



World Christian Fellowship

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Hebrews- How to read this Epistle?

This is a tremendous book.
It is a difficult book.

It is a book that has many, many deep truths, difficult to understand lest we really be diligent and faithful in our study. There are things here that are beyond the understanding apart from a deep knowledge of the Spirit of God and a commitment to understand the Word of God in total.

You cannot understand the book of Hebrews unless you understand the book of Leviticus because the book of Hebrews is based upon the principles of the Levitical priesthood.

Author:

The author of Hebrews is unknown. Paul, Barnabas, Silas, Apollos, Luke, Philip, Priscilla, Aquila, and Clement of Rome have been suggested by different scholars, but the epistle's

vocabulary, style, and various literary characteristics do not clearly support any particular claim.

We will make reference to the fact that it was written by the Holy Spirit, that we do know.

It was written by this unknown author to a suffering, persecuted group of Jews somewhere in the east. Not in Israel, but outside of Israel.

It is significant that the writer includes himself among those people who had received confirmation of Christ's message from others.

Hebrews 2:3, *how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard Him,*

That would seem to rule out someone like Paul who claimed that he had received such confirmation directly from God and not from men.

Galatians 1:12, *For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through the revelation of Jesus Christ.*

Whoever the author was, he preferred citing OT references from the Greek OT (LXX) rather than from the Hebrew text.

Even the early church expressed various opinions on authorship, and current scholarship admits the puzzle still has no solution. Therefore, it seems best to accept the epistle's anonymity. Ultimately, of course, the author was the Holy Spirit.

2 Peter 1:21, *for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.*

Date:

When was the letter written?

It had to be written sometime after Christ's ascension, which would have been about 30 A.D., and sometime before the destruction of Jerusalem, which would have been 70 A.D., because Jerusalem is still standing at this point in the letter.

The use of the present tense in **5:1–4; 7:21,23,27,28; 8:3–5,13; 9:6–9,13,25; 10:1,3,4,8,11; and 13:10–11** would suggest that the Levitical priesthood and sacrificial system were still in operation when the epistle was composed.

Since the temple was destroyed by General (later Emperor) Titus Vespasian in A.D. 70, the epistle must have been written prior to that date.

In addition, it may be noted that Timothy had just been released from prison (13:23) and that persecution was becoming severe (10:32–39; 12:4; 13:3). These details suggest a date for the epistle around A.D. 67–69.

Historical background.

There weren't any apostolic missionaries from Jerusalem until at least seven years after the church had been founded there. Likely it was sometime later that they would have reached this little Jewish community.

There are no references to gentiles in the book. The problem of gentile and Jew together in the church is not here, indicating that the little congregation to which he's writing was strictly Jewish for there was no gentile conflict.

To this persecuted, suffering group of Jewish believers and unbelievers, he writes to reveal the merits of Jesus Christ and the new covenant as opposed to the old covenant.

We do not know the exact location of these Hebrews, somewhere near Greece perhaps, but we do know that this Jewish community had been evangelized by the apostles and the prophets.

These people had been evangelized, evidently, early after Christ had lived and died and risen again. By the time the letter to the Hebrews is written, there already exists a little group, a little local congregation of believers.

Included in the same view of the letter are unbelievers who, evidently, are also a part of this little Jewish community.

Unlike Jerusalem Jews or Galilee Jews, they had never met Jesus.

Everything they knew about him, they got second-hand.

They really didn't even have any New Testament writings, as such, for it hadn't been put together. Obviously, the book of Hebrews wasn't even a part of yet.

So, whatever they knew, they knew directly from the mouths of the apostles and by the New Testament prophets. So, they were kind of second-generation Christians because of apostolic missionaries.

After they had been reached, they had to have a certain amount of time to grow spiritually.

Hebrews 5:12-14, *For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to*

*need milk and not solid food.*¹³ *For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe.*¹⁴ *But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.*

So, it had to sometime after the apostolic missionaries would go out, establish the little congregation, and then they would have sufficient to have matured spiritually.

Theological themes.

We must understand that there were three basic types of people in view throughout this epistle.

If you do not understand these three basic types of people, then it becomes very confusing. If, for example, as some have said, it was all written to Christians, the entire thing was written to Christians, then you have monstrous problems. It cannot be written to unbelievers because it talks about the believers too much, so it must be written to a combination.

