

INTRODUCTION AND HEB. 1:1-4

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Introduction

I. Preface

A. William Barclay remarked just over 50 years ago, "When we come to read the *Letter to the Hebrews* we come to read what is, for the person of today, the most difficult book in the whole New Testament" (quoted at Guthrie [NIVAC] p. 14).

B. Even the background of the book is difficult to determine. George Guthrie writes in his 1998 commentary on Hebrews (NIVAC, p. 19):

Commentators have had to write tentatively concerning issues of background when it comes to this wonderfully complex document. As William L. Lane notes, "Hebrews is a delight for the person who enjoys puzzles." The author simply left us little in the way of overt remarks on his own context and the context of the recipients.

C. But despite the difficulties, we can make an educated guess about the letter's background. To quote Guthrie again (p. 19), "like a Sherlock Holmes mystery, clues in the text lead the interested investigator to feasible conclusions."

II. The Recipients

A. It is clear that Hebrews was written initially to a specific group of Christians rather than to the church at large.

1. This group had ministered generously to other Christians (6:10) and had endured in earlier days certain specific acts of persecution that are referred to in 10:32-34. The author knows the circumstances under which they had become Christians (2:3), knows their present state of mind (5:11ff.; 6:9ff.), and apparently knows their attitude toward their leaders (13:17).

2. The author knows these Christians personally and hopes to visit them again (13:19, 23). He requests that they pray for him (13:18) and mentions Timothy's release as an item of news in which they would be interested (13:23).

B. This group of Christians is being urged to hold fast to their confession, to maintain their allegiance to Christ (e.g., 3:6, 14; 4:14; 10:23). It seems they were being tempted to reject Christianity and to return to some form of Judaism, which means they were (at least largely) Christians who previously had identified with Judaism.

1. Many no doubt were ethnic Jews who had converted to Christ, but the group also may have included Gentiles who before their conversion had affiliated with Judaism as proselytes or God fearers.

2. The fact this letter was known to Clement of Alexandria around A.D. 180 as having been written "for Hebrews" and the fact the earliest manuscript of the letter dating around A.D. 200 (P⁴⁶) is entitled "To [the] Hebrews" support this understanding of the recipients.

III. Purpose of the Letter

A. The purpose of the letter, as I've already indicated, was to urge these Christians to hold fast to their confession of faith. What was tempting them to revert to Judaism is only hinted at, but it seems to have included being tired of bearing the shame of living outside the mainstream of their cultural heritage (13:13), a doctrinal blurring of the distinctive place of Jesus, and possibly fear of persecution because Judaism was recognized as an official religion by the Romans but Christianity was not.

B. The theme the writer sounds in warning the readers not to turn from the Christian faith is the unqualified supremacy of Christ. D. A. Carson and Douglas Moo write in *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (p. 597):

The general theme of Hebrews – the unqualified supremacy of God's Son, Jesus Christ, a supremacy that brooks no challenge, whether from angelic or human beings – is not in dispute. Correlatively, the covenant he has inaugurated is superior to any covenant that has preceded it; his priesthood is better than Levi's; the sacrifice he offered is superior to those offered under the Mosaic code; and in fact, the very purpose of antecedent revelation was to anticipate him and point to him and to all the blessings he has brought with him. This theme of the supremacy of Christ is not the stuff of an abstract essay; its purpose is repeatedly disclosed by the parenetic passages (2:1-4; 3:7-4:11; 4:14-16; 5:11-6:12; 10:19-39; 12:1-13:17) designed to warn the readers not to turn back from the Christian faith to the forms of piety they once knew.

IV. Location of the Recipients

A. Many ancient and some modern commentators think the recipients lived in Palestine, perhaps even in Jerusalem. That conclusion is based on the repeated references to the Jewish cultus in Hebrews, but several things cut against that conclusion.

1. The letter is written in polished Greek, and none the O. T. quotations and allusions clearly depend on Hebrew or Aramaic. As Moo and Carson state (p. 608), "from this we must conclude either that the author knew no Semitic tongue or that his readers, if in Jerusalem, were all expatriates, Greek speakers choosing to live in Jerusalem or the surrounding area."

2. There were countless Jews who did not live in Palestine but who looked to the cultus in Jerusalem for cleansing and for a secure relationship with God, so the references to the cultus do not really support Jerusalem as a destination.

B. Most modern commentators believe the recipients lived in or near Rome. They base that mainly on three pieces of evidence.

1. The statement in 13:24 that "those from Italy send you greetings" is ambiguous in that it could refer either to Italian Christians who had left their native land and were sending greetings home or to Christians who were in Italy with the author and were sending greetings to those to whom the letter was being sent. However, some conclude from the phrase "from Italy" in Acts 18:2 that the former is the more likely meaning.

2. Hebrews is the only N. T. document that refers to the leaders of the church by the Greek term *hegoumenoi* (13:7, 17, 24; translated "leaders"). Outside the N. T. this designation for church leadership occurs in two early Christian documents, *1 Clement* and *The Shepherd of Hermas*, both of which were associated with the church in Rome.

3. *First Clement*, which was written from Rome near the end of the first century, shows familiarity with and even direct reference to Hebrews (esp. *1 Clement* 36:1-6). So the earliest evidence of Hebrews in the church ties it to Rome.

V. The Date

A. First, there is good reason for believing Hebrews was written before A.D. 70. The author is stressing the obsolescence of the old covenant and its sacrificial system in light of the new covenant instituted by Christ. If those sacrifices were no longer being offered in the temple (which sacrifices were in fundamental continuity with those established for the tabernacle) because the temple had been destroyed, it seems certain the author would have pointed this out. In addition, if the sacrifices no longer were being offered, it seems unlikely the author would have written in 10:1-2 that the law-covenant "can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. Otherwise, would they not have stopped being offered?" (Carson and Moo, 607).

B. If the Roman destination is accurate, the date of the writing reasonably can be narrowed to the mid-60s A.D. This is based on the fact (1) the recipients had been Christians long enough that their immaturity was unreasonable (5:11-6:3), (2) they had faced and persevered in a time of serious persecution in the past (10:32-34), and (3) they had yet to suffer martyrdom for the faith (12:4) but were now facing a more severe time of trial (11:35-12:3; 12:7; 13:3, 12-13) (Guthrie, 22). Guthrie (p. 22-23) writes:

[T]he situation indicated by the data above suggests Hebrews was written in the mid-60s A.D., just prior to the extreme persecution of the Roman church under Nero. At this point the Roman church had been in existence for about three decades. The conflict with the Jews and the government in A.D. 49, which led to the expulsion by Claudius, would account for the earlier time of testing experienced by this community (10:32-39). Also, Nero's rising threat to the church accounts for the fear of death and the waning of commitment indicated in Hebrews.

C. How does this square with the likely makeup of the Roman church?

1. The most likely scenario for the founding of the church in Rome is that Jews, who were converted on the day of Pentecost in Jerusalem (Acts 2:10), brought their faith in Jesus back with them to their home synagogues.

2. When Paul wrote Romans around A.D. 57, there were both Jewish and Gentile elements in the church, but it seems the Gentile Christians were in a majority large enough to justify Paul including the Christian community in Rome within the sphere of those Gentiles to whom his apostleship was especially directed (1:5-6, 13). The church probably had shifted to a predominantly Gentile complexion through the conversion of "God-fearers" (Gentiles who were interested in Judaism and attended the synagogue without becoming Jews) and through Claudius's expulsion of Jews from Rome in A.D. 49. Roman authorities would not have distinguished between Jews and Jewish Christians.

3. As with similar expulsions of specific groups from Rome, this one did not stay in force long. Soon after Claudius's death in A.D. 54, Jews, like Priscilla and Aquila (16:3), were able to return.

4. If Hebrews was written in the mid-60's, the Jewish population in the Roman church could have increased, but it's also quite possible that it was written to a segment of the Roman church, perhaps one or more predominantly Jewish house churches. Paul refers to several house churches in Romans 16.

VI. Genre

A. Hebrews is not like a typical letter of the first century in that it begins without a salutation and does not name the writer and the addressees. On the other hand, it concludes in a typical letter fashion, with a benediction, some personal remarks, and a final farewell (13:20-25).

B. Many are convinced that Hebrews is essentially a sermon in written form that was sent as a letter. It is as though the author was preaching the letter in person to the recipients. As William Lane states (lxxiv):

The writer skillfully conveys the impression that he is present with the assembled group and is actually delivering the sermon he has prepared. Until the postscript (13:22-25), he studiously avoids any reference to actions like writing or reading that would tend to emphasize the distance that separates him from the group he is addressing. Instead he stresses the actions of speaking and listening, which are appropriate to persons in conversation, and identifies himself with this audience in a direct way.

VII. The Author

A. Though Hebrews nowhere names its author, by the second century the Eastern church held that Paul had written it. The Western church resisted that conclusion until the latter half of the fourth century, when Jerome and Augustine shifted the opinion. That long resistance to Pauline authorship may reflect knowledge in the Roman church, as the original recipients of the letter, that Paul did not write it. The notion of Pauline authorship held sway until the Reformation when countless ancient traditions were reexamined.

B. Virtually no scholars today argue that Paul wrote Hebrews. Beyond the differences in vocabulary, Greek style, and rhetoric, the fact there is no self-identifying salutation at the beginning of the letter is very hard to square with Pauline authorship. But most importantly, it's very hard to believe that the Paul who wrote Gal. 1:11-12 would identify himself as one of those who heard the gospel, not from the Lord, but from those who heard him (2:3).

C. Many have been proposed as the author of Hebrews, but the bottom line is that we do not know who wrote it. He (note masculine participle in 11:32) was a dynamic preacher, highly educated, and knowledgeable about the Old Testament and its interpretation, but who best fits that description in the early church remains a guess. Martin Luther's claim that Apollos wrote it is perhaps the most reasonable suggestion.

VIII. Fictitious Portrayal of Setting – George Guthrie portrays the setting behind the book of Hebrews through a fictitious account of a young man named Antonius (p. 17-18; also online). I think his account really brings the situation home, so here is a lengthy excerpt:

Antonius sat alone in a deteriorating second-story apartment located in a slum on the slope of the Esquiline hill in Rome. . . .

That morning his employer, a rough, burly fellow named Brutus, once again turned from the task of pricing fruits and vegetables to ridicule this young Christian. . . . Antonius cringed against the man's emotional blows, wishing he could strike back out of his hurt and embarrassment. . . . Yet, he bit his lip, nursed his wounded pride, and again asked the Lord's forgiveness for his thoughts.

Persecution of the church in Rome had yet to result in martyrdom, but since the expulsion of Jews under the Emperor Claudius, Christians had continued to be harassed to various degrees by both Jews and pagans. Upon the expulsion some had suffered imprisonment, beatings, and the seizure of their properties. That was almost fifteen years ago now. Antonius had not been part of the Christian church at that time but had heard about the conflict. In fact his own grandfather, ruler of the Synagogue . . . , had been one of the most outspoken opponents of the Christians. When at seventeen Antonius converted to Christianity, the old man almost died, declaring Antonius dead in a shouting match that ended in tears and a tattered relationship.

In recent months, abuse of the church had escalated with the amused approval of the emperor himself, and now emotional fatigue was taking its toll. Footsteps in the hall, a scream in the night, meaningless events that, nevertheless, set Antonius's heart racing. He had been told the cost of following the Messiah, but somehow his experience was different than he expected. In the beginning he thought his joy would never be broken, that he would always feel the presence of God. He had been taught that the Lord, the righteous Judge, would vindicate his new covenant people. Did not the Scriptures, speaking of the Messiah, say that God had put "all things in subjection under his feet?" But the church had taken a great beating lately, and members of its various house-groups had become discouraged and were questioning whether Christ was really in control. In their hearts they wondered if God had closed his ears against their cries for relief. Some, in their disillusionment, doubted and left the church altogether.

Antonius Bardavid remembered the traditions of the synagogue and the support of the Jewish community, the joy of the festivals, and the solemn celebrations of the Jewish calendar. He appreciated the fellowship of Christ's community, but genuinely missed the traditions of his ancestors – and he missed members of his family. He watched them from a distance as they walked together to market by the Tiber River. Some of them still would not speak to him and passed him on the street as they would a Gentile. . . .

To make matters worse he was one of the poorer members of the church. When Antonius became a Christian, he lost his job as a tailor's apprentice in the Jewish quarter. He now spent his days sorting rotting produce, sweeping the floor, swatting flies, and receiving orders from obnoxious Roman slaves shipping for rich mistresses. . . . To be poor and a Christian invited double portions of ridicule.

Antonius had missed the weekly meal and worship for the past two weeks, and his heart had cooled somewhat toward the little house-group.

A spiritual itch in the back of his spirit warned him, cautioning him concerning his loss of perspective, yet, in recent days he had begun to snuff such thoughts from his mind as quickly as they came. Antonius's bitterness over his current circumstances was growing and slowly obscuring the Truth.

That night the believers were to meet for worship and encouragement. Rumor had it the leaders had received a document from back east somewhere. Although discouraged and tempted to skip the meeting again, Antonius's curiosity was aroused, and he decided to travel the short distance to the neighborhood house at which the fellowship was to meet. Entering the gathering room, he spoke greetings to several friends, who also looked tired from the day's work. The hostess offered something to drink and friendly banter, but dejection hung like a cloud over the room. When the meal was finished, the group's leader, a good and godly man of almost seventy years, finally arrived. Joseph was a bit out of breath, having come from a meeting with the other leaders half way across the city. He was visibly moved as he stood smiling before the group of about twenty, his hands shaking slightly from advancing age. After a few words of introduction Joseph took a deep breath and explained he had talked the other leaders into allowing his group the first reading of the scroll. With a twinkle in his eye the elder said, "I believe you will find this quite relevant." He unrolled the first part of the parchment and began reading with vigor: "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son. . . ."

IX. Structure and Argument of the Letter

A. There is no consensus regarding the development and structure of the argument in Hebrews. Different scholars outline the book different ways.

B. George Guthrie's doctoral dissertation was on the structure of Hebrews, and that dissertation was published as a monograph in 1994. In 1998 he applied his proposed structure in his commentary. Guthrie's analysis has been well received. For example, William Lane devoted an addendum to it in his commentary, and Carson and Moo state in their 2005 book *An Introduction to the New Testament* (p. 598):

Perhaps the most detailed and consistent outline is that of Guthrie. After surveying many other proposals, he deploys the tools of discourse analysis (= text-linguistics) to draw attention to the complex interplay of exposition and exhortation that runs through this document. His monograph is nuanced and allows for subtleties such as overlaps. In a later commentary he works out his proposal in believable and practical terms.

C. Guthrie sees Hebrews as switching back and forth between expounding on the person and work of the Son of God and exhorting the congregation to a positive response. The exhortations are interspersed in the exposition. The exposition and exhortation work together to challenge the recipients to endure in their commitment to Christ. Guthrie writes (p. 30):

In the hortatory sections he offers powerful warnings, challenges, examples, and reminders of God's faithfulness to his promises, all based on God's word. He lays a solid foundation for his exhortation with a thorough exposition on the Son of God. The expository and hortatory sections in Hebrews overlap in the relationship of the hearers, to whom God has spoken his powerful word, with the Son, of whom and to whom God has also made proclamations. The ultimate bases for endurance, therefore, are their new-covenant relationship with God's superior Son and an ongoing openness to God's Word. In other words, one's endurance ultimately will depend on the health of one's relationship to Christ and faithful obedience to the Word.

D. The study below follows Guthrie's outline but not always the format of that outline.

Exposition

I. Introduction: God Has Spoken to Us in a Son (1:1-4)

Having long ago spoken to the fathers many times and in many ways by the prophets, ²in these last days God spoke to us by [the] Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom also he made the universe; ³who being the radiance of the Glory and [the] exact representation of his nature, and sustaining all things by the word of his power, after providing purification of the sins sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven, ⁴having become as much greater than the angels as the name he has inherited [is] superior to theirs.

A. The climax of divine communication (1:1-2a)

1. Throughout Old Testament history, God spoke to the Israelites through various forms of prophetic communication. He used not only straightforward speech but also parables, allegories, symbolic actions, and recounted visions. But his final, ultimate revelation was given in the first century in and by his Son, Jesus Christ. He is the climax of divine communication, the one in whom the piecemeal and diverse revelations of the Old Testament come together and find their fulfillment.

2. The communication given by God in and by his Son was given in "these last days" in that Jesus' coming, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension and pouring out of the Spirit, that complex of events, was the beginning of the last days.

a. For example, Peter in Acts 2:17 identifies the outpouring of the Spirit as an event of the "last days," and in 2 Tim. 3:1-5 Paul describes how people will be in the "last days" and then commands Timothy to avoid such people. See also, Jas. 5:3 and 2 Pet. 3:3.

b. As Douglas Moo states in *The Letter of James*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 224:

With the death and resurrection of Jesus and pouring out of the Spirit, the "last days" have been inaugurated. This final age of salvation will find its climax in the return of Christ in glory. But – and here is the crucial point – the length of the age is unknown. Not even Jesus knew how long the "last days" would last (cf. Mark 13:32). What this means is that the return of Christ, as the next event in the salvation-historical timetable, is, from the time of the early church to our own day, "near," or "imminent." Every generation of Christians lives (or should live!) with the consciousness that the *parousia* could occur at any time and that one needs to make decisions and choose values based on that realization.

c. John Stott puts it like this in *Romans* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994) 352:

[W]hat the apostles did know is that the kingdom of God came with Jesus, that the decisive salvation events which established it (his death, resurrection, exaltation and gift of the Spirit) had already taken place, and that God had nothing on his calendar before the *parousia*. It would be the next and the culminating event. So they were, and we are, living in "the last days." It is in this sense that Christ is coming "soon" (16:20). We must be watchful and alert, because we do not know the time.

B. The person, work, and status of the Son (1:2b-4)

1. God appointed the Son heir of all things.

a. This is an indication of the Son's greatness and glory; God appointed him heir of all things. This appointment is evident in the fact he took possession of all things, so to speak, when God exalted him to a position of universal authority, made him Lord of all, following his selfless sacrifice for humanity (see Acts 2:33, 36; 1 Cor. 15:27; Phil. 2:9-11; Col. 1:15).

b. Craig Koester writes in *Hebrews*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 2001) 177-178:

A ruler would designate the son as his heir so that when the ruler died his son would govern the kingdom. The peculiarity here is that God – the

testator – does not die; instead, the Son enters into his inheritance and kingly power through his own death and exaltation (Spicq; Vanhoye, *Situation*, 62-64). The Son's inheritance of "all things" through his resurrection and exaltation points to the fulfillment of God's promise that the heir of David's throne would receive the nations as his "inheritance" (Ps. 2:8; cf. 89:27; Rom. 4:13).

2. God made the universe through the Son. God the Son, who became the God-man Jesus Christ, was God the Father's agent in the creation of the universe. See also, Heb. 1:10; Jn. 1:3; 1 Cor. 8:6; Col. 1:16. Jesus is not one of many religious teachers in human history; he is the creator of the universe!

3. The Son is the radiance of the Glory and [the] exact representation of his nature.

a. The "Glory" is a way of referring to God because the word often is used in the O. T. to refer to the luminous manifestation of his being (e.g., Ex. 16:7, 33:18; Isa. 40:5). In saying the Son is the "radiance" of the Glory the writer is suggesting that the Son is so intimately associated with God the Father that to see the Son is to see the Father's glory and presence (e.g., Jn. 14:9).

b. Put another way, the Son is the exact representation of the Father's nature. In seeing the Son one is seeing God expressed in flesh.

4. The Son sustains all things by the word of his power, or more colloquially, by his powerful word. The Son not only was the Father's agent in the creation of the universe; he sustains or governs it by his word. Apart from God, and more specifically apart from Jesus the Son, the cosmos would disintegrate. He's that powerful and significant. As Paul says in Col. 1:17, "in him [Jesus] all things hold together."

5. The Son provided purification for sins. In the sacrifice of himself on the cross, Jesus provided purification for humanity's sins. As the Apostle John says in 1 Jn. 1:7, "the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin." In v. 9 John says that Jesus "cleanses us from all unrighteousness."

6. After providing purification for sins, the Son sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.

a. This is a metaphorical reference, drawn from Psalm 109:1 LXX (110:1 MT), to the exaltation and supremacy of Christ. See also, Acts 2:22-26, 5:30-31; Rom. 8:34; Eph. 1:20; Col. 3:1; Heb. 8:1, 10:12, 12:2; 1 Pet. 3:21b-22; Rev. 3:21, 12:5.

b. The fact Jesus *sat down* (sometimes called his "session") at God's right hand signifies that his atoning work is complete and final. As Heb. 10:12-13 indicates, he now reigns while he waits "for the complete subjugation of every power that

resists the gracious redemptive purposes of God." William Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word Books, 1999) 267. It also connotes his authority. As Craig Koester notes (p. 179), "those who approached the throne normally stood while the ruler remained seated."

7. The Son became as much greater than the angels as the name he has inherited [is] superior to theirs.

a. There is a sense in which Jesus was for a little while lower than the angels (2:9). He not only became a human in humble circumstances; he subjected himself to sinful human authority that abused, humiliated, and ultimately crucified him, which was the most shameful death of the ancient world. He is in nature God, but he lowered himself even to the point of dying on a cross and following that selfless service was exalted to the greatest height (Phil. 2:5-11). Donald Hagner states in *Hebrews*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1990) 26:

So he became . . . superior to the angels describes the result of the reference in the preceding clause to Christ's exaltation; it thus refers not to the character of the Son from the beginning, but to the last clause of verse 3, which refers to the ascension of Christ. In this exaltation to the right hand of the Father, the Son comes to hold a position that indeed was always his by virtue of his identity, but which was set aside during the incarnation.

b. Though many believe that the name Jesus inherited that is superior to the name of angels is the name "Son," I think Luke Timothy Johnson probably is correct in concluding that it is the name "Lord" (*Hebrews*, New Testament Library [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2006] 73). See also, Guthrie, 50. It seems pretty clear that the name in Phil. 2:9 that is above every name is the name "Lord," and the statement here that the name was "inherited" points back to 1:2, which is a reference to Jesus' exaltation. In 1:8 and 1:10, the names "God" and "Lord" are applied to the Son.