currently under the wrath of God (cf. 1 Thess 2:15-16). The key to such endurance is understanding and continually affirming the superiority of the person and work of Jesus Christ.

I. Prologue: The Son of God is the culmination of divine revelation (1:1-4).

These opening bars of the symphony of the Son sound forth the finality of His revelation, by summarizing his future inheritance, past work of creation, and present ministry at God’s right hand. He is the ultimate revelation of God, demonstrated by his exaltation above even the angels.

II. Part I: The superiority of Christ’s work argues the foolishness of returning to Judaism (1:5–10:39).

The writer does not immediately reveal the hortatory purpose of his writing. Rather, he begins by focusing upon the superiority of Christ and then works into his various concerns and warnings. He thus establishes an exposition-admonition pattern, which continues throughout the book.

Beginning with the climactic element of the prologue, namely, Christ’s position at the Father’s right hand far above the angels, the writer develops the reasons for such an exaltation. Christ has been exalted because of who he is and because of what he has done.

A. The Son has been appointed as ruler above all because he became lower than the angels to accomplish our salvation (1:5–2:18).

The first exposition demonstrates Christ’s superiority to the angels in his person (1:5-14). As Son, King, Creator, and Sovereign, Christ has been placed over and given
charge of the angels, who themselves have been sent for the benefit of those who will inherit
salvation. This is broader than merely justification. It includes the full experience of living
the Christian life, deliverance from temporal judgment, and the preservation of the value of
one’s life for eternity (cf. 10:39). Because Christ is the superior messenger of this salvation,
sufficiently authorized by divinely testimony, the believer ought to pay close attention.
Neglecting his word will result in dire consequences (2:1-4). This is the first admonition.
Additional exposition shows that Christ was also exalted by his work, namely, his willing
subjection to life as a man (2:5-9), and to a perfecting by suffering as its necessary corollary
(2:10-13), so that he might die as a satisfactory, substitutionary sacrifice for mankind’s sin
(2:14-18). No angel could ever have accomplished such a work.

B. The Son has been honored above Moses as the builder of his house (3:1–4:16).

The second area of superiority is as Apostle and High Priest with respect to the
house of priestly service (3:1-2). Moses was faithful in this house, referring to the tabernacle
constructed in the wilderness, but Christ is its ultimate builder (3:3-4). By extension, “house”
becomes a metaphor for that company of believers, within the totality of the body of Christ,
who maintain a priestly ministry of open confession of Christ. This ministry is contingent
upon holding “fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm to the end” (3:6).
Though all believers have the right and responsibility to participate in this special priestly
ministry, not all do.⁴ The admonition with respect to the house of confession takes the form
of learning from Israel’s failure to fulfill their calling as God’s priest-nation to the rest of the
nations (3:7–4:16; cf. Exod 19:5-6). Israel continually, generation by generation, failed to
complete the work of testimony entrusted to them by God (3:7-15; 4:8-10). Thus, because of
unbelief, they did not enter into the rest of a completed work, the kind of rest that God
enjoyed at the completion of creation (3:16-19). However, believers in Christ may, by
associating themselves as his companions, complete such a work, if they “hold the beginning
of [their] confidence steadfast to the end” (3:14-15). Israel failed to fully possess the land and
complete their ministry of priesthood (4:1-8). Therefore, the priestly ministry of
proclamational confession remains to be completed by the (present) people of God (4:9-10).
Diligence is required to finish such a work (4:11) and God will most assuredly evaluate the

⁴ Cf. 1 Peter 2:5 for the concept of being built into a “spiritual house for a holy priesthood.” The
effort (4:12-13). The key to its completion is holding fast the confession of Christ, for which there is the unfailing resource of grace (4:14-16).

C. The Son has been exalted above Aaron as a Priest according to the order of Melchizedek (5:1–10:39).

This section of the book, the largest one, deals with the superiority of the Melchizedekan priesthood to the Aaronic one. The central focus of Christ’s priesthood has already been introduced (3:1; 4:14-16), but is now fully developed as it relates to the believer’s present condition and future expectation. Two sets of exposition and admonition serve to warn and motivate the believer with respect to consistent, open identification with Christ.

1. Exposition: Christ is fully qualified as the High Priest of eternal salvation (5:1-10). Since every priest is taken from among men so as to be able to deal empathetically with their plight, so Christ became a man and was schooled through suffering (5:1-8). However, since Christ was also the Son, His perfectly obedient response resulted in the authoring of a complete salvation experience, fully orbed in quality and quantity (5:9). Beyond mere judicial release from the eternal penalty of sin, this salvation extends to the believer’s present experience and rewardable effort. Obedience is required in order to benefit fully from such a salvation (5:9). However, these believers have become spiritually dull with respect to modeling their lives after the Savior’s (5:11). This prompts a serious warning.

2. Admonition: Protracted spiritual immaturity will result in spiritual retrogression and serious chastening (5:11–6:20). Obedience is necessary for a believer to share in this total salvation experience, yet some of them are still spiritual infants, only able to intake the milk of Christian truth (5:12-14). This is dangerous because it can lead to serious defection in the face of the threat of persecution, to permanent spiritual disability, and even to physical judgment (6:1-8). They need to press on to maturity (6:1) so that they may be able to discern good and evil and respond accordingly (5:14). They need to learn to live like Christ had (2:10-11; 5:8-9). If they fell away, coming to need reinstruction in the elementary truths of the faith, they may well not be able to recover (6:4-6). Not that they would lose possession of the gift of eternal life. Rather they would become stuck in a protracted immaturity, much like the nation of Israel throughout their history. This kind of life experience would be similar to burned earth (6:8).
However, the writer is confident that this will not likely happen to his readers (6:9). They had already proven themselves to a large extent and could be assured of the Lord’s assistance in their spiritual pursuit (6:10-12) buoyed by Abraham’s success and Jesus’ accomplishments (6:13-20).