Evidently three basic types in this little Jewish community to which the writer of the epistle writes.

1. Hebrew Christians.
2. Hebrew Non-Christians.
3. Non-Christians.

1. Hebrew Christians.

There was in this little community a legitimate congregation of true believers in Jesus Christ. They had come out of Judaism. They had been founded and raised in it. They were born again. They had received Jesus Christ as their personal Saviour.

They had become followers of Jesus Christ, and naturally the result of that was a tremendous hostility from their own people. Expelled from their family, persecuted and suffering, though they never died Hebrews points that out, they still suffered greatly.

Persecuted not only by their own countrymen, the Jews, but evidently also perhaps by gentiles.

- They should have known better.
- They should have been mature, but they weren't.
- They had no confidence.
- They were in danger of going back into the patterns of Judaism. Not in danger of losing their salvation but in danger of confusing their salvation with legalism.
- They couldn't make a clear-cut break between the New Testament and the new covenant in Christ and all the forms and ceremonies and patterns and methods of their old life in Judaism.

- They were having a hard time with this problem.

For example, on the temple ritual and temple worship. That is why Jesus keeps talking to them about a new priesthood and a new kind of temple, a new kind of sacrifice, and a new kind of sanctuary that's better than the old one, because they were still hung up on that old one.

They had gone beyond Judaism in receiving Jesus Christ, but they were still hanging onto many of the Judaistic habits that had been so much a part of their life, and it's understandable.

When their own friends and their own countrymen began to really persecute them and let them have it, they tended to feel the pressure of this and to hold even tighter to some of the old Jewish traditions to at least have a foothold on their relationships to their own people.

It was a very hard thing to make a clean break. So with all that pressure and their weak faith and their spiritual ignorance, they were in great danger of mixing the new with the old. They were in great danger of coming up with a ritualistic, ceremonial, legalistic Christianity. They were a whole congregation of Romans 14 weaker brothers.

So, the Holy Spirit directs this letter to them to strengthen their faith in the new covenant to show them that they did not

need the old temple, they did not need – which, incidentally, in a matter of a few years would be wiped out by Titus Vespasian anyway, showing that God brought an end to that whole economy.

- They did not need the old Aaronic priesthood, Levitical priesthood.
- They did not need the old day-in-day-out, day-in-day-out sacrifices.
- They had a new and better covenant with a new and better priesthood, a new and better sanctuary, a new and better sacrifice all the way down the line.

So, it is written, then, to give confidence to these floundering believers.

He is speaking to Christians and telling them to hang onto the better covenant, the better priesthood, and not go back into the patterns of Judaism, either to that priesthood or to that assemblage, but to maintain that new relationship.

2. Hebrew Non-Christians.

Hebrew non-Christians who are intellectually convinced.

People who know the truth but have never committed themselves to it.

They have heard the truth of Jesus Christ, they believe it, they are intellectually convinced that Christ is indeed who He claimed to be, but they are NOT willing to make a commitment of faith to Him.

These are just common to every kind of group. There are those people who are here tonight. People who are convinced that Jesus is the Christ but have never committed themselves to Him.

These Hebrew non-Christians intellectually convinced are the object of some of the things that the writer has to say. They believed that Jesus was the Messiah, but they had not been willing to receive Him personally.

Why?

Just like those in the Gospel of John.

John 12:43, *for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God.*

They weren't willing to make the sacrifice. These particular group are exhorted by the Holy Spirit in the book of Hebrews to go all the way to saving faith. To go all the way to commitment.

Hebrews 2:1-4, *Therefore we must give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard, lest we drift away.² For if the word spoken through angels proved steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just reward,³ how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard Him,⁴ God also bearing witness both with signs and wonders, with various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to His own will?*

They were at the point of believing it but not committing to it and the great sin of neglecting to do what they had been intellectually convinced was right.

Hebrews 6:4-6, *For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit,⁵ and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come,⁶ if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame.*

There is a warning to the intellectually convinced not to stop because if he stops for the total revelation, if he stops when he's convinced he has only one way to go, if when a man is totally convinced that Jesus Christ is who He claimed to be, he refuses to believe, the man is hopeless. Because he's

convinced that it's true and he still won't do it. Nothing else God can do. So He warns.

What is the greatest sin that a man can commit?

The sin of rejecting Christ.

