

An Exposition of Hebrews

Lesson #1 Introduction – An Exposition of Hebrews³⁴⁰¹

I. Introduction

The grand theme of the book of Hebrews is the superiority of Christ, particularly towards and amongst the Hebrew people. This book is a theological apologetic outreaching to God's chosen people, the Jews.

The Jewish people largely rejected Christ and played a key role in His crucifixion, which was necessary for Christ to become the redeemer to the whole world, but firstly to the Jews themselves.

John 11:49-51 *But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all, ⁵⁰nor do you take into account that it is expedient for you that one man die for the people, and that the whole nation not perish." ⁵¹Now he did not say this on his own initiative, but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus was going to die for the nation, ⁵²and not for the nation only, but in order that He might also gather together into one the children of God who are scattered abroad. ⁵³So from that day on they planned together to kill Him.*

"Hebrews is not for the theologically faint of heart. Hebrews is for those whose endurance will be richly rewarded with a remarkable portrait of Christ. Let us treasure Him, our Creator and Redeemer. He is worthy, for He is supreme over all things." **Albert Mohler Jr.;** *Christ-Centered Exposition of Hebrews*; p. 12

"The first major error made in approaching the Old Testament comes down to reading it as if it is a book that does not belong to the church. This way of reading the Bible assumes that the Old Testament belongs to the Jews, whereas the New Testament belongs to the Church. - - - Marcion, a famous heretic in the days of the early church, epitomized the worst form of this type of Old Testament interpretation. He posited that the God of the Old Testament was not the same as the God of the New Testament. He ultimately tried to do away with the Old Testament and everything in the New Testament that was in any way favorable toward Judaism. The early church quickly smelled the scent of heresy in Marcion's teachings - the stench of deadly error. Many of Marcion's heresies, however, are perpetrated in modern liberal theology, which asserts that the Old Testament portrait of God is crude and rudimentary. Regrettably, this way of thinking often sinks into certain sections of evangelical churches as well."

Albert Mohler, Jr.; *Christ Centered Exposition of Hebrews*; p. 13

Note: The study of Hebrews is clearly a study which synthesizes the Old and New Testaments. rrw

Note: Throughout this course we will primarily use the New American Standard Bible Updated (NASU) translation of Scripture unless otherwise indicated.

II. Authorship

"The writer of this letter does not identify himself, but was obviously well known to the original recipients. Though for some 1,200 years (from c. a.d. 400 to 1600) the book was commonly called 'The Epistle of Paul to the Hebrews,' there was no agreement in the earliest centuries regarding its authorship. Since the Reformation it has been widely recognized that Paul could not have been the writer. There is no disharmony between the teaching of Hebrews and that of Paul's letters, but the specific emphases and writing styles are markedly different. Contrary to Paul's usual practice, the author of Hebrews nowhere identifies himself in the letter -- except to indicate that he was a man (see note on [11:32](#)). Moreover, the statement "This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him" ([2:3](#)), indicates that the author had neither been with Jesus during his earthly ministry nor received special revelation directly from the risen Lord, as had Paul ([Gal 1:11-12](#)).

The earliest suggestion of authorship is found in Tertullian's *De Pudicitia*, 20 (c. 200), in which he quotes from 'an epistle to the Hebrews under the name of Barnabas.' From the letter itself it is clear that the writer must have had authority in the apostolic church and was an intellectual Hebrew Christian well versed in the OT. Barnabas meets these requirements. He was a Jew of the priestly tribe of Levi ([Ac 4:36](#)) who became a close friend of Paul after the latter's conversion. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the church at Antioch commissioned Barnabas and Paul for the work of evangelism and sent them off on the first missionary journey ([Ac 13:1-4](#)).

The other leading candidate for authorship is Apollos, whose name was first suggested by Martin Luther and who is favored by many interpreters today. Apollos, an Alexandrian by birth, was also a Jewish Christian with notable intellectual and oratorical abilities. Luke tells us that 'he was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures' ([Ac 18:24](#)). We also know that Apollos was associated with Paul in the early years of the church in Corinth ([1Co 1:12](#); [3:4-6,22](#)).

One thing is evident: The author was a master of the Greek language of his day, and he was thoroughly acquainted with the pre-Christian Greek translation of the OT (the Septuagint), which he regularly quotes."
from: <https://www.biblestudytools.com/hebrews/>

III. Recipients

"A proper interpretation of this epistle (Hebrews) requires the recognition that it addresses 3 distinct groups of Jews: 1) believers; 2) unbelievers who were intellectually convinced of the gospel; and 3) unbelievers who were attracted by the gospel and the person of Christ but who had reached no final conviction about Him. Failure to acknowledge these groups leads to interpretations inconsistent with the rest of Scripture."

from John **MacArthur**; **Study Bible**; *Introduction to Hebrews under "Interpretive Challenges"*; p. 1864. See the rest of this section for fuller details.

