



1: To The Hebrews

The Book of Hebrews is not like any of the other New Testament books: it stands alone. It's often referred to as the Letter to the Hebrews but we're not sure if it was originally a letter: it finishes like a letter but it doesn't start like one and really it reads more like a sermon.

But that's not the only way in which it stands alone. It's written in the most elegant Greek to be found in the New Testament and uses words (over one hundred and fifty of them) that aren't found anywhere else in the New Testament. It's written in the language of a scholar.

As well as being a skilled writer, whoever wrote the Book of Hebrews had an excellent knowledge of the Old Testament: he draws on more than a hundred Old Testament passages. All of his Old Testament quotations are taken from the Septuagint. Some conclude from that that he couldn't read Hebrew which of course, would rule out Paul as the writer.

Who Wrote It?

Who did write the Book of Hebrews? The short answer is we don't know. We don't know because we're not told and because we're not told I reckon it really doesn't matter. If we needed to know God would have given us a name.

Nevertheless, the question is often hotly debated: people do like to speculate about these things. There have been quite a few names put forward over the years: Luke, Barnabas, Silas, Priscilla aided by her husband Aquila, Apollos and Clement of Rome, to mention some of the ones you would recognise.

Most people will tell you that Paul wrote the Book of Hebrews. That's probably because they assume that their Authorised Version must have the title right. The AV title is found on some later manuscripts but it's not found on any of the oldest ones. The title on them is simply "To the Hebrews".

Having said that, the arguments for Paul being the author are probably stronger than those for anyone else. So far as tradition goes, Paul was being named as the writer of Hebrews in the 5th century and that was never questioned until the 16th century when the Reformation reopened the whole authorship debate. Erasmus rejected Paul as the author on grounds of language and style. Luther rejected him in favour of

Apollos. The argument for Paul being the writer revolves around the reference made to Timothy (13:23) and Peter's reference to Paul in his second letter.

“Consider that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation—as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, 16 as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures.”

2 Peter 3:15 – 16

We really have no clues as to where the writer lived. The expression "they of Italy" (13:24) might just mean that some Italians were with the writer when he was writing, not necessarily that he was writing from Italy.

Why are we even thinking about this? Well, it's probably of no real relevance to us because we're satisfied that the Book of Hebrews belongs in the Bible. But in the past, when what's known as the canon of Scripture was being settled, who wrote Hebrews was an important question. The Book of Hebrews right to a place in the New Testament was one of the last to be agreed on: it was disputed right up the 3rd century. The difficulty wasn't that anyone doubted its inspiration; the difficulty was to do with its authorship. You see one of the criteria that had to be applied before a book could be included in the New Testament was that it had to be shown that it was written by an apostle or, at least, it had to be clear that it had the approval of an apostle. From very early times Hebrews was accepted by the churches in the East. It wasn't until the beginning of the 5th century that it was fully accepted by the Western Church. The reason for that was that the Eastern Church thought that evidence of apostolic approval was enough to allow them to include a book in their New Testament; the Western Church looked for apostolic authorship. The whole question was opened up again at the time of the Reformation because the question of what should be in the Bible and what shouldn't was reopened in relation to the books of what we now call the Apocrypha.

Who Was It Written For?

As I have said, the title "To the Hebrews" appears on the oldest manuscripts, but we don't know with any certainty if that was the original title or not. It is clear that the first readers of the book must have been Jews. All its references to the Old Testament and the weight the author assumes they will carry make that clear.

It's also clear that the book is not written to Jews in general but to a definite group of Jews, who have been following Jesus and have endured and suffering and loss of property because of their allegiance to Him, though they have not yet "resisted unto blood" (10:32-34,6:9ff.). It's evident that they've been followers of Jesus for some time: the author says that they're like babies in the faith when they ought to be teachers (5:11-6:3). As well as that, all through the book there are warnings against turning away from Jesus, which suggests that some of their number have already turned away.

Where those first readers lived is another matter that's been the subject of a lot of debate. Palestine, Alexandria, Syria, (Antioch in particular) Asia Minor, Greece, North Africa and Italy — Rome — have all been suggested. Many go for Rome, citing the reference to Italy mentioned above (13:24) and the fact that Clement of Rome mentions the Book of Hebrews in his letter to Corinth. But a better case can be made for believing that Hebrews was written to a community of Jewish Christians living in or near Jerusalem.

When Was It Written?

The Temple was still standing and functioning when the Book of Hebrews was written. If, as I've suggested, the readers had been Christians for a long time and had already suffered persecution and if they were now facing persecution again, then the date of writing has to be close to but before 70AD. Most reckon Hebrews was written about 67 – 69AD

Why Was It Written?

We know, from reading the letter itself, that the writer was out to convince his readers that following Jesus is way better than following the old Jewish ways they were being put under strong pressure and tempted to turn back to. He wanted to warn them against the danger of turning back (6:4 – 8; 10:26 – 31; 12:14 – 19) and encourage them to make a complete break with Judaism (12:18 – 13:17) and a renewed effort to press on (6:1,9 – 12; 10:19 – 39; 12:12 – 17).

Outline

There are two parts to the Book of Hebrews. There's a doctrinal part which is mostly a reasoned argument for the supremacy of Jesus (1 – 10:18) and there's a practical part where the writer lays out some things about how those who are convinced that Jesus way is better ought to live (10:19 – 13:25).

Something to watch out for: the writers argument doesn't always flow in a straight line. At various points he leaves his main line of reasoning, goes off on a tangent and then comes back to where he broke off and continues with his main point. That can make the book hard to follow and is one of the reasons that Hebrews is sometimes thought to be a difficult book. Mostly the writer goes off on his tangents to encourage his readers to persevere or to give them strong warnings against the danger of turning from Jesus and His ways. The Book of Hebrews is renowned for those warnings. You'll sometimes hear them called parenthetical warnings: parenthetical as in, by-the-way, supplementary, in brackets, not part of the main flow.

The book can be divided up further:

The Doctrinal Section

Jesus is better than the prophets	1:1 – 3
Jesus is better than the angels	1:4 – 2:18
Jesus is better because He is God	1:4 – 14
The First Warning — Don't Neglect His Way of Salvation	2:1 – 2:4
Jesus is better because He's one of us	2:5 – 18
Jesus is better than Moses	3:1 – 3:6
The Second Warning — The Danger of Unbelief	3:6 – 4:13
Jesus is a better High Priest	4:14 – 10:18
Jesus is better placed to be our High Priest	4:14 – 4:16
Jesus is better qualified to be our High Priest	5:1 – 5:10
The Third Warning — The Danger of Apostasy	5:11 – 6:12
Jesus belongs to a better order of Priests	6:13 – 7:28
Jesus' sanctuary is better	8:1 – 8:5 & 9:1 – 9:11
Jesus' covenant is better	8:6 – 8:13, 9:15 – 9:20 & 10:16 – 10:18
Jesus' sacrifice is better	9:12 – 9:14, 9:21 – 9:28 & 10:1 – 10:15

The Practical Section

The Fourth Warning — Warning against Apostasy	10:19 – 10:39
Examples of people who persevered in faith	11:1 – 40
Jesus' even better example	12:1 – 4
God's Chastening Love	12:5 – 11
The Fifth Warning — Be strong stay faithful	12:12 – 12:29
Everyday faithfulness	13:1 – 13:17
Winding Up	13:18 – 3:25

Homework

Read the book of Hebrews right through as many times as you can manage in the week. Don't worry about trying to understand it all just get a general feel for the book, what it's about and how it joins up.