

THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Though no author is named in the text, from the fifth century to modern times this work has been associated with Paul. Jerome's mentioning Paul as the author in his Latin Vulgate helped to consolidate this association. Our earliest preserved copy, Beatty Papyrus II (P⁴⁶), which dates from the end of the second century, has Hebrews bound in with letters by Paul, immediately after the Letter to the Romans. However, a little later, and from the same area of northern Egypt, the great Alexandrian scholar, Origen, remarked: 'Who wrote the epistle, in truth God knows!' (see Eusebius, *History of the Church*, 6.25.14). Eusebius, writing in the first half of the fourth century, has this to say:

It is not indeed right to overlook the fact that some have rejected the Epistle to the Hebrews, saying that it is disputed by the church of Rome, on the ground that it was not written by Paul.

– History of the Church, 3.3

For reasons that will become obvious when we examine the text, the eastern church found Hebrews extremely useful in the controversy with Arius, and, in spite of the obvious difference in style from any of Paul's letters, was happy to link it to Paul and to accept it into the canon. The hesitations came from the Roman church, possibly because Hebrews was composed precisely for the Roman church and, as its recipients, they knew that it was not written by Paul. The First Letter of Clement to the Corinthians, composed in Rome at the end of the first century, draws on Hebrews (compare 1 Clement 9 and 12 with Hebrews 11:7,31, and 1 Clement 36 with Hebrews 1:3-4). However, it is not mentioned in any of the early Roman listings of the New Testament scriptures. It is not mentioned by the Shepherd of Hermas (second century), the Muratorian fragment (c.200AD), Hippolytus (died 235AD), or the Roman presbyter Gaius, also of the third century. Ambrosiaster (380AD) has a commentary on all thirteen letters of Paul, but not on Hebrews.

Modern scholarship does not share the early church's concern that authors of inspired writings be recognised apostolic figures. The fact that we do not happen to know an author's name is no barrier to inspiration or to the community recognition that goes with canonicity. As will be pointed out in the commentary, there are a number of similarities between the thought of the author and ideas expressed by Paul. However, besides the differences in vocabulary and style (already noted by Origen), it is hard to imagine Paul never using the expression 'Christ Jesus' and referring to the resurrection only once (13:20). Paul declared: 'I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ' (Galatians 1:11-12). It is impossible to think of this same Paul speaking of God's salvation as something which was 'declared at first through the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard him' (Hebrews 2:3). The author is clearly a second generation Christian.

Scholars today are unanimous in recognising that the author is not Paul. Various suggestions are made as to who the author may be. The fact that it is the finest Greek of any New Testament writing, and that the author is trained in rhetoric, is steeped in the cultic language of the Septuagint and in Hellenistic Jewish Wisdom literature, makes the 'eloquent' Apollos of Alexandria (see Acts 18:24) a favourite candidate, but any suggestion is no more than guesswork.

It is commonly referred to as ‘the Letter to the Hebrews’, and the last paragraph of the text indicates that it was sent as a letter. However, its rhetorical style and structure indicate that it was composed by a skilled orator to be delivered orally. While all the letters of the New Testament would have been read out to the assembled community, no other letter is composed precisely in a rhetorical form. It is intended as a ‘word of exhortation’(13:22). Note the recurrence of the verbs ‘speaking’ and ‘hearing’(see 2:5; 5:11; 6:9; 8:1; 9:5; 11:32). The author knows his audience well. In the context of urging them to be obedient to their leaders, he asks them to pray for him ‘so that I may be restored to you very soon’ (13:19). This, plus the whole tone of the document, points to him as being among their leaders, or if not a leader, as someone who is confident in their respect. An examination of the text reveals that those whom he is addressing have considerable familiarity with the Jewish scriptures. This is not to say that they were all Jews, but the Gentiles among them were either converts from among those who were attached to the synagogue or who soon became familiar with Jewish traditions through the community. This obvious trait was picked up by the one responsible for providing the title ‘To the Hebrews’. The oration is addressed to a Christian community with strong roots in Judaism, such as one would find in Palestine, Rome, or Cyrene. It is not the kind of work one would expect to find directed to the largely Gentile Pauline churches of Asia or Greece.