3. Exposition: As a Priest of the order of Melchizedek Christ provided perfect salvation (7:1–10:18).

The reason for the writer’s confidence in his readers’ positive response lies not in their ability but, rather, in the new covenant ministry of Jesus as a Melchizedekan priest. It is an eternal priesthood that provides and enables a completed experience. After fully developing the superiority of Christ as a priest (7:1-28) the writer dwells on the superiority of Christ’s service (8:1–10:18). The goal of this service is to “... save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him ...” (7:25), that is, to deliver them into a full and complete experience of all the benefits of salvation. This points beyond eternal justification to present sanctification. The superiority of Christ’s service centers in his mediation of the new covenant (8:7–9:15). While the first covenant was broken due to human inability (8:7-9) the new covenant provides divine enablement (8:10-13). This new covenant is not vexed with natural limitations (9:1-10) but operates out of the greater, heavenly tabernacle and provides a conscience purged from dead works to serve the living God (9:11-14). This is the only sure provision for obtaining the promised inheritance (9:16). Because of Christ’s superior sacrifice (9:16-28) he is able to effect a superior experience (10:1-18). What the Old Testament believer could never have, namely, a sense of the final, full, complete forgiveness of sins (10:1-4), Christ has provided for the believer under the new covenant through the sacrifice of his own body (10:5-10). This means that believers have been finally and forever set apart to God, secure in the knowledge of their acceptance and forgiveness of sins, perfected as it were in their approach (10:11-18).

4. Admonition: Failure to maintain faithfulness will result in temporal judgment for the believer (10:19-39).

The believer now has boldness to enter God’s presence because of Jesus’ sacrifice (10:19-20) and because he has a High Priest of access (10:21). Therefore, the believer should come into his presence (10:22). This drawing near “with a true heart and full assurance of faith” is what will sustain steadfast confession of Christ as the believer’s hope (10:23). Believers are to encourage one another to this end in light of the exigencies of the time
However, great privilege brings with it great responsibility. Deliberate defection from the faith, through a “confessional rejection” of the work of Christ, will open one up to the prospect of temporal judgment (10:26-31). In light of who Christ is and all that he has done, no greater insult to the grace of God could be perpetrated than to return to Judaism (10:28-29). Endurance is needed to avoid such insult and, in the process, to obtain the reward granted for faithfulness (10:32-39). The readers had already endured mistreatment for the cause of Christ (10:32-34). Now they needed to endure to the end unto the pleasure of God (10:38) and the eternal benefit of their own souls (10:39).

III. Part II: The superiority of Christ’s reward argues the blessedness of faithful endurance (11:1–12:29).

Having focused on the superiority of Christ’s person and work as the motivation for maintaining a confession of faith, the writer now turns to the superiority of Christ’s reward. Throughout time, the faithful have been looking forward to “something better” than what this world can offer. Their example serves as further motivation for these beleaguered believers in their struggle to remain openly loyal to Jesus Christ.

A. Spiritual certainty and divine approval are gained by faith (11:1–40).

Maintaining one’s confession requires faith. Faith is being sure about what God has promised and seeing things from God’s perspective. Examples of old demonstrate that faith obeys divine directives and gains God’s approval (11:4-16). Furthermore, faith overcomes the obstacles that are part of divine testing, also approved by God (11:17-40). Faith discounts the present appearance of lack and need and fixes its hope on the promise of God held out for the future (11:39-40). Hence, present distress must not be allowed to deter one from maintaining confession of Christ.

B. Admonition: Perseverance must be maintained in order to realize the completeness of God’s intentions (12:1-29).

The final admonition is to endure in the “race” of life. Faith will be fostered by looking to the One who authored and perfected faith, in spite of the most humiliating treatment (12:1-2). In order to gain the promised inheritance it is necessary to be disciplined through suffering (12:3-11). This will produce the kind of character needed to honor the Father and thus receive divine approval. This will require diligence because failure is always a possibility (12:12-17). Since the believer has come to the Mediator of the new covenant
(12:18-24) great care must be taken to respond to the heavenly mandate to serve God acceptably (12:25-29). To not do so invites the displeasure of the One who has so graciously provided believers with His kingdom (12:28-29).


The personal exhortations with which the writer concludes can be understood as confessional ramifications with regard to personal conduct (13:1-6) and assembly life (13:7-17). By maintaining identification with the church, believers are indicating their willingness to bear the reproach of Christ (13:10-13), indicating the fact that they are looking to the Lord’s future reward (cf. ch. 11). The spiritual sacrifices to be offered are all things that somehow will contribute to their confession of Christ. Even submission to church oversight becomes a confessional matter (13:17).

The writer’s benediction is a fitting summary of his exhortation, focusing as it does on the great Shepherd of the sheep, the everlasting covenant, and his desire that they become complete in their works unto the pleasure of the Lord.

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY


