

# Introduction to Hebrews

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## Where is it in the Bible?

Hebrews is the nineteenth book in the New Testament between Philemon and James. This puts it between the Pauline epistles (Romans through Philemon) and the catholic or general letters (James through Jude).

## Who wrote it?

This book was included with the Pauline epistles in the ancient Church, but the text itself is anonymous. Relatively early in the history of the church, some recognized that Hebrews had a distinctive style and theology that set it apart from the letters associated with Paul. Other suggestions about the identity of the author have been made, including Barnabas, Apollos, and Priscilla, but none of the arguments is conclusive. "At present, most scholars would agree with the verdict reached more than seventeen hundred years ago by Origen, a prominent teacher of the early church. After investigating the matter, he concluded, 'Who wrote this epistle? Only God knows!'"<sup>1</sup>

## When was it written?

Dating the book of Hebrews is somewhat easier than identifying its author. Clement of Rome knew of it and quoted from it in a letter that was written around 96, so Hebrews had to have been written some time before then. The original recipients seem to have been second-generation believers (2:3) who have been Christians for some time (5:12; 10:32). This has led scholars to suggest that Hebrews was written sometime between 60 and 90.

## What is it about?

One thing that sets Hebrews apart from the Pauline epistles is that there is no salutation identifying the author and the recipients and no later references to their identity. This along with the author's description of the work as a "word of exhortation" (13:22) indicate that this is probably not a letter but a sermon or homily. The purpose is to offer encouragement to dispirited Christians who have lost some of the enthusiasm of their earlier days in the faith, perhaps because of abuse, persecution, or suffering. The author does this by holding up the example of Jesus who has brought them into a new covenant relationship with God. It proclaims the superiority of the Christian faith over all others and encourages perseverance, knowing that God will be faithful.

## How is it structured?

- I. Jesus is Superior to the Angels (1:1-2:18)
  - a. The Supremacy of God's Son (1:1-14)
  - b. Warning Against Neglecting Salvation (2:1-4)
  - c. Jesus and Humanity (2:5-18)
- II. Jesus is Superior to Mosaic Law (3:1-10:18)
  - a. Jesus is Greater than Moses (3:1-6)

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Allen Powell, *Introducing the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 431-432.

- b. Warning Against Unbelief (3:7-4:13)
  - c. The High Priesthood of Jesus (4:14-10:18)
- III. Call to Faith and Endurance (10:19-12:29)
  - a. The Full Assurance of Faith (10:19-39)
  - b. Examples of Faith (11:1-40)
  - c. Running the Race of Faith (12:1-29)
- IV. Concluding Remarks (13:1-25)
  - a. Living as Christians (13:1-19)
  - b. Benediction (13:20-21)
  - c. Final Exhortation and Greetings (13:22-25)

### What are some things to look for?

- **Faith:** The author of Hebrews says faith involves trusting God's promises and being faithful to God. As encouragement, he cites the examples of past heroes of the faith in chapter 11, urging the readers to follow these examples and the example of Jesus and to remain steadfast in spite of troubles and suffering.
- **Jesus as High Priest:** "Hebrews is unique among New Testament writings in its portrayal of Jesus as high priest. As a priest, Jesus makes a sacrifice of atonement for sin, shows compassion toward the weak, and intercedes for people with God (2:17-18; 4:14-5:10; 7:25). Jesus has some similarities to priests such as Aaron and Melchizedek, but Jesus is unique in that he alone serves forever through the power of his resurrection."<sup>2</sup>
- **Old Testament Quotations:** The author frequently quotes, paraphrases, or alludes to the Old Testament. These are from or based on the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, not on the Hebrew texts that were used for our English translations. Christ is seen as fulfilling the Old Testament and, at the same time, the Old Testament provides a framework for understanding what Jesus has done.
- **Picture of Jesus:** Jesus is portrayed as the majestic Son of God who is superior to the angels. He is both fully divine and fully human, and his suffering, death, resurrection, and exaltation give hope to believers. However, almost nothing else is said about Jesus' life and teachings. "It is interesting that when the author reports sayings of Jesus, all the words come from the Old Testament. In Hebrews 2:12-13 Jesus' words come from Psalm 22:22 and Isaiah 8:17-18, and in Hebrews 10:5-7 the words of Jesus are from Psalm 40:6-8."<sup>3</sup>
- **Pilgrimage:** Hebrews presents Christians as a people on a journey. Believers are temporarily on earth travelling through the wilderness to the promised eternal city in a heavenly country.

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<sup>2</sup> Craig R. Koester at <http://www.enterthebible.org/newtestament.aspx?rid=58>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.