The author writes in Greek and quotes from the Greek version of the Scriptures. This does not rule out Palestine as the location of those whom he is addressing, as the Greek language and Scriptures were at home in first century Palestine and had been for some time. However, if, as some suggest, the author is trying to persuade Palestinian Jewish Christians to a more Hellenistic Christian view, one might have expected him in undertaking such a delicate task to write in Hebrew and use the Hebrew scriptures. A number of authors favour the Christian community in Rome as those for whom the work was intended. These communities kept close links with the mother church in Palestine (see Acts 28:21). What we have already noted about the knowledge of the work early in Rome favours this suggestion, as does the fact that the author sends greeting from ‘those from Italy’(13:24).

The Christians for whom he writes are not recent converts: ‘by this time you ought to be teachers’(5:12). He recalls former times when they suffered for their faith: ‘Recall those earlier days when, after you had been enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and persecution, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion for those who were in prison, and you cheerfully accepted the plundering of your possessions, knowing that you yourselves possessed something better and more lasting’(10:32-34). It is important to note what he does not say. He makes no mention of any of them losing their lives which he would surely have done if that were the case. This seems to me to be a conclusive argument against those who suggest that the author is writing to Christians in Rome *after* the persecution of Nero. If the work is intended for the Christian community in Rome, he could be referring to what happened when Jewish Christians were exiled by Claudius (49AD, see Acts 18:2), but the above description could apply to most Christian communities of the first century.

Introduction

The rapid growth of the Christian movement witnesses to the attraction which their lives had for many of their contemporaries. At the same time, by not taking part in worship of the gods, and so by staying away from public festivities which involved such worship, Christians were perceived as dishonouring the gods and so as incurring divine disfavour. They were an easy target for blame when things were not going well. It did not take much for harassment to spill over into outright denunciation and persecution.

At the time of writing, they are 'enduring trials'(12:7), but have not had to resist 'to the point of shedding your blood'(12:4). However, they have lost their earlier fervour, and are discouraged in the struggle to live their faith in a hostile environment. Some have given up attending the community assemblies: 'neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some'(10:25). Our author is writing to revivify their awareness of who Jesus is to whom they have committed their lives: 'Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart'(12:3).

As Jewish Christians they may also have been losing heart because Christianity was growing in Gentile communities, but their Jewish brothers and sisters on the whole remained closed to the gospel. They may also have been troubled by the build up of tension between Jewish nationals in Palestine and the Roman occupiers, and have had to face the accusation of disloyalty from their compatriots. Were they wondering whether they should rejoin their Jewish brothers and sisters? If so, the author is assuring them that it is they who are being faithful to their roots, not those who refuse to accept the gospel. He sets out to demonstrate from the Jewish scriptures that God promised to bring Judaism to its fulfilment and that Jesus in whom they have put their faith is the Messiah in whom God has brought about this fulfilment.

The Jewish scriptures themselves show that God promised a new priesthood:

The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, 'You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.'

– Psalm 110:4

They show that God promised a new covenant:

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the Lord, for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

– Jeremiah 31:31-34

They show that God promised a new sacrifice:

Sacrifice and offering you do not desire, but you have given me an open ear. Burnt offering and sin offering you have not required. Then I said, 'Here I am; in the scroll of the book it is written of me. I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart.'

– Psalm 40:6-8

The author stresses the fact that the ancient covenants as well as the Jewish law, cult and institutions have found their perfect expression in Christianity, which, while bringing Judaism to its fulfilment, has gone beyond the limits of Judaism in opening eternal redemption to everyone who believes in Jesus.

The author is encouraging his readers to cling to Jesus, to be faithful to the revelation of God that they have received in their conversion, and to resist going back, whatever hardships they are facing. He calls them to remain faithful to the tradition: to 'what we have heard'(2:1); to 'our confession'(4:14; 10:23); to 'the confidence and the pride that belong to hope'(3:6; 6:11; 10:19,35). He calls them to endure (10:36; 12:2,7; 10:32-34).

