

Scripture and Commentaries: **The Holy Bible**, ESV, Crossway Bibles, 2001. Commentaries include: **HEBREWS**, Ray C. Stedman, IVP New Testament Commentary Series, 1992; **Hebrews**, Simon J. Kistemaker, Baker Book House, 1984; **After the Sacrifice**, Walter A. Henrichsen, Zondervan Publishing House, 1979; **Hebrews (Volume 1 & 2)**, R. Kent Hughes, Crossway Books, 1993; **Growing Slowly Wise**, David Roper, Discovery House Publishers, 2000.

Introduction to Hebrews: The letter to the Hebrews was written at a time of significant change throughout the Roman Empire. In particular Judaism was experiencing great changes. In times of change, people tend to cling to familiar patterns. They resist the threat of the unfamiliar. When worldly change impacts religion, remembering heavenly things which cannot change is important. Believers should be encouraged by the fact their Lord is unchanging. Human events often are chaotic, but God is sovereign. He has a plan which will be fulfilled. He will bless those who follow Christ

For being Christians, Christian Jews were under threat of persecution by the Romans. They were tempted to return to Judaism. Hebrews was written to convince them it would be a mistake to turn back. The author's argument is that Christ and His New Covenant are far superior to every Old Testament person, institution, ritual, or sacrifice. The Judaism left behind in becoming Christians was a stable world of ritual and traditions. Christian doctrine and traditions were still new and developing. That was difficult. The added threat of persecution as Christians increased their concern. Roman law would protect them from persecution if they returned to Judaism.

Date of Writing: The letter mentions Temple sacrifices as ongoing. Jerusalem was captured, burned, and the Temple destroyed in 70 A.D. The letter must have been written before the Temple was destroyed.

Likely it was written in late 63 or early 64 A.D. before Rome was burned in mid-July 64 A.D. Christian Jews were being harassed and intimidated, but their lives were not at threat. There were signs persecution would get worse. What would happen if things did get worse and their lives were threatened?

Who wrote Hebrews: The short answer is the Holy Spirit. Nothing in the letter identifies the human author. It is frequently said only God knows who wrote the letter. But for more than a thousand years, the Apostle Paul was considered the author. Pantaenus of Alexandria (145 A.D.) wrote Hebrews was considered to be from Paul. About 50 years later, Clement of Alexandria wrote “the men of old handed it down as Paul’s.” Questioning the author’s identity began in the early 200’s but came to no conclusion. Tertullian suggested Barnabas as author. However, both the Eastern Church in the 200’s and the Western Church some 200 years later included Hebrews in the canon as Paul’s. Until the reformation Paul was considered the author of Hebrews. Erasmus, Luther, and Calvin expressed doubt Paul was the author. Why?

The Argument Against Paul as Author: Reasons for doubting Hebrews to be from Paul include: (1) It’s elegant Greek style appears different from undisputed writings of Paul. (2) The claim that verse 2:13 identifies the author as someone with only secondhand knowledge of the Lord. Paul vehemently denies that is the case for him (e.g. Galatians 1:12, 1 Corinthians 9:1). (3) Paul’s writings usually emphasized Christ’s resurrection. Hebrews emphasizes Christ’s exaltation to God’s right hand. (4) Paul usually emphasized the redemptive character of Christ’s work. Hebrews emphasizes Christ’s cleansing and sanctifying. (5) Paul stresses union with Christ. Hebrews does not mention it, nor does it mention justification by faith, or faith versus works, or the tension between flesh and spirit, all of which are important to Paul. (6) Hebrews stresses Christ’s high priesthood, but Paul usually did not.

It is curious that along with their reasons for doubting Paul, the doubters also declared that nothing in Hebrews contradicts Paul, and some places sound like Paul. That attitude together with the mention of Timothy in 13:23 caused many doubters to conclude that, while the author was not Paul, he was a member of Paul’s circle.