Hebrews 10:26, *For if we sin wilfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins,*

If a man has the truth, receives it, understands it, is intellectually convinced, and wilfully rejects Christ, what can God do?

Nothing.

This is another warning to the Hebrew, non-Christian, intellectually convinced.

Hebrews 10:27, *but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries.*

Hebrews 10:29, *Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace?*

In other words, when you know the truth and you reject it, the sorer punishment will be yours.

Hebrews 12:15-17, *looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled; ¹⁶lest there be any fornicator or profane person like Esau, who for one morsel of food sold his birth right. ¹⁷For you know that afterward, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought it diligently with tears.*

The tragedy of too little too late. This is, again, a warning to the convinced individual who has never made a commitment to Christ.

3. Non- Christians

Just the nation Israel in general. The Holy Spirit also in this book, not only does He want to speak to the Christians and strengthen their faith. But He wants to speak to intellectually convinced and push them over the line to faith.

The Spirit of God also wants to speak to those who haven't believed at all yet who aren't convinced of anything and give them enough information to show them that Jesus is in fact who He claimed to be.

Hebrews 9:11, *But Christ came as High Priest of the good things to come, with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this creation.*

Not of this building.

Hebrews 9:14-15, *how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? ¹⁵And for this reason He is the Mediator of the new covenant, by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant, that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance.*

Hebrews 9:27-29, *And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment, ²⁸so Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many. To those who eagerly wait for Him He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation.*

Those are messages given to one who is an unbeliever, not to a Christian and not to one who is necessarily convinced intellectually, but to that one who needs to know who Christ really is, and there are many other such illustrations.

So, there are three groups, then, in view in the epistle.

The key to interpreting Hebrews is to understand to which group he is speaking. If we don't understand that, then we mess everything up because we confuse the issue. He is not saying to believers it is appointed unto men once to die and after that the judgment, is he?

We must understand what group it is to whom he speaks. The flow of the text is to the believers. Periodically there are warnings to these unbelieving groups, these two groups of unbelievers, the intellectually convinced and the unconvinced. In a masterful way that could only be done by a divine mind, the Holy Spirit pulls these three groups together and meets every one of their particular needs and their particular questions and the particular issue in the very same letter.

In the book of Hebrews, there is confidence and assurance to the Christian. In the book of Hebrews, there is warning to the intellectually convinced that he must receive Christ, or his knowledge will damn him.

Finally, there is a convincing presentation to the unbelieving Jew who is not intellectually convinced that he indeed should be and should believe in Jesus Christ.

To do this Hebrews was written. Christ, the Messiah, the author of a new covenant, greater than the old one that God

had made in the Old Testament. Not that the old one was wrong, it was only incomplete.

The theme of the book

The theme of the book is the superiority or the pre-eminence of Christ. That He is better than anything they have got.

The central motif of Hebrews is “**Jesus Christ is better**” (the words “better,” “more,” and “greater” appear a combined 25 times).

- ✓ Christ is better than anything that is.
- ✓ Christ is better than the Old Testament persons.
- ✓ Christ is better than the Old Testament institutions.
- ✓ Christ is better than the Old Testament rituals.
- ✓ Christ is better than the Old Testament sacrifices.
- ✓ Christ is better than everything.

A general outline of the book of Hebrews, which shows you the pattern of presenting the superiority of Jesus Christ!

It begins with the superiority of Christ to everyone and everything, and that’s a kind of a summary of the whole book.

- ✓ The superiority of Christ to angels,
- ✓ The superiority of Christ to Moses,

- ✓ The superiority of Christ to Joshua,
- ✓ The superiority of Christ to Aaron and his priesthood,
- ✓ The superiority of Christ to the old covenant,
- ✓ The superiority of Christ's sacrifice to old sacrifices,
- ✓ The superiority of Christ's faithful to all faithless,
- ✓ The superiority of Christ's testimony to the testimony of any other.

That little outline gives you the flow of the book, which teaches the superiority of Jesus Christ.

To the Jew, it had always been a dangerous thing to approach God. No man shall see my face and live.

On the great day of atonement, Yom Kippur, which Jews still keep to one degree or another, which occurred one time a year, at that time and that time alone could the high priest enter into the holy of holies where the Shekinah glory dwelt, where God's presence was. They could not see God. They could not behold God.