This fidelity calls them to continue on a journey of faith. They are to 'approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may find mercy and grace to help in time of need'(4:16; 10:22); they are to 'make every effort to enter God's rest'(4:11); they are to 'run with perseverance the race that is set before us'(12:1); they are to go forth even to suffering (13:13), being faithful to Jesus the one who is the source of the saving grace which they have received and the one who leads them to its perfection.

If we follow the indications that point towards Rome being the likely locality in which those for whom the work was composed lived, the failure to mention the terrible events of the persecution under Nero favour a date in the early 60s. Another cataclysmic event that is not mentioned is the Jewish-Roman war which broke out in 66AD and reached its climax in the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 70AD. If this happened before our work was written it is difficult to see how it would not have been mentioned as pertinent to the author's argument.

The earliest extant manuscript of Hebrews is the papyrus codex P⁴⁶ from c.200AD which contains the whole text. It is complete also in our two fourth century parchment codexes, Sinaiticus and Vaticanus, as well as in the fifth century parchment codex, Alexandrinus.

The Rhetorical Nature of Hebrews

Our author is a highly skilled orator. He presents whoever is to proclaim his ‘letter’ to the assembly with a ready-made and polished piece of oratory, using all the conventional techniques aimed at assisting the listeners not only to follow the argument and come to insight, but also to be moved to recommit their lives to Christ. Some of these techniques can be reproduced in translation: the repetition of a word to indicate the closure of a point that was introduced by the same word earlier; the repetition of a phrase to link a point with the preceding or following one; repeating a key word throughout the development of a theme to which it is central. Our author manages beautifully to signpost his meaning in many intricate, aesthetically pleasing, and intellectually satisfying ways – and all in the service of accurate communication. The most important way in which he indicates his intention is by announcing the theme of the section which is to follow. He does this in 1:4; 2:17-18; 5:9-10; 10:36-39 and 12:13.

Other more subtle techniques in the orator’s art defy translation: alliteration and other forms of repeating sounds, as well as the many ways in which a skilled orator assists the listeners with modulation of sound, tone, and pace. A comparison can be made with a musical composition, which is much more than a series of sounds. The orchestration is all important. So it is with the orator’s structuring of his work. It is his way of indicating points that are to be played softly, and others with full force. By the way in which he structures his work he lets us know when to slow down, and when to build to a climax. Relative importance is a critical issue. All this is true for any piece of good writing. It is especially true of Hebrews, which is the most highly structured and polished piece of writing in the New Testament. Since most of us are reading the text rather than hearing it proclaimed, and since most of us are reading it in translation, it becomes especially important that we try to understand how the piece has been orchestrated. This will help us appreciate what is important to the author, achieve insight into his meaning, and, please God, be moved to the faith that he wishes to inspire in his audience.

What emerges most clearly from a close examination of the way in which our author orchestrates his work is that he wants its recipients to listen attentively to God who is speaking to them: ‘See that you do not refuse the one who is speaking’ (12:25). They are to listen carefully to the word of God mediated through their sacred writings, to which the author regularly refers. His aim is to demonstrate that when they do this they will hear God making promises that have been fulfilled in Jesus, God’s perfect word. They are to listen carefully to the words now being addressed to them by the risen Christ, especially when they come together in worship. Their former religious worship, expressed in the traditional cult, has also found its fulfilment in Jesus who lives forever in the eternal sanctuary of God’s presence, whence he continues to mediate God’s word to us and to join our response to his, bringing us into the perfect communion of love for which we are created and for which we long. All our hopes for the present and for the future lie in Jesus. We must cling to him in faith, hope and love, and when this brings suffering, we are to cling all the more closely, knowing that we will share his glory.

Introduction	1:1-4
Part One: The name so different from the angels	
1. The Son of God	1:5-14
2. An appeal	2:1-4
3. Our brother	2:5-18
Part Two	
A. A trustworthy high priest	
1. Like Moses, Jesus reveals God's word	3:1-6
2. Warnings concerning faith	3:7 - 4:14
B. A compassionate high priest	
1. An appeal	4:15-16
2. Like Aaron, Jesus offers a sacrifice	5:1-10
Part Three	
Preamble	
1. An appeal	5:11 - 6:12
2. The promise is secure, as is our hope	6:13-20
A. A high priest like Melchizedek	
1. Melchizedek	7:1-10
2. Two kinds of priesthood	7:11-28
B. A priest who has attained fulfillment	
1. The old ministry, cult and institutions	
a. An earthly cult	8:1-6
b. An imperfect covenant	8:7-13
a ¹ . Powerless to effect salvation	9:1-10
2. The new institutions, covenant and ministry	
a ¹ . Able to effect salvation	9:11-14
b. A perfect covenant	9:15-23
a. A cult that gives access to heaven	9:24-28