Evidence of this thesis is found in the word usage found throughout this book, namely that:

1st The word "Church" (*ἐκκλησία* - *ekklesia* (Str.1577) 114x; meaning to call out as referring to the New Testament assembly of called out believers, is used only once in this book. In this occurrence it is referring not to a local assembly, but of the church of believers in Christ in heaven. (Heb 12:23)

It is used one other time in an Old Testament quotation from Ps 22:22 occurring in Heb 2:12 referring to the Hebrew assembly called out as the Israelite people.

2nd The word "Saint" (*ἅγιος* - *hagois* (Str. 40) 233x; / 45x referring to the people of God only occurs 2x in the book of Hebrews. Paul deeply associated this word when referring to believers (redeemed) in Christ. The meaning refers to those who name the name of Christ and identify with Him as Lord. This word only occurs twice in the book of Hebrews. (Heb 6:10 & 13:24 as part of the benediction)

3rd The word "Christian" (*Χριστός* - *Christos* (Str. 5574) 529x; meaning Messiah, anointed one, Christ) does not occur in the book of Hebrews. Although *Christos* occurs 529x in the New Testament, only 2 of those occurrences are translated as "Christian" ([Ac 26:28](#) & [1 Pet 4:16](#)) which makes this 3rd point a weak argument.

IV. Date and Form of Writing

A. Date:

Hebrews must have been written before the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in A.D. 70 because: (1) If it had been written after this date, the author surely would have mentioned the temple's destruction and the end of the Jewish sacrificial system; and (2) the author consistently uses the Greek

present tense when speaking of the temple and the priestly activities connected with it (see [5:1-3](#); [7:23,27](#); [8:3-5](#); [9:6-9,13,25](#); [10:1,3-4,8,11](#); [13:10-11](#)).

from: <https://www.biblestudytools.com/hebrews/>

Hebrews was probably written close to 70 A.D. (about 68 – 69 AD), perhaps as early as 65 A.D.

B. Form of Writing:

“Hebrews is commonly referred to as a letter, though it does not have the typical form of a letter. It ends like a letter ([13:22-25](#)) but begins more like an essay or sermon ([1:1-4](#)). The author does not identify himself or those addressed, which letter writers normally did. And he offers no manner of greeting, such as is usually found at the beginning of ancient letters. Rather, he begins with a magnificent statement about Jesus Christ. He calls his work a "word of exhortation" ([13:22](#)), the conventional designation given a sermon in a synagogue service (see [Ac 13:15](#), where "message of encouragement" translates the same Greek words as "word of exhortation"). Like a sermon, Hebrews is full of encouragement, exhortations and stern warnings. It is likely that the author used sermonic materials and sent them out in a modified letter form.”

from: <https://www.biblestudytools.com/hebrews/>

V. Canonicity

The word “Canon” means a standard by which things are measured or evaluated. The Canon of Scripture is that standard by which individual books are evaluated to be included in the Holy Scriptures.

Here we will consider only the 27 books of the New Testament.

“The early church councils applied several basic standards in recognizing whether a book was inspired.

Tests of Canonicity:

1st Is it authoritative (“Thus saith the Lord”)?

2nd Is it prophetic (“a man of God” [2 Peter 1:20](#))?

- A book in the Bible must have the authority of a spiritual leader of Israel (O.T. – prophet, king, judge, scribe) or an apostle of the church (N.T. – It must be based on the testimony of an original apostle.). [Based on apostolic writing or concurrence.]

3rd Is it authentic (consistent with other revelation of truth)? [internal Biblical consistency]

4th Is it dynamic – demonstrating God’s life-changing power (Hebrew 4:12)?

5th Is it received (accepted and used by believers – [1 Thessalonians 2:13](#))?”

[Acceptance by the early churches.]

<https://bible.org/seriespage/6-canonicity>

(Norman L. Geisler & William Nix, A General Introduction To The Bible. pp. 137-144).

Apostolic Authority for the New Testament Books:

NT Books Written by **Apostles**:

Matthew’s Gospel	by Matthew	1
John’s Gospel	by John	1
Paul’s Epistles	by Paul (Romans, I & II Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, I & II Thessalonians, I & II Timothy, Titus, Philemon)	13
James Epistle	by James, the half-brother of Jesus	1
Peter’s Epistles	by Peter I & II Peter	2
John’s Epistles	by John (I, II, & III John & Revelation)	4
		<hr/>
		22

NT Books Not Written by Apostles:

Mark’s Gospel	by Mark under Peter’s authority	1
Luke’s Gospel	by Luke under Paul’s authority	1

Acts of the Apostles	by Luke under Paul's authority	1
Hebrews	Writer unknown (perhaps Apollos or Barnabas???)	1
Jude	by Jude, the half brother of Jesus, probably under authority of James or Peter.	<u>1</u>
		5

22 + 5 = 27 NT books

Since we do not know who the author of Hebrews is, it is hard to accept its canonicity in accordance with the 2nd rule above. Therefore:

“The acceptance of Hebrews as canonical was urged by many in the church on the basis of an assumed Pauline authorship. But from very early times there were others who rejected Pauline authorship in favor of one or another of several different suggestions. Origen, who died about A.D. 254, mentions various theories of authorship and conclude, ‘But who actually wrote the epistle, only God knows.’ Thus, the acceptance of Hebrews as canonical was not entirely due to belief in Pauline authorship. Rather, the intrinsic qualities of the book itself must have finally convinced early readers, as they continue to convince believers today, that whoever its human author may have been, its ultimate author can only have been God himself. The majestic glory of Christ shines forth from the pages of the epistle to the Hebrews so brightly that no believer who reads it seriously should even want to question its place in the canon.

