

Introduction

Historical background

The writer said that he and those to whom he wrote had come to faith in Jesus Christ through the preaching of others who had heard Jesus (2:3-4). Apparently those preachers had since died (13:7). The original readers had been Christians for an extended period of time (5:12). So probably the earliest possible date of composition was about A.D. 60.

Some scholars believe that the book must have been written before A.D. 70 since the writer spoke of the sacrifices as being offered when he wrote (7:27-28; 8:3-5; 9:7-8, 25; 10:1-3, 8; 13:10-11). However, the writer showed no interest in the temple but spoke of the sacrifices as the Israelites offered them when the tabernacle stood. He evidently used the present tense to give these reference a timeless quality rather than indicating that temple worship was still in practice. Nevertheless a date of composition before A.D. 70 seems probable.¹

“The best argument for the supersession of the old covenant would have been the destruction of the Temple.”²

The reference to Timothy’s release from imprisonment (13:23) appears to date the book later in the life of that outstanding man.³ No other New Testament writer mentioned his imprisonment. The imprisonment of Christians seems to have been a well-known fact of life (10:34; 13:3). This was true after Nero launched an empire-wide persecution in A.D. 64. All of these factors when taken together seem to point to a writing date near A.D. 68-69.

As to authorship, most students of this subject are not dogmatic or even certain for good reason.⁴ As early as Origen, the Alexandrian church father who died about A.D. 255, no one knew who the writer was for sure. After careful study of the authorship of Hebrews, Origen wrote, “But who it was that really

¹ 1. William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, pp. lxii-lxvi; Andrew H. Trotter Jr., *Interpreting the Epistle to the Hebrews*, pp. 27-38.

² 2. H. W. Montefiore, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, p. 3.

³ 3. Almost all scholars believe that the Timothy referred to in Hebrews is the same one named elsewhere in the New Testament.

⁴ 4. See Trotter, pp. 39-57, for a good discussion.

wrote the epistle, God only knows.”⁵

“The language of the Epistle is both in vocabulary and style purer and more vigorous than that of any other book of the New Testament.

“... The vocabulary is singularly copious. It includes a large number of words which are not found elsewhere in the apostolic writings, very many of which occur in this book only among the Greek Scriptures ...”⁶

“All that can be said with certainty is that Hebrews was composed by a creative theologian who was well trained in the exposition of the Greek Scriptures. . . . He was surely a hellenistic Jewish-Christian.”⁷

Commentators have made cases for the writer being Paul, Apollos, Barnabas, Luke, Peter, Jude, Stephen, Silvanus (Silas), Epaphras (Epaphroditus), Philip the Evangelist, Priscilla, Mary the mother of Jesus, Clement of Rome, Aristion, and others.⁸ None of these suggestions has found enthusiastic general reception for various reasons. Probably we should be content to share Origen’s agnosticism on this question and look forward to getting the answer in heaven.⁹

The early Christians originally accepted all the New Testament books as inspired by God because they contained apostolic teaching. For this reason the writer was probably either an apostle or a close associate of at least one of the apostles (cf. 13:23).

The original recipients of the epistle are also unknown. The title “The Epistle to the Hebrews” implies that they were Jewish Christians. This title is ancient and is probably a safe guide to the identity of the first readers. References in the epistle also suggest that the original readers were mainly Jewish. The writer assumed that they were very familiar with the institutions of Judaism. The

⁵5. *The Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius Pamphilus*, p. 247.

⁶6. Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, p. xlv. See Trotter, pp. 117–43.

⁷7. Lane, p. xlix.

⁸8. However the masculine participle *diegoumenon* (“to tell”), which refers to the writer in 11:32, would seem to rule out a female.

⁹9. See Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, pp. 3–21.

warnings against turning away from Jesus Christ back to the Old Covenant also imply this identity. Other indications are the emphasis on the superior priesthood of Jesus and the many appeals to the authority of the Hebrew Scriptures. However the brand of Judaism in view seems to have been Hellenistic rather than Palestinian.

The reference to the generosity of the readers and their helping other believers (6:10) suggests that the original audience did not live in Palestine. The Palestinian churches had a reputation for needing material assistance rather than for giving it to other Christians (cf. Rom. 15:25-31; 1 Cor. 16:3). Probably they were Jews of the Diaspora therefore. This conclusion has support in the writer's consistent use of the Septuagint Old Testament version. Hellenistic Jews used this translation widely, but Palestinian Jews did not use it as much.¹⁰

In most of the New Testament churches there was a mixture of Jewish and Gentile believers. The appeal of this epistle would certainly have been great to Gentiles tempted to return to paganism as it would have been to Jews facing temptation to return to Judaism. However the writer's primary concern appears to have been that his Jewish readers were failing to appreciate that Christianity is the divinely revealed successor to Judaism. He did not want them to abandon Christianity and return to Judaism.

Probably the letter originally went to a house-church outside Palestine that had a strong Hellenistic Jewish population. This church may have been in or near Galatia in view of conditions that existed there that the Epistle to the Galatians reflects. However they may very well have lived in another area. Many scholars believe that the letter went first to a church in or near Rome.¹¹

In view of 13:24b it has seemed to some scholars that the writer was in Italy when he sent this epistle, perhaps in Rome. However the expression "from Italy" in that verse probably refers to those living outside Italy, such as Priscilla and Aquilla who were Jews forced to leave Rome by Emperor Claudius' edict in A.D. 49 (Acts 18:2).¹² This expression suggests that the writer was not in Italy when he

¹⁰ 10. Arguments for the recipients being Palestinian Jews include their intimate knowledge of the temple ritual and the opportunity they had to escape suffering by returning to the observance of Jewish practices and feasts. See J. Dwight Pentecost, *A Faith That Endures*, pp. 12-13. I think the arguments for their living outside Palestine are stronger.

¹¹ 11. See Lane, pp. lviii-lx, for supporting evidence; and Ellingworth, p. 29.

wrote.

Purpose

Many students of the book have observed that Hebrews is more of a sermon in written form than an epistle in the traditional New Testament sense.¹³ The writer even described it as a “word of exhortation” (13:22). He urged the original readers to persevere in their faith rather than turning from Christianity and returning to Judaism. A note of urgency and pastoral concern permeates the whole letter. This tone comes through especially strongly in the five warning passages and in the encouragements that follow these warnings.

“... the purpose of the writer to the Hebrews is not to give us an interpretation of Old Testament prophecy. . . . Using material not from the prophets but primarily from the Psalms, with other materials added to elaborate the argument, the writer’s goal was to establish the superiority of the gospel in contrast to all that went before, particularly the levitical system. The primary evidence of the supremacy of Christianity is presented in its *finality*. Coming to Christ means final access to God without any barrier.”¹⁴

“... Hebrews is a sermon rooted in actual life. It is addressed to a local gathering of men and women who discovered that they could be penetrated by adverse circumstances over which they exercised no control. It throbs with an awareness of the privilege and the cost of discipleship. It is a sensitive pastoral response to the sagging faith of older and tired individuals who were in danger of relinquishing their Christian commitment. It seeks to strengthen them in the face of a new crisis so that they may stand firm in their faith. It warns them of the judgment of God they would incur if they were to waver in their commitment. Exhortations to covenant fidelity and perseverance are grounded in a fresh under-

¹² 12. See Merrill C. Tenney, “A New Approach to the Book of Hebrews,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 123:491 (July-September 1966):234-35.

¹³ 13. See Lane, pp. lxix-lxxxiv, for an extended discussion of the genre, or Trotter, especially pp. 59-80.

¹⁴ 14. Robert L. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism*, p. 56.

standing of the significance of Jesus and his sacrifice.”¹⁵

Message¹⁶

We could summarize the message of this epistle in the following words. We will only realize our full eternal reward as believers if we appreciate the greatness of Jesus Christ and continue to trust God rather than turning away from Him in this life.

The ultimate goal that the writer had in view was our full eternal reward as believers. I do not believe it was the conversion of the unsaved members of his audience. He addressed his readers consistently as believers. He wrote to encourage Christians to persevere faithfully so we will receive all that God wants to give us at the judgment seat of Christ. Our rewards are at issue in this letter. He did not want us to suffer loss but to enter into our full inheritance, our full rest, our full salvation.

To do this he wrote that we must know one thing and do two things, one positive and one negative.

We must know the greatness of Jesus Christ. In this epistle the writer presented Him as the greatest revelation that God has given mankind. God’s revelation in His Son is superior to all other revelations He has given in three respects.