Argument for Paul Being the Author: Romans 9:2 is undisputedly Paul’s. We learn Paul had great sorrow and anguish over his fellow Jews rejection of Christ. His anguish was so intense, he was willing to be cut off from Christ if that would enable his kinsmen to be “in Christ.” Hebrews was obviously written by someone with deep concern for Jews.

Paul's anguish for fellow Jews was deep. He was eager for them to be "in Christ." It seems natural that if he heard of Christian Jews teetering on the verge of returning to Judaism, he would write persuasively to those at-risk Christian Jews. No doubt he would use the language of Judaism and the Old Testament so familiar to all Jews. He would demonstrate the superiority of Christ and His New Covenant using examples from the Hebrew Bible. He would use frequent references to Hebrew scripture as he showed them the superiority of what they gained in Christ. He would show that Christ fulfilled the Old Covenant promises. All this fits well with Hebrews.

Whoever the author is, he was very familiar with the Hebrew Bible and priestly practices. He wrote with authority – indeed one would even say apostolic authority.

The letter's Hellenistic Greek style has been compared to that of Luke in Acts. That makes sense. Luke was with Paul. If Paul dictated and Luke wrote in his own style, that would explain both why the Greek style is different from Paul's other letters and its similarity to Luke's writing in Acts. Hebrews final few lines are in a simpler style with words more characteristic of Paul. As was customary in closing a dictated letter, the final words were written by the author in his own hand.

What about the opinion verse 2:3 excludes Paul as author? Read the verse carefully. It says: *"how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard."* Think about it. If Paul is speaking, doesn't he say he heard this great salvation directly from the Lord. True, he heard it from the risen Lord, but nonetheless directly from the Lord. What he heard from the Lord was gospel essentials. Later Paul heard details attested by those who heard Jesus teach and saw His miracles. How does verse 2:3 exclude Paul as author? Perhaps it is actually evidence in support of Paul. Likewise with other objections. When each objection is carefully examined, all turn out to be speculation. Paul remains the most likely human author of Hebrews.

Conclusion on Identity of the Author: For lack of conclusive evidence, it remains true that no one but God knows for sure who wrote the Letter to the Hebrews.

First Recipients of the Letter: Who first received the letter? No one knows. Evidence points to likely first recipients being Christian Jews in a small house church in Rome. Jews in Jerusalem are another possibility. From the text, it appears the author, the letter's recipients, and Timothy, all knew each other well.

Persecution: After Rome burned, Christians were severely persecuted, often martyred. Persecution before that was milder. Nero was Emperor. Judaism continued to be a legal religion of the Roman Empire. As such it was **excluded** from the requirement of Emperor Worship. In its earliest days, Christianity was considered a sect of Judaism, and also protected from the Emperor worship requirement. Then Jews began to treat Christians as lawbreakers, refusing to allow them in their Synagogues. That led to Rome declare Christianity to be a separate religion. Emperor worship was required. Christians refused to worship the Emperor thereby breaking Roman Law. Not only would Christians not worship the Emperor, they declared they had no king but Christ. Widespread severe persecution in late 64 AD.

When severe persecution of Christians began, Christian Jews, being Jews by birth, were tempted to escape persecution by returning to the umbrella of legal Judaism. It was easy to do. Racially Jewish people and Judaism went together.

Judaism: The Jews religion was given to them by God, including a divinely appointed place of worship and ceremonial detail on how to approach God. God also gave instructions on how to carry out the necessities of daily life. Christian Jews looked back on more than 1000 years of their ancestors carrying out the traditions established by God. Now they believed the long-promised Messiah had come, and they committed their lives to Him. Following Christ changed many things. Traditions and rituals which had been a formal part of their lives had to be left behind. It was confusing and stressful.

Persecution by Their Fellow Jews: Persecution of Christians by Jews was more disturbing than persecution by the ungodly. After Festus died in 62-63 AD, Judaic leadership, under the high priest Ananus, treated Jewish Christians as transgressors of the Law. Some were stoned to death. All were banished from holy places including the Temple. Clinging to the One they believed to be the promised Messiah, Christian Jews were being cut off from Messiah's ancestral people, forbidden to worship in the Temple, excluded from participating in past traditions, and often punished (think of Saul's early life of seeking believers for punishment).

