

Hebrews Overview

If you're like most people, when you receive an important letter you probably read it straight through first to see what the writer has to say in general. After that, you may go back to examine particular sections more closely. This is just the way to study a biblical letter. In this lesson, we'll take a broad look at Hebrews to lay the groundwork for detailed study in future lessons.

Author

Little is known about the writer of Hebrews, but many possible authors have been suggested, including Paul, Apollos, and Barnabas. Paul is well-known as the author of thirteen other New Testament epistles, and from the fifth to sixteenth centuries was believed without question to be the author of Hebrews (many printings of the King James Version call it "The Epistle of Paul to the Hebrews").

Some early Christian writers disagreed over Pauline authorship, and the debate was revived during the protestant reformation. It is now almost universally recognized that Paul could not have been the author. Paul identifies himself as the author of all thirteen of his New Testament epistles, but the author of this letter does not identify himself. Additionally, the author of Hebrews seems to indicate that he has received knowledge of the gospel second-hand (2:3), but Paul received his knowledge first-hand on the road to Damascus.

Apollos, first suggested as the author of Hebrews by Martin Luther, was an influential Jewish Christian (Acts 18:24-28) in the early church and would have been acquainted with Paul. Barnabas is another Jewish Christian and good friend of Paul who has been suggested as a potential author of Hebrews. Other likely authors include Luke, Clement, Priscilla, Philip, Peter, Silvanus (Silas), Aristion, and Jude.

Though we can't be sure who wrote the letter, we can be sure he was well versed in the Old Testament. His arguments are meticulously and solidly constructed. When he pauses to admonish his readers he does so with tact and sensitivity. He gives his readers the benefit of the doubt in most situations, but never backs down from delivering strong precautionary warnings. Most importantly, he gives us the clearest exposition of the Christian approach to the Old Testament of any of the New Testament writers.

Recipients

Hebrews offers us a fair amount of information about the original recipients and their situation. The original readers spoke Greek and probably used the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint). They were able to follow arguments drawn from the Old Testament and were interested in the Old Testament

sanctuary, sacrificial system and priesthood. They had heard the gospel through the apostolic word (2:3) rather than directly from Jesus. They had suffered, and were currently suffering, persecution (10:32-34; 13:3). Death for the cause of Christ was likely a real possibility for them (12:4). It is possible that they had also been expelled from Jewish institutions (13:12-13) and thus shamed for their confession of Jesus and stripped of the familiar visible institutions of organized Jewish religion. Some may have been tempted to “shrink back” (10:38-39) into unbelief and so to give up their journey toward God’s rest and God’s city (4:1-2, 11; 11:10, 14-16; 13:14). Finally, they received greetings through the author from “those in Italy” (13:24).

Drawing these features together, we may conclude that the recipients were primarily Jewish Christians of the dispersion. They probably lived in Italy and may have lived in Rome, where the earliest evidence of acquaintance with the epistle has been found.

Some have inferred that the recipients of the letter were in leadership positions (5:12) and were perhaps meeting together separately from the main body of believers (10:25). Some have even claimed this group consisted of former temple priests. It is clear from elsewhere in the New Testament that there were many priests among the Christian converts in the first century (Acts 6:7). It makes sense that these priests would feel it important to form groups for the study of their new approach to the former temple rituals. However, there is no evidence of any churches comprised of priests and some caution must be exercised over this view.

Context and Background

Since the writer of Hebrews speaks of the temple rituals in the present tense, it is safe to assume the temple was still standing when the epistle was written. Since the temple was destroyed in a.d. 70, this indicates a probable date of composition prior to that time. If Hebrews was written during the time of the persecutions under Nero (circa a.d. 64), the suffering mentioned (10:32-34) could have been caused by an edict of Claudius that expelled Jews from Rome in a.d. 49 (Acts 18:2).

