

## **Introduction to the Book of Hebrews**

Hebrews is a magnificent New Testament document. It is carefully constructed and beautifully written, theologically profound and powerfully argued. It challenges our understanding of reality and makes us ponder a world in which the unseen is more real, more powerful, and more attractive than that which can be seen and touched and counted.

This letter that wonderfully portrays Jesus as the Son of God, the great high priest, who is both human and divine, the crucified and exalted one, also makes stringent demands on its readers in relation to Christian discipleship. It summons believers, just as it did the first listeners, to unqualified commitment, unflinching perseverance and a willingness to suffer for one's faith.

And this is exactly what I hope this study of Hebrews will produce in our lives as we bow before God in worship, making it possible for the Spirit of God to take the Word of God, so that He might transform us into the people that He would have us to be.

However, though everything that I have just said about Hebrews is true, it is also true that for contemporary readers, such as us, it is one of the most difficult New Testament books to understand, and as a result of this it has often been neglected. But this certainly will not be the case over the next several years as we very systematically and methodically work our way through this very important New Testament document verse by verse.

So, what makes the book of Hebrews, which is so carefully constructed and beautifully written, theologically profound and powerfully argued so difficult to understand? There are a number of different reasons.

First of all, Old Testament quotations and allusions abound while details about Israel's priesthood and sacrificial system dominate much of the book.

Secondly, many of the author's arguments employ typological similarities that are difficult to grasp, for example, between old and new, temporal and eternal, or earthly and heavenly.

Thirdly, although the arguments seem to be based on careful reasoning, they are often detailed and extensive so that it is difficult to see how the author moves from one argument or stage to the next.

Fourthly, there is also the insertion of repeated exhortations that seem to initially at least, to interrupt the overall flow of the discourse.

Fifthly, at a personal level, Christians throughout history have been unsettled by the warning passages in Hebrews 2, 3, 6,10 and 12, **which** may seem to contradict the doctrine of eternal security.

So will there be challenges for us as we study our way through this magnificent New Testament document? Absolutely! But just as assuredly, if throughout our study we remain bowed before God in worship we can know this. The Spirit of God will take the biblical truths contained in this book to transform us, as we behold the glory of God, in the face of Christ. And I hope that you believe this and will therefore in anticipation of this study become excited about the wonderful, glorious, and life-changing possibilities that lie before us.

So now let us begin our study. Typically when we begin a study of a New Testament letter we would begin with the very first verses, where at the very least the author of the book, as well as the recipients of the book, would be identified. Unfortunately for us, this is not how this particular book begins.

Because of this we will not be able to immediately jump into our text but rather we will be compelled to look elsewhere to find the answers for some of our most basic questions, which would normally be supplied to us or be able garnered by us from a typical salutation. And this now leads us to the various questions that we will be seeking to answer this morning in order to provide us the background material to fully profit from our study of this great book. So, what is the first question that we will be seeking to answer?

Who wrote the Book of Hebrews? This is not at all an easy question to answer. In fact, I do not believe that this question can be answered with the information that we presently have available. But it is an important question so let us consider a few of the suggestions that have been made.

Clement of Alexandria who lived between 150-215 AD suggested that the Apostle Paul was the author of this epistle. In fact, this view became so prevalent among the Eastern Church, that they adopted this view as the correct view very early on in church history. Even up to this day this is a very commonly held view as evidenced by the fact that the editors of the “**New Schofield Reference Bible**” assigned the following title to this anonymous work, “**The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews.**”

But this view is not without significant problems such as if this is in fact one of Paul’s letters, it is the only letter that he did not begin with a salutation that boldly, prominently, and proudly identified himself as the author. This is a significant hurdle to overcome. But this is not all. The writer of this letter, whomever he might be, in **Hebrews 2:3**, places himself among those to whom the message of Christ was confirmed by others, which would appear to stand in contradiction to Paul’s words in **Galatians 1:12** that he had not received the gospel from men. And beyond all of this, the author’s preference for quoting the Septuagint, which is the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, rather than the Hebrew Scriptures themselves, which was the typical practice of Paul, is another problem in embracing this letter as having been authored by him.

So who else has been suggested? Barnabas, the early companion of Paul, has also been suggested. And who first suggested him? Tertullian, who lived between 150-222 AD, suggested him. And certainly there are good reasons that he might be suggested. Not only was he a close companion of Paul, but he was also a Levite. Therefore we could assume that he would have had more than a passing interest in Jewish ritual and would have been intimately acquainted with its procedures, which of course are prominently featured in this particular book. But again, just as with the suggestion of Paul being the author, this view has some significant problems such as there is no historical record or evidence of Barnabas ever having written anything. And this of course leads to a second problem. If we have no known writings that can be attributed to Barnabas, then there is no way we can use comparative studies to confirm or reject this particular suggestion.

So, what about Apollos who Martin Luther put forward as a possible author? Could he have been the writer based on the fact that not only was he a Jew and would therefore have been familiar with the Jewish priesthood and

sacrifices but also because he would have been knowledgeable and capable enough to have written this very powerful and complex book?

And what is the answer? Yes, he could have been. But this also has a significant problem, not the least being that there is no early historical record of him ever being suggested as the author of the book, whether in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, 3<sup>rd</sup> century, 4<sup>th</sup> century, 5<sup>th</sup> century, 6<sup>th</sup> century etc. etc. etc.

So who is the author of Hebrews? The best answer to this question would appear to have been given by Origen, “Who wrote the epistle, God knows the truth.”

All that we know is that someone wrote it. And over time, beginning with the Eastern Church in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century and the Western Church in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, it was ultimately embraced as a divinely inspired document and therefore worthy to be included in our New Testament canon. So, what is the next question that we will be seeking to answer?

Who were the recipients of the letter? Obviously you can see from the title of this letter as assigned by whatever translation you may be carrying there is a general consensus that the recipients of this letter would have been primarily Hebrew Christians. So why would this be the general consensus? There are several reasons.

First of all, the author assumes that his audience has an extensive knowledge of the Old Testament. We see this demonstrated by the author’s use of 35 Old Testament quotations, 19 summations of Old Testament material and 13 references to Old Testament names or topics.

Secondly, the author uses theological concepts that were popular in the Greek-speaking synagogues of the first century such as the veneration of Moses as having special access to God as indicated in **Hebrews 3:1-6**, as well as angels being mediators of Old Covenant revelation in **Hebrews 2:1-4**.

So who were the recipients of this epistle? The general consensus is that Hebrew Christians were the recipients of this epistle from an author that is still as yet unknown. And this piece of information naturally leads us to the next question.

Where were these Hebrew Christians living? Now some people might entertain the thought that this letter was written to various Hebrew Christians scattered throughout a particular geographical area, such as was the case with the Epistles of Peter, but most Bible commentators as a whole do not believe this. Rather the general consensus is that the recipients of this letter were living in a very specific area. So, what are the most common proposals?

The two most common proposals identify the recipients of this letter as living in either in Jerusalem or Rome. So which of these two choices which is the best?

Those who believe that the recipients of this letter were residing in Jerusalem largely base this conclusion on the assumption that because there are so many references to the Jewish priesthood as well as to the Jewish sacrificial system that of course the recipients of this letter should be assumed to be living near the temple in Jerusalem.

But even though this might be an interesting thought it really does not carry a lot of weight when we recognize that there is not one specific reference to the temple per se in the book of Hebrews and as such should not be a factor in determining where specifically these Hebrew Christians might have been living.

This brings us to the second proposal, which I believe is by far the better proposal. The book of Hebrews was written to Hebrew Christians living in Rome. Now why would I say this? I would say this for two reasons. First of all, though it is self-evident from the internal evidence of the book of Hebrews that the author was writing to a group of Hebrew Christians, it is also self-evident based on internal evidence that the author was most likely writing to a group of Hebrew Christians living in a Gentile area, based on the author's preference for using the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, rather than the Hebrew Scriptures themselves.