Because Judaism was a legal religion of Rome, Christian Jews who reverted to Judaism were protected from Roman persecution. There would be no persecution by Jews because they would be one of them. They could worship in the Temple and participate in traditions. What can be said to persuade them to remain Christians?

Superiority of Christianity: As converts from Judaism to Christianity, what is the relationship between the “new” they had entered and the “old” they were leaving behind? The author of Hebrews demonstrates with great clarity and power that Christ is the “substance and reality” for which Judaism contained the “shadows and figures.” Christ is superior to all aspects of Judaism – to prophets, to angels, to Moses, to Joshua, to Aaron, to the rituals of worship, and to the Old Covenant. Christ fulfills Hebrew Bible promises. It would be foolish to turn back.

Old and New: Giving up Judaic traditions was traumatic. Persecution by fellow Jews was vile. Why continue? What were they gaining? The author’s answer is they gained: (1.) A great High Priest superior to all others (4:14). (2.) Direct access to the presence of the Most High (4:16). (3.) An anchor for their soul (6:19). (4.) A superior covenant (8:7-13).

At its beginning, worship of God in Judaism centered on the Priesthood and Tabernacle. Later it centered on the Temple and its associated Priesthood. For that reason, the author emphasizes Christ’s roles as High Priest, the true altar, the one true and sufficient sacrifice, and as the one provider of unlimited access into the presence of the Most High.

The letter’s recipients likely never met Jesus. Like us, all they knew about Him, they received second-hand. The New Testament did not yet exist. What they learned was received directly from apostles or from those who heard the apostles teach.

The Letter’s Two Major Sections: Hebrews has a clear dividing line at verse 10:18. The first section concerns Christ’s superiority, emphasizing Him as the Perfect High Priest mediating between men and God. The second section, Hebrews 10:19 – 13:25, focuses on Christ as the perfect way to faith and life.

Hebrews 1:1-4: *“Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. ³ He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, ⁴ having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.”*

WOW! The first four verses of Hebrews are magnificent. They are reminiscent in beauty and theological profoundness to the prologue of the Gospel of John (John 1:1-18). In these four verses, the author establishes his high doctrine of Christ.

He emphasizes that God’s word as spoken through His Son is the culmination of revelation begun long ago. The revelation by the Son reveals completes God’s prior communication with His people. God’s word through the prophets, and through them to us, came about at many times and in many ways. God’s revelation of Himself in the past was partial and progressive. It is now completed in the Son.

Diverse Communication from God in the Past: The method of God’s communication with His people in the past was diverse. God walked in the cool of the evening with Adam. He spoke in thunder and lightning and with the voice of a trumpet to Moses at Sinai. He spoke to Elijah at Horeb in “a gentle whisper.” To Ezekiel, God gave visions. To Daniel, He gave dreams. Angels served as intermediaries. An angel appeared to Abram and Sarah promising a son. Jacob wrestled with an angel. Gideon changed from a cowering youth to a valiant man of war when confronted by “the angel of the Lord.” God declared Himself by establishing law, giving warnings, exhorting, and through parables.

“Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets.” This affirmation recognizes the strong foundation and continuity of revelation through the years. God progressively revealed Himself and His plan.

Before Christ, God’s self-revelation was recorded in the Old Testament. These 39 books recorded the step-by-step progressive revelation of God to His people. Being in written form, God’s revelation could be passed on from generation to

generation. Though written over a period of more than a thousand years by a variety of people, the 39 books reveal an amazing continuity.

Our infinite God communicates with His finite human creatures through chosen people who, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, record or speak as they are inspired. As God communicates through a chosen person, the heart and spirit of the prophet impacts the form but not the content of the prophecy. God chose different people to convey different parts of His progressive revelation. Not long before Hebrews was written, a new and glorious thing had happened. The Son, who revealed God as completely as humans could understand, came to dwell on the earth.