Purpose of the Letter

The author makes only one explicit statement about his purpose in writing. In 13:22 he simply states, “bear with my word of exhortation, for I have written you only a short letter.” If “word of exhortation” means the same thing here as in Acts 13:15, it would suggest that the structure of Hebrews owes its origin to sermon given on a special occasion and later adapted into letter form. Hebrews is aptly described as a “word of exhortation”, for exhortation and encouragement are at the heart of the book’s purpose (3:13; 6:17-20; 10:25; 12:5-6). Hebrews repeatedly calls its readers to an active and courageous response (e.g. 4:11, 14, 16; 6:1; 10:19-25).

Hebrews' high literary style and theological interests set it apart from other New Testament books. Among its greatest contributions to the New Testament revelation of Jesus Christ is its detailed disclosure of Jesus' fulfillment of the temple, sacrifices and priesthood that were established in the Law of Moses (chs. 8-9).

Questions for Discussion

1. Read the following passages, paying attention to the contrasts the author uses. See if you can come to any conclusions about the author's main theme.

Roland: (1:1-4) Revelation through prophets contrasted with _____

Joey: (1:5-2:18) Angels contrasted with _____

Marti: (3:1-6) Moses contrasted with _____

Cory: (3:12-4:10) Canaan rest contrasted with _____

Christina: (4:14-5:10) Aaron's priesthood contrasted with _____

Janene: (5:11-14) Spiritual infancy contrast with _____

Roland: (6:1-20) Apostasy contrasted with _____

Joey: (7:1-28) Aaron's priesthood contrasted with _____

Cory: (8:1-13) The old covenant contrasted with _____

Marti: (9:11-28) Sacrificial blood of animals contrasted with _____

Christina: (10:1-18) Repeated Levitical sacrifices contrasted with _____

Janene: (10:19-39) Perseverance contrasted with _____

Joey: (11:1-40) Faith contrasted with _____

2. What do these contrasts suggest to you about the author's goal in this letter?

3. In ancient manuscripts, this letter is entitled, *Pros Hebraious*, "To Hebrews." This probably refers to a group of Hebrew Christians. Why do you think the approach you observed in questions 1 and 2 would have been effective with first-century Jewish Christians?

4. Throughout Hebrews, the author gives theological teaching and then says, "Therefore. . . ." Below, summarize the theological points he makes in each doctrinal section, then summarize the practical "therefore" that should result from the doctrine.

Cory: (1:1-14) Doctrine _____

(2:1) Therefore _____

Christina: (2:5-18) Doctrine _____

(3:1) Therefore _____

Roland: (3:7-19) Doctrine _____

(4:1) Therefore _____

Janene: (4:6-10) Doctrine _____

(4:11) Therefore _____

Cory: (5:11-14) Doctrine _____

(6:1) Therefore _____

Joey: (7:1-10:18) Doctrine _____

(10:19-22) Therefore _____

Joey: (11:1-40) Doctrine _____

(12:1) Therefore _____

Roland: (12:7-11) Doctrine _____

(12:12) Therefore _____

Marti: (12:14-27) Doctrine _____

(12:28) Therefore _____

Janene: (13:11-14) Doctrine _____

(13:15) Therefore _____

5. Based on what you have learned so far, what do you think the author of Hebrews was trying to accomplish with his readers?

6. How would you summarize the main theme(s) of this letter in a sentence?

Personal Application (Homework)

1. What are some of the questions you would like to have answered as you delve more deeply into Hebrews? (Your questions can serve as personal objectives for your study.)

2. Did your overview of Hebrews suggest any areas of your life that you want to work on during this study? If so, jot them down, along with any plans you already have to deal with them. Take each one to God in prayer, asking Him to show you His priorities for your application and to give you His strength to become what He desires. If anything in the book has convicted you, confess your failings to God.

Sources

- Guthrie, Donald; *Hebrews*; The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries; William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; Grand Rapids, MI / Cambridge, U.K.; 1983.
- Rhodes, Ron; *Hebrews*; LifeChange Series; NavPress; Colorado Springs, CO; 1989.