

## The Book of Hebrews

The Book of Hebrews is the literary masterpiece of the New Testament, perhaps of the entire Bible. It overflows with vivid, even dramatic, lyrical prose, at times reaching the poetic. It tells its stories masterfully and clearly, and provides significant details to make its cases. Its writer is a master of both persuasion and the art of rhetoric. Hebrews, most of all, inspires the reader. It is “beautifully written and stylistically polished.” At the same time, Hebrews expects a knowledge of Torah and the Aaronic priestly functions that few readers have today.

The Book of Hebrews intends to do three things.

First, it sets out its theology of salvation through Jesus Christ and the importance of faith to our relationship with God and the salvation process. In doing this, it clarifies the relationship between the Old (or First) Covenant of repeated sacrifices to God in the tabernacle to obtain forgiveness of sin and the New Covenant in which there is one sacrifice for all time made by Jesus Christ. If Hebrews has a primary focus, it is this relationship between the two forms of sacrifice and the clear superiority of the sacrifice of Jesus. This distinction is both the source of the theological power of Hebrews and its rejection by some in the modern church. That is, the implied *supersessionism* of Hebrews is no longer considered politically correct by some in this day of religious *pluralism*.

Second, Hebrews takes the reader through the steps necessary to understand why Christ must be fully human to accomplish God's redemptive work of salvation. We most often concentrate on the divinity of Christ and diminish his humanity. Sometimes, we even reason that Jesus being divine, the sacrifice on the cross would not be so great for an entity that is divine and immortal. Hebrews shows us that Jesus was fully human and experienced all that humans experience, including fear, dread and suffering. This reality of being fully human also provides the triune

God the full human experience. In the Book of Hebrews, Jesus takes on the roles of both High Priest and the sacrifice, the one making the offering and the one being sacrificed.

Third, the Book of Hebrews provides the incentive for remaining faithful to Jesus. Facing apostasy by members of the church who had converted from Judaism, the writer reminds them and us of the rewards of steadfastness, and the losses resulting from giving up our faith. At this time in the history of the church, apostasy, especially among Jewish believers of the Jesus Movement, had become a growing concern. The Apostles had preached about the imminent return of Jesus in great power and glory. Members of the movement would be elevated. There would be no more persecution. The neighbors would be astonished and impressed. And the members of the movement would all be with Jesus in his Kingdom.

Now, decades later, Jesus had not yet returned. Persecutions continues. The neighbors are encouraging the Jesus people to come back to synagogue. What were they to do? Continue to pray and wait or give up on this idea of seeing Jesus? Many returned to traditional Jewish worship and beliefs. The writer must renew the belief of these congregants in the superiority of God's plan for salvation in the New Covenant vs. the Old Covenant. It is in this environment that this leader of the Church produces the Book of Hebrews.

We cannot be absolutely certain of the audience for whom this work was written. The title of Epistle to the Hebrews was added years after the work was written. It was not a part of the original document. The focus on Jewish history and religious practices and the thorough knowledge of them suggests that the author was Jewish. By extension, we conclude that the audience was also Jewish, since they would need to be familiar with the topics addressed by the writer. But, this is an assumption, not a certainty. The audience could have been a mix of Jews and Gentiles. Likewise, we cannot say where the people receiving this "letter" were living. There are a variety of speculations, but we cannot say for certain.

Hebrews was probably written around 70 CE. It may have been written as a sermon. It would have been quite a long sermon compared to our sermons of today, when an Episcopal congregation grows restless if a sermon exceeds fifteen

minutes. It is actually not written in the form of a letter. So, technically it is not an epistle. The author is unknown. A number of different authors have been suggested. The most famous of the suggestions is the Apostle Paul. But the style is quite different from that of Paul, and the writing skill far superior to Paul's. Moreover, the 70 CE date would most likely be after the death of Paul. So, the authorship of this most excellent statement of theology and Christology will likely remain a mystery.

Now, let us begin our exploration of one of the two great works of theology of the New Testament, the Book of Hebrews.

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