

Background Notes on the book of Hebrews

Compiled by Pastor David Hentschel

Overview:

The book of Hebrews is written as a strong source of encouragement to press on toward the supremacy of Christ over all things. He is worth every effort! Our world is obsessed with upgrades and others around us are perpetually looking for what's easy and comfortable. But what if instead of always chasing what's next, your soul was able to find an anchor that would keep you grounded at all times and pull you through in all circumstances? In the first century, times were tough for the early Christians. Persecution and marginalization were a daily reality. Believers were tempted to abandon their faith and seek an easier life. In this New Testament book, called "a word of exhortation" (13:22), we are given strong motivations to press on and run the race marked before us with discipline and courageous faith. There are stern warnings and consequences for those who shrink back and look elsewhere for their security in life. Instead, we are told, no matter what it costs us, "Let us go to Him!" (Heb 13:13). Knowing Him is worthy of all our devotion. Fixing our eyes on Jesus, we will make it to the end of our race, and the things of earth will grow strangely dim, because He is *greater*.

Authorship:

No certain answer can be given as to the authorship of Hebrews. Early church father Origen famously said regarding this question: "Only God knows." (A.D. 254)¹ Conjecture has led to some considering Paul, Apollos, Priscilla, Luke and others. Those who argue for the apostle Paul as the writer do so for several reasons: First, the use of common Pauline teachings and metaphors are similar; such as "milk to meat," (1 Cor 3:1-3, Heb 5:12-14), the comparison of unbelief at Kadesh Barnea as an illustration of what not to do today (Heb 4:11, 1 Cor 10), and the use of Habakkuk 2:4b as foundational to the teaching of

¹ Cited in Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History 6.25.14.

salvation by faith (Rom 1:17, Heb 10:38). Second, the author has an association with Timothy (13:23). Third, the author's thorough knowledge of the Old Testament is consistent with Paul's testimony (Phil 3). Fourth, the author is writing "from" (Gr. "Apo") Italy (Heb 13:24). All of these factors seem to lead to the conclusion that this was written by Paul. However, Chapter 2:3-4 seems to indicate that the author is *outside* the circle of the original apostles. Furthermore, this book has no signature of Paul as was his custom in his letters and it does not have the writing style of Paul grammatically. Arguments against Priscilla are made due to the use of the masculine pronouns. (Heb 11:32) Luke as a close missionary companion with Paul is a compelling option as the writing style is closer to Luke / Acts. Some have said this book is a mixture having "the flavor of Paul, by the style of Luke." As such, this may have been originally a sermon preached by Paul (perhaps numerous times) and then preserved, translated and transcribed by Luke. Tertullian suggested Paul wrote in Hebrew, Luke translated into Greek. Regardless of authorship, the first century church universally adopted this book into the canon of scripture and it should be recognized as authoritative.

Genre:

The genre of the book of Hebrews is atypical. It does not begin as an epistle, but it ends as an epistle. Many see this as a letter written in sermonic form for the following reasons: In Heb 13:22 the author says it's "a word of exhortation," the same word is used in Acts 13:15 to describe a sermon by Paul. Paul is invited to give a "word of exhortation" in a synagogue. The warning passages speak of a homiletical form. The use of the first person plural (Our / Us / We), a speaking technique to identify with audience while asserting authority. The use of the language of "hearing / listening / ears" throughout the book (For example, Heb 2:5, Heb 5:11 "dull of hearing", Heb 6:9 "speak in this way" Heb 11:32 "what more shall I say" etc.). Furthermore, the alternation between exposition and explanation of scripture is homiletical in style. Fifth, the many rhetorical devices throughout such as alliteration (Heb 1:1-3 has five words that begin with the P sound), the use of repetition (such as the word "better"), the use of rhetorical questions (1:14), inclusios, and vivid imagery (