This brings us to the heart of the question of canonicity. For a book to belong in the canon, it is absolutely necessary that the book have divine authorship. If the words of the book are God's words (through human authors), and if the early church, under the direction of the apostles, preserved the book as part of Scripture, then the book belongs in the canon. - - -

In other cases, and in some geographical areas, the church simply had to decide whether it heard the voice of God himself speaking in the words of these writings. In these cases, the words of these books would have been self-attesting; that is, the words would have borne witness to their own divine authorship as Christians read them. This seems to have been the case with Hebrews.”

Wayne Grudem; *Systematic Theology*; p. 62 - 63

VI. Thematic Pattern

“Hebrews 1:1 begins with the words "long ago." Just like Genesis and the Gospel of John, Hebrews opens with a chronological reference taking readers back to the beginning of creation. This is a remarkable feature of Hebrews, one that sets a trajectory for how the book needs to be interpreted. These introductory verses set the context for how the author of Hebrews will explain the gospel. It is significant that he begins his retelling of the gospel not with Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, but with the creation narrative and the covenants in the Old Testament. Why is this so weighty? Because the Holy Spirit through the author of Hebrews, is placing the story of Christ within the context of God's entire redemptive plan - a redemptive plan that spans from creation to new creation. The person and work of Christ can only be rightly understood when given proper place at the center of history's metanarrative. The story of God's saving work in Jesus Christ begins not just during the age of the Roman Empire but "long ago" in the narratives of the Old Testament. The account of God's saving work in Jesus Christ begins at the very beginning of creation.” **Albert Mohler Jr.;** *Christ-Centered Exposition of Hebrews*; p. 7

- A. The Superiority of Jesus Christ's Person (1:1-4:13)
- B. The Superiority of Jesus Christ's Priesthood (4:14-7:28)
- C. The Superiority of Jesus Christ's Priestly Ministry (8:1-10:18)

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

E. The superiority of Christian Behavior (13:1-21)

Main Headings: Taken from MacArthur Study Bible; p.1865

Important Quotations

Orthodox Christians believe that the Holy Spirit inspired the writings of the New Testament books and controlled the historical process of canonical selection. However, Protestant evangelicals insist that the church only recognized the canon of Scripture. The church did not and, in fact, could not stand above Scripture and authoritatively define or create the canon.

[Bruce] Milne concludes, "In the final analysis only God can be an adequate witness to himself." [from Know the Truth; p. 33] In other words, Scripture is the Word of God because the Holy Spirit says so, not because the church says so. Each canonical book of Scripture was inspired the day it was written. It didn't somehow become inspired the day the church recognized it as canonical.

Kenneth Samples; *A World of Difference*; p. 115

Of old, God complained to an apostate Israel, "Thou thoughtest that I was altogether as thyself" (Ps 50:21). Such must now be His indictment against an apostate Christendom. Men imagine that the Most High is moved by sentiment, rather than actuated by principle. They suppose that His omnipotency is such an idle fiction that Satan is thwarting His designs on every side. They think that if He has formed any plan or purpose at all, then it must be like theirs, constantly subject to change. They openly declare that whatever power He possesses must be restricted, lest He invade the citadel of man's "free will" and reduce him to a "machine". They lower the all-efficacious Atonement, which has actually redeemed everyone for whom it was made, to a mere "remedy", which sin-sick souls may use if they feel disposed to; and they enervate the invincible work of the Holy Spirit to an "offer" of the Gospel which sinners may accept or reject as they please. **A. W Pink;** *The Attributes of God*; p.36

I find that many people who are evangelical and orthodox see truth just as true to the dogmas, or to be true to what the Bible says. Nobody stands more for the full inspiration of Scripture than I, but this is not the end of truth as Christianity is presented, as the Bible presents itself. The truth of Christianity is that it is true to what is there. You can go to the end of the world and you never need be afraid, like the ancients, that you will fall off the end and the dragons will eat you up. You can carry out your intellectual discussion to the end of the discussion because Christianity is not only true to the dogmas, it is not only true to what God has said in the Bible, but it is also true to what is there, and you will never fall off the end of the world! **Francis A. Schaeffer;** *Trilogy - He Is There and He Is Not Silent*; p. 289