Introduction

C. The cause of eternal salvation

1. The efficacy of the sacrifice of Christ 10:1-10
2. Our coming to perfection is assured 10:11-18

Concluding appeal 10:19-39

Part Four

- A. The faith of the ancestors 11:1-40
- B. We must persevere and endure 12:1-13

Part Five: We must live appropriately

1. Our response to Jesus 12:14-29
2. Our divine worship is loving our brothers and sisters 13:1-6
3. Food observance or true Christian living 13:7-19

Peroration and envoy 13:20-25

An analysis of the structure demonstrates the fact that it is the priesthood of Christ which is the central theme of the oration. The centrepiece structurally is Part Three Section B, and the centre of this section is the phrase 'Christ the high priest'(9:11). Part One lists divine and human titles of Jesus, reaching its climax in the title 'high priest' which links both. Part Two looks at the two poles which a priest (that is to say, a mediator) must connect. Section A looks at his connection with God which is trustworthy, and Section B looks at his connection with mankind which is compassionate. Part Three looks at the three essential characteristics of priesthood and shows how in each of these the priesthood of Christ surpasses that of the Levitical priesthood. Section A shows that his mediation from God to mankind is more secure and is eternal. Section B shows that he has reached fulfilment in the sanctuary of heaven. Part C shows that his mediation from mankind to God is complete as he draws us into the eternal salvation of complete communion with God.

Three processes recur in each Part of the work. Firstly, the author brings out the contrast between history before Christ and the present which is graced by him. Secondly, he distinguishes between Christ and Christians in the three key areas of sacrifice, eschatology and covenant. Thirdly, there is a constant interaction between doctrine and appeal, knowledge and conversion.

This is a passionate appeal from a pastor to a Christian community. It is not a piece of abstract, academic, christology. He highlights the priesthood of Christ, but only so that they will recognise in Christ the mediator of the eternal redemption and salvation for which they hope. His aim is to encourage them to cling to Christ in hard times and to continue their Christian mission in the world.

1:1-6	Christmas Day
	1st Monday of Ordinary Time, Year I
1:7-14	not in the Sunday or Weekday lectionary
2:1-4	not in the Sunday or Weekday lectionary
2:5-12	1st Tuesday of Ordinary Time, Year I
2:9-11	27th Sunday of ordinary Time, Year B
2:13	not in the Sunday or Weekday lectionary
2:14-18	1st Wednesday of Ordinary Time, Year I
3:1-6	not in the Sunday or Weekday lectionary
3:7-14	1st Thursday of Ordinary Time, Year I
3:15-19	not in the Sunday or Weekday lectionary
4:1-5,11	1st Friday of Ordinary Time, Year I
4:6-10	not in the Sunday or Weekday lectionary
4:12-13	28th Sunday of ordinary Time, Year B
4:12-14	1st Saturday of ordinary Time, Year I
4:14-16	29th Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year B
4:14-16; 5:7-9	Good Friday
5:1-6	30th Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year B
5:1-10	2nd Monday of Ordinary Time, Year I
5:7-9	5th Sunday of Lent, Year B
5:11-14	not in the Sunday or Weekday lectionary
6:1-9	not in the Sunday or Weekday lectionary
6:10-20	2nd Tuesday of ordinary Time, Year I
7:1-3, 15-17	2nd Wednesday of Ordinary Time, Year I
7:4-14, 18-22	not in the Sunday or Weekday lectionary
7:23-28	31st Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year B
7:25 - 8:6	2nd Thursday of Ordinary Time, Year I
8:6-13	2nd Friday of Ordinary Time, Year I

Introduction

	9:1,4-10	not in the Sunday or Weekday lectionary
	9:2-3, 11-14	2nd Saturday of Ordinary Time, Year I
9:11-15		The Body and Blood of Christ
	9:15, 24-28	3rd Monday of Ordinary Time, Year I
	9:16-23	not in the Sunday or Weekday lectionary
9:24-28		32nd Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year B
	10:1-10	3rd Tuesday of Ordinary Time, Year I
10:5-10		4th Sunday of Advent, Year C
10:11-14, 18		33rd Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year B
	10:11-18	3rd Wednesday of Ordinary Time, Year I
	10:19-25	3rd Thursday of Ordinary Time, Year I
	10:26-31	not in the Sunday or Weekday lectionary
	10:32-39	3rd Friday of Ordinary Time, Year I
11:1-2, 8-19		19th Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year C
	11:1-7	6th Saturday of Ordinary Time, Year I
	11:1-2, 18-19	3rd Saturday of Ordinary Time, Year I
	11:20-31	not in the Sunday or Weekday lectionary
	11:32-40	4th Monday of Ordinary Time, Year I
12:1-4		20th Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year C 4th Tuesday of Ordinary Time, Year I
	12:4-7, 11-15	4th Wednesday of Ordinary Time, Year I
12:5-7, 11-13		21st Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year C
	12:8-10, 14-17	not in the Sunday or Weekday lectionary
	12:18-19,21-24	4th Thursday of ordinary Time, Year I
12:18-19, 22-24		22nd Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year C
	12:25-29	not in the Sunday or Weekday lectionary
	13:1-8	4th Friday of Ordinary Time, Year I
	13:9-14,18-19	not in the Sunday or Weekday lectionary
	13:15-17,20-21	4th Saturday of Ordinary Time, Year I
	13:22-25	not in the Sunday or Weekday lectionary

Season of Ordinary Time

WEEK 1, Year I

Monday : Hebrews 1:1-6

Wednesday : Hebrews 2:14-18

Friday : Hebrews 4:1-5,11

Tuesday : Hebrews 2:5-12

Thursday : Hebrews 3:7-14

Saturday : Hebrews 4:12-14

WEEK 2, Year I

Monday : Hebrews 5:1-10

Wednesday : Hebrews 7:1-3, 15-17

Friday : Hebrews 8:6-13

Tuesday : Hebrews 6:10-20

Thursday : Hebrews 7:25 - 8:6

Saturday : Hebrews 9:2-3, 11-14

WEEK 3, Year I

Monday : Hebrews 9:15, 24-28

Wednesday : Hebrews 10:11-18

Friday : Hebrews 10:32-39

Tuesday : Hebrews 10:1-10

Thursday : Hebrews 10:19-25

Saturday : Hebrews 11:1-2, 18-19

WEEK 4, Year I

Monday : Hebrews 11:32-40

Wednesday : Hebrews 12:4-7, 11-15

Friday : Hebrews 13:1-8

Tuesday : Hebrews 12:1-4

Thursday : Hebrews 12:18-19, 21-24

Saturday : Hebrews 13:15-17, 20-21

WEEK 6, Year I

Saturday: Hebrews 11:1-7

Sundays in Ordinary Time

SUNDAY 19 Year C : Hebrews 11:1-2, 8-19

SUNDAY 20 Year C : Hebrews 12:1-4

SUNDAY 21 Year C : Hebrews 12:5-7, 11-13

SUNDAY 22 Year C : Hebrews 12:18-19, 22-24

SUNDAY 27 Year B : Hebrews 2:9-11

SUNDAY 28 Year B : Hebrews 4:12-13

SUNDAY 29 Year B : Hebrews 4:14-16

SUNDAY 30 Year B : Hebrews 5:1-6

SUNDAY 31 Year B : Hebrews 7:23-28

SUNDAY 32 Year B : Hebrews 9:24-28

SUNDAY 33 Year B : Hebrews 10:11-14,18

Introduction

Seasons other than Ordinary Time

4 SUNDAY ADVENT	Year C : Hebrews 10:5-10
CHRISTMAS DAY	A,B,C : Hebrews 1:1-6
GOOD FRIDAY	A,B,C : Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9
5 SUNDAY LENT	Year B : Hebrews 5:7-9
BODY&BLOOD OF CHRIST	Year B : Hebrews 9:11-15