Jesus is the Perfect Revelation of the Father: Past revelation was gracious and good. But with Jesus, the best has come. *“In these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.”* What does this phrase mean? First, a fundamental turning point had been reached in God’s progressive revelation and plan for the ages. The preparation period was over. God now spoke definitively and finally through His Son who came into the world as Messiah, the God-Man. In 1 Corinthians 1:20 Paul puts it this way, *“For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory.”* In John 13:9b Jesus says, *“Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.”* Further understanding of God’s self-revelation can only be interpretation of what God revealed in the life and words of His Son.

Meaning of “Last Days”: What is the meaning of “in these last days?” The phrase is eschatological language. The sense in which the days of the author and our days are “last” days is theological not chronological. No one knows the chronological length of end times nor their date. The cross, death, resurrection, exaltation, the reality and finality of Christ are theologically ultimate and signify the beginning of “end times.” The surprising and sometimes confusing thing is this period of eschatological fulfillment seems so prolonged, but God will do what He has said He will do, and it will all happen in His timing.

Identifying Christ as the Son has strong Old Testament messianic significance. In verse 1:2 the author quotes from Psalm 2:7 and 2 Samuel 7:14.

The True Nature of the Son: Beginning at verse 2b, the true nature of the Son is stated in seven wonderful phrases that reveal His incomparable superiority.

Phrase 1: He is *“the heir of all things.”* In Hebrew culture to be a son (especially the only or unique son) was to be an heir. As the Son, Christ is appointed the One to ultimately possess everything. Messianic Psalm 2:8 says, *“Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession.”*

Phrase 2: The Son is the One *“through whom also he created the world.”* The Son was God’s agent in the creation of all that exists – all space and time and the contents thereof. His creative activity plus His role as heir of all things shows His vital importance in creation at the beginning and in inheritance at the end of history. In Colossians 1:16 Paul puts it this way, *“For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him.”*

Phrases 3 and 4: The third and fourth expressions in this description of Christ deal with the manner in which Christ is the true expression of God the Father.

Phrase 3: the Son is *“the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature.”* The Son is the perfect representation of the Father just as the imprint in wax is the exact impression of a seal. Other New Testament writings make the same point. 2 Corinthians 4:4, *“the glory of Christ, who is the image of God”*; Colossians 1:15, *“He is the image of the invisible God”*; John 14:9, *“Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.”* Without denying distinctions between Father and Son, the author shows us the Son is of the same order of existence as the Father. In other words the Son is deity.

Phrase 4: *“he upholds the universe by the word of his power.”* Christ’s Word underlies reality. He dynamically sustains and makes coherent all that exists. We find parallels to this statement at the beginning of the Gospel of John and in Paul (e.g., Colossians 1:17).

Phrase 5: This phrase deals with the atoning work of Christ. He made *“purification for sins.”* Theologically these are the last days because Christ made *“once and for all purification for sins.”* Purification or cleansing of sins describes the work of a high priest. As the author argues in chapters 9 and 10, the work of the high

priest in the Temple cannot of itself make permanent atonement for sins. Only the unique Son of God, as our Great High Priest, can accomplish the sacrifice that makes possible the *permanent cleansing and forgiveness of sins* (Romans 3:24-26).

Phrase 6: This phrase is the capstone of this part of the author's argument. Having accomplished the purpose of His incarnation, "***he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.***" These words, from the Messianic Psalm 110, convey the once and for all sense of completion and fulfillment. Having finished His earthly task, Christ ascended to heaven and sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high. In His exaltation Christ became "***as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.***" No Judaic priest ever sat down in the sanctuary. There were no seats of any kind in the sanctuary.

In these statements the author sets forth his position that the Son embodies the three main offices of the Old Testament: Prophet (speaking for God), priest (accomplishing forgiveness for sins), and king (reigning with the Father). All things were created through Him and for Him. He is the expression of God's glory and essence.

What is Next? Christ greater than the angels.