1. It supersedes all other revelations: God’s revelation through angels (the Mosaic Law), His revelation through humans (the prophets), and His revelation through rituals (the Old Covenant). When Jesus Christ came to reveal God, He brought revelation that superseded what had preceded Him.

2. God’s revelation in His Son is sufficient to meet every basic human need. God spoke through His Son, so the need for a prophet (a revealer of God) no longer exists. He established a new Covenant, so the need for a priest (a mediator for man) no longer exists. Moreover He exalted His Son to His right hand, so the need for a king (a righteous ruler) no longer exists.

3. God’s revelation in His Son insures final victory in every basic sphere. The individual (the human order) attains perfection through the Son. Society (the social order) will experience perfection through the Son. The universe (the

¹⁵ 15. Lane, p. xlvi. See also Ellingworth, pp. 78–80.

¹⁶ 16. Adapted from G. Campbell Morgan, *Living Messages of the Books of the Bible*, 2:2:106–121.

cosmic order) will reach perfection through the Son.

This is what we need to know objectively to do subjectively what is necessary to gain our full reward as believers.

What we must do is continue to trust God. Hebrews places great emphasis on the importance of living by faith. It teaches us three things about faith.

1. Hebrews defines faith. Faith is volitional surrender and obedience to God regardless of appearances. It is not just intellectual conviction. It is the action of the will that expresses intellectual conviction. This epistle regards unbelief as disobedience as does all of Scripture. People in the past who lived by faith made decisions and acted because they believed God in spite of appearances (ch. 11).

2. Hebrews also illustrates faith. It describes faith as doing, as suffering, and as waiting. These are the primary activities of faith that the writer of Hebrews emphasized. They are progressively more difficult. It is harder to suffer persecution for our faith than it is to obey God when obedience does not involve suffering. It is most difficult to keep on trusting God when suffering does not end. Waiting for God to fulfill His promises is hardest of all when our hopes do not materialize (e.g., Christ's return).

3. In addition, Hebrews vindicates faith. It assures us of the ultimate triumph of faith. People in the past who acted in faith achieved. People who suffered for their faith triumphed. People who waited in faith received their reward.

On the positive side we need to continue to trust God to realize our full reward as believers.

What we must not do is turn away from God. This is the negative responsibility that the letter also stresses. If we apostatize, we will lose our full reward. Hebrews teaches us three things about apostasy (as it does about faith).

1. This epistle defines apostasy descriptively. It is the opposite of faith. It consists of disobedience because of appearances (e.g., the 10 spies; cf. Jude). Apostasy for a Christian is turning away from faith having previously embraced faith. An apostate, however, can be a believer or an unbeliever.

2. Hebrews also illustrates apostasy in the same three ways it illustrates faith. Apostasy acts. It involves a deliberate turning away. It also suffers, not now but in the future because of what the apostate loses. It also waits, even

though it lives for the present rather than for the future.

3. Likewise Hebrews condemns apostasy. It assures us of the ultimate tragedy of apostasy. Apostates may achieve what they want in the present, namely success, but they lose what is far more valuable in the future. They may avoid suffering now, but later they will be sorry. They may not want to wait for their reward now, but they will wait forever for it later and never get it.

This is the central message of the epistle. We will only realize our full eternal reward as believers if we appreciate the greatness of Jesus Christ and continue to trust God rather than turning away from Him.

The writer urged his readers to persevere in faith by using two appeals, one negative and one positive.

The first appeal is negative: the warnings. There are five warning passages in Hebrews. Each one warns of the danger of apostasy from a different angle.

1. The first passage (2:1-4) warns of the danger of drifting away from the truth (2:1). It pictures a ship dragging its anchor. The tides of our age can draw us away from our moorings. We need to keep on standing firm in faith (cf. Col. 1:23).

2. The second passage (3:7-19) warns of the danger of disbelief (3:12). Disbelief results in heart hardening (3:13). We need to keep on believing rather than ceasing to believe (cf. Luke 17:3).

3. The third passage (5:11-6:12) warns of the danger of immaturity (5:12). When we do not put truth into practice, we do not just remain in the same spiritual state. We regress. Therefore we need to keep on growing (cf. 2 Pet. 3:18).

4. The fourth passage