And if this is so and this author is in fact writing a group of Hebrew Christians in a Gentile area, why might we conclude that the Gentile area in which these Hebrew Christians were living was in fact Rome? This conclusion is based on **Hebrews 13:24** where the author, in addressing his recipients, says to them, **“those from Italy greet you.”** So if the recipients

of this letter are in fact Hebrew Christians living in a Gentile area, then we should be able to deduce from this relatively ambiguous greeting in **Hebrews 13:24** that it was coming from those who had at one time lived in that Gentile area, or in other words who at one time lived in Italy who were now sending their greeting to those still living in Italy (i.e. Rome).

And where did these Hebrew Christians living in Rome come from? They were most likely composed of various Roman Jews who had been visiting Jerusalem during the Feast of Pentecost and had witnessed the events described for us in Acts 2 and had subsequently become converted to the Christian faith and subsequently returned back to Rome where they spread their faith thus establishing, most likely, house churches. This now leads us to another next question but very important question.

Why did the author of Hebrews feel compelled to write this letter to these Hebrew Christians living in Rome?

Why would the author have written these Hebrew Christians living in Rome this letter at this particular time? This is a question that I believe that we will be able to answer with far more precision than our earlier questions.

In order to answer this question we need to understand that as a result of their profession of faith in Christ these Hebrew Christians living in Rome had suffered greatly for their faith and were continuing to suffer for their faith, and suffering greatly for their faith. This is made clear to us **Hebrews 10:32-34** where the author declares to the recipients of this letter these words, **“But remember the former days, when, after being enlightened, you endured a great conflict of sufferings, partly by being made a public spectacle through reproaches and tribulations, and partly by becoming sharers with those who were so treated. (34) For you showed sympathy to the prisoners and accepted joyfully the seizure of your property.”**

So had recipients of this letter, the Hebrew Christians living in Rome, suffered greatly and were continuing to suffer? Yes!

So let me ask you this question. Should they have anticipated this suffering and have been mature enough to deal with it? Yes, they should have anticipated it and they should have been mature enough to deal with it. But unfortunately it would appear that they had not anticipated it nor were they

apparently mature enough to deal with it. They lacked full confidence in the gospel, and consequently in the Lord. Their faith had begun to wane.

And what was the consequence of this? They were in danger of returning back to Jewish rituals and regulations thus weakening their faith and testimony.

With all that pressure, together with their weak faith and spiritual ignorance, they were in danger of mixing the new with the old. They were in danger of coming up with a ritualistic, ceremonial, legalistic Christianity.

So why did the author write this letter at this particular time to the Hebrew Christians living in Rome?

The author of the book of Hebrews wrote this letter to strengthen the faith of Hebrew Christians living in Rome during a period of great persecution to help prevent them from falling away.

So now let me ask you this question. Do you believe that the book of Hebrews that was written for the purpose of strengthening the faith of Hebrew Christians living in Rome 2000 years ago during a time of persecution has any relevancy for us?

Absolutely! And I will prove this to you. Take a look at the people around you. For the most part I believe we could easily assume that the people around you are professing believes. In other words, you could ask them if they consider themselves a follower of Christ and they will most likely say to you absolutely.

But now let me make a prediction. One year from now there will be individuals who are sitting with us now who will not be sitting with us one year from now. And the reason why they will not be with us will not be because they are sick or that they had to leave town for work, or they will be on vacation. No! They will not be here because their so-called faith will have been tested and their so-called faith will have been found wanting.

Their faith will be tested by pleasure. Their faith will be tested by comfort. Their faith will be tested by greed. Their faith will be tested by jealousy.

They faith will be tested by hurt. Their faith will be tested by fear. They faith will be tested.

Rather than in the time of their testing choose to enter into God's presence through the door that God opened for them through the death of His Son so that they might persevere and endure, they will in the time of their testing return back to their former idols believing that they in pursuing those idols might find relief. But there will be no relief, but worse of all those idols will once again gain control over their lives and they will find themselves no longer identified with the Christian community.

May God gave us the grace to understand the truths that we will be studying in the book of Hebrews in the years ahead so that our faith might increase and that God will be glorified.