

Introduction to Hebrews

NIV Study Bible

AUTHOR

The writer of this letter does not identify himself, but he was obviously well known to the original recipients. Though for some 1,200 years (from c. a.d. 400 to 1600) the book was commonly called “The Epistle of Paul to the Hebrews,” there was no agreement in the earliest centuries regarding its authorship. Since the Reformation it has been widely recognized that Paul could not have been the writer. There is no disharmony between the teaching of Hebrews and that of Paul’s letters, but the specific emphases and writing styles are markedly different. Contrary to Paul’s usual practice, the author of Hebrews nowhere identifies himself in the letter—except to indicate that he was a man (see note on 11:32). Moreover, the statement “This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him” (2:3), indicates that the author had neither been with Jesus during his earthly ministry nor received special revelation directly from the risen Lord, as had Paul (Gal 1:11–12).

The earliest suggestion of authorship is found in Tertullian’s *De Pudicitia*, 20 (c. 200), in which he quotes from “an epistle to the Hebrews under the name of Barnabas.” From the letter itself it is clear that the writer must have had authority in the apostolic church and was an intellectual Hebrew Christian well versed in the OT. Barnabas meets these requirements. He was a Jew of the priestly tribe of Levi (Ac 4:36) who became a close friend of Paul after the latter’s conversion. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the church at Antioch commissioned Barnabas and Paul for the work of evangelism and sent them off on the first missionary journey (Ac 13:1–4).

The other leading candidate for authorship is Apollos, whose name was first suggested by Martin Luther and who is favored by many interpreters today. Apollos, an Alexandrian by birth, was also a Jewish Christian with notable intellectual and oratorical abilities. Luke tells us that “he was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures” (Ac 18:24). We also know that Apollos was associated with Paul in the early years of the church in Corinth (1 Co 1:12; 3:4,6,22).

One thing is evident: The author was a master of the Greek language of his day, and he was thoroughly acquainted with the pre-Christian Greek translation of the OT (the Septuagint), which he regularly quotes.

DATE

Hebrews must have been written before the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in a.d. 70 because: (1) If it had been written after this date, the author surely would have mentioned the temple’s destruction and the end of the Jewish sacrificial system; and (2) the author consistently uses the Greek present tense when speaking of the temple and the priestly activities connected with it (see 5:1–3; 7:23,27; 8:3–5; 9:6–9,13,25; 10:1,3–4,8,11; 13:10–11).

LITERARY FORM

Hebrews is commonly referred to as a letter, though it does not have the typical form of a letter. It ends like a letter (13:22–25) but begins more like an essay or sermon (1:1–4). The author does

not identify himself or those addressed, which letter writers normally did. And he offers no manner of greeting, such as is usually found at the beginning of ancient letters. Rather, he begins with a magnificent statement about Jesus Christ. He calls his work a “word of exhortation” (13:22), the conventional designation given a sermon in a synagogue service (see Ac 13:15, where “message of encouragement” translates the same Greek words as “word of exhortation”). Like a sermon, Hebrews is full of encouragement, exhortations and stern warnings. It is likely that the author used sermonic materials and sent them out in a modified letter form.

OUTLINE

- Prologue: The Superiority of God’s New Revelation (1:1–4)
- The Superiority of Christ to Leading Figures under the Old Covenant (1:5—7:28)
 - Christ Is Superior to the Angels (1:5—2:18)
 1. Scriptural proof of his superiority (1:5–14)
 2. Exhortation not to ignore the revelation of God in his Son (2:1–4)
 3. Jesus was made a little lower than the angels (2:5–9)
 4. Having been made like us, Jesus was enabled to save us (2:10–18)
 - Christ Is Superior to Moses (3:1—4:13)
 1. Demonstration of Christ’s superiority (3:1–6)
 2. Exhortation to enter salvation-rest (3:7—4:13)
 - Christ Is Superior to the Aaronic Priests (4:14—7:28)
 1. Jesus is the great high priest (4:14–16)
 2. Qualifications of a priest (5:1–10)
 3. Exhortation to press on toward maturity (5:11—6:12)
 4. The certainty of God’s promise (6:13–20)
 5. Christ’s superior priestly order (ch. 7)
- The Superior Sacrificial Work of Our High Priest (8:1—10:18)
 - A New Sanctuary and a New Covenant (ch. 8)
 - The Old Sanctuary (9:1–10)
 - The Better Sacrifice (9:11—10:18)
- A Call to Follow Jesus Faithfully and with Perseverance (10:19—12:29)
 - Having Confidence to Enter the Sanctuary (10:19–25)
 - A Warning against Persistence in Sin (10:26–31)
 - C. Persevering in Faith under Pressure (10:32—12:3)
 1. As in the past, so in the future (10:32–39)
 2. Faith and its many outstanding examples (ch. 11)
 3. Jesus, the supreme example (12:1–3)
 - Encouragement to Persevere in the Face of Hardship (12:4–13)
 - Exhortation to Holy Living (12:14–17)
 - Crowning Motivation and Warning (12:18–29)
- Conclusion (ch. 13)
 - Rules for Christian Living (13:1–17)
 - Request for Prayer (13:18–19)
 - Benediction (13:20–21)
 - Personal Remarks (13:22–23)

- Greetings and Final Benediction (13:24–25)

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