They could not get near God except for one day a year, and only one guy could do it, and he had to get in there and get it done and get out of there. He didn't stay around a long time.

The Bible says, "He could not linger there lest he put Israel in terror." But in this kind of a situation where there was no nearness to God.

God established a covenant meant that God in His grace and in His sovereign initiative began the nation Israel and then offered to Israel a special relationship with Himself.

In a very unique way, He would be their God and they would be His people. They would have a special access to Him if they were obedient to His laws.

To break the law was sin, and sin interrupted the access to God, and since there was always sin, the access was always interrupted. So, God instituted a system of sacrifices. The whole Levitical priesthood, all the priests that ministered in Israel and all the sacrifices were to atone for sin that the barrier might be taken down and there might be access to God.

God gave His covenant, gave His law. Said you could have access. Man sinned, so he broke the covenant. The barrier went up. The sacrifice was made for sin that dropped the barrier so that that relationship could be consummated.

How many times did they have to make the sacrifice?

They had to do it incessantly, hour after hour, day after day, month after month, year after year, they never stopped.

To make things worse, the priests were all sinners, too, and they had to go through a whole ritual of making sacrifices for their own sins to get themselves in shape to make sacrifices for the sins of the people.

The barrier went up and down!

Of course, this is proof of the ineffectiveness of the whole system. It was a losing battle to preserve the barrier or to remove the barrier.

What man needed was a perfect priest and a perfect sacrifice who could open the way once and for all. Some kind of a sacrifice that didn't just deal with one sin, but something that just took it all away at once. They needed a perfect priest to bear that perfect sacrifice. The writer of Hebrews says that is what exactly what Jesus was and what He did.

Jesus comes as the mediator of a better covenant because it's one that doesn't have to be repeated every hour.

He comes as the mediator of a better covenant because His sacrifice covers every sin ever committed once and for all.

He comes as the mediator of a better covenant because He's a priest who doesn't need to make any sacrifices for Himself.

He's totally perfect. The perfect priest and the perfect sacrifice. Jesus Christ, in His own sacrifice, showed the perfection that eliminated sin.

Hebrews 10:10-12, By that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once *for all*. ¹¹*And every priest stands ministering daily and offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins.* ¹²*But this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God,*

No priest could ever sit!

There weren't even any seats. They had to keep making sacrifice. Jesus made one and sat down and that meant it's done.

Hebrews 10:14, *For by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified.*

There is a better priest making a better sacrifice.

This is the message of the book of Hebrews to the Jewish people.

- To the believer, he is saying have confidence in it.

- To the intellectually convinced, receive it. You are right on the borderline, don't fall into perdition when you are only a step away.
- To the unbeliever, he says look at it, how much better it is to receive Christ.

The writer is saying all your lives, you Jews have been looking for the perfect priest. You have been looking for the perfect final sacrifice. I present Him to you, Jesus Christ.

The pre-eminence or the superiority of Christ over all others is the theme of the book of Hebrews.

This is not easy for the Jews to accept.

It's extremely difficult for them to accept the superiority of the new covenant. Especially it is hard for them to make a clean break with the old.

Now, the gentiles didn't have that kind of a problem because for long centuries the gentiles hadn't believed in much of anything consistent anyway. They had long ago lost the knowledge of the true God and in consequence for worshipping idols and so forth and so on.

The Jews always had a divine religion. They always had a divinely appointed place of worship. God had established their religion.

It wasn't like going to a gentile and saying, "Here is the truth." When you went to a Jew and said, "Here is the truth," he would say, I already know the truth and it is from God.

It was not an easy thing to make that transition.

To be called on to forsake completely all the heritage that it was God-authored was not easy. Even among those who were saved, it was difficult. It was a natural desire for a Christian Jew to retain some of the forms and some of the ceremonies that were a part of his life when he was brought up, and that is part of the problem of the book of Hebrews, trying to confront that born-again Jew with the fact that he can let go of all those rituals.

It was especially hard for them since the temple still stood and the priests still ministered. It got easier after the temple was destroyed in 70 A. D.

Add the intense persecution that they were going through, and it was rough. In fact, the high priest Ananias really let them have it. They were all banished, any Christian Jew was automatically banished from the holy places.

They were banished from their own country. All their lives, they had had access, they couldn't even take part in God-appointed services.

- They were unclean.
- They couldn't go to the temple.
- They couldn't go to the altar.
- They couldn't go to the sacrifices.
- They couldn't communicate with the priests.
- They had nothing to do with their own people.
- They were cut off from their society.
- They were un-synagogued.

By clinging to the Messiah, they had been banished from everything they had ever known. They were considered worse than gentiles, though they were the only true Jews at all. For a Jew is not a Jew who is one outwardly, but one who is one inwardly.

So, they were beginning to say to themselves, "this is tough. We heard this from these preachers who have never seen Christ, we received Him, we believed Him, but it's tough to make this break and the persecution and all the traditions that they have always held.

Is this really the Messiah?

Doubts would come into their minds, and it was a problem. They were so spiritually infantile in their own concepts that they really didn't have any resources to fall back on.

Throughout the book of Hebrews, he speaks to these beloved Christians and tells them to put their confidence in the new covenant.

“Put your confidence in Christ, the mediator of a better covenant, the new, great high priest.”

The writer of Hebrews reminds them that they weren't losing something, they were just getting something better.

- They had been deprived of an earthly temple, but they were going to get a heavenly one.
- They had been deprived of an earthly priesthood, but they had a heavenly priest.
- They had been deprived of the pattern of sacrifices, but they had one final sacrifice.

Hebrews, everything presented is presented as a better thing.

- a better hope,
- a better testament,
- a better promise,
- better sacrifice,
- better substance,
- better country,

- better resurrection, and the
- better thing. And Jesus

Christ is presented there, and we are presented as being in Him, dwelling in a new kind of dimension, the heavenlies.

In Hebrews a heavenly Christ,

- a heavenly calling,
- the heavenly gift,
- the heavenly country,
- the heavenly Jerusalem, and
- our names are written in the heavenlies.

Everything is new. Everything is better. We don't need the old.

Do you want to get a summary of the book of Hebrews?

Hebrews 8:1, *Now this is the main point of the things we are saying: We have such a High Priest, who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens,*

Here is the whole summary of Hebrews in one verse. In one sentence!

There's the wrap-up on Hebrews right there. We have some kind of high priest. Who needs that old economy at all? And the significance of it is a high priest who's seated means his work is done. It's done.

Outline

1. The Superiority of Jesus Christ's Position (1:1–4:13)

- a) A Better Name (1:1–3)
- b) Better Than the Angels (1:4–2:18)
 - A greater messenger (1:4–14)
 - A greater message (2:1–18)
 - A greater salvation (2:1–4)
 - A greater saviour (2:5–18)
 - Better Than Moses (3:1–19)
 - A Better Rest (4:1–13)

2. The Superiority of Jesus Christ's Priesthood (4:14–7:28)

- a) Christ as High-Priest (4:14–5:10)
- b) Exhortation to Full Commitment to Christ (5:11–6:20)
- c) Christ's Priesthood like Melchizedek's (7:1–28)

3. The Superiority of Jesus Christ's Priestly Ministry (8:1–10:18)

Through a Better Covenant (8:1–13)

In a Better Sanctuary (9:1–12)

By a Better Sacrifice (9:13–10:18)

4. The Superiority of the Believer's Privileges (10:19–12:29)

- a) Saving Faith (10:19–25)
- b) False Faith (10:26–39)
- c) Genuine Faith (11:1–3)
- d) Heroes of the Faith (11:4–40)
- e) Persevering Faith (12:1–29)

5. The Superiority of Christian Behaviour (13:1–21)

- a) In Relation to Others (13:1–3)
- b) In Relation to Ourselves (13:4–9)
- c) In Relation to God (13:10–21)

Postscript (13:22–25)

Application:

This epistle is more than a doctrinal exposition. However, it is intensely practical in its application to everyday living (Chapter. 13).

The writer himself even refers to his letter as a “word of exhortation” (13:22).

Exhortations designed to stir the readers into action are found throughout the text.

Those exhortations are given in the form of 6 warnings:

1. Warning against drifting from “the things we have heard” (2:1–4)
2. Warning against disbelieving the “voice” of God (3:7–14)
3. Warning against degenerating from “the elementary principles of Christ” (5:11–6:20)
4. Warning against despising “the knowledge of the truth” (10:26–39)
5. Warning against devaluing “the grace of God” (12:15–17)
6. Warning against departing from Him “who speaks” (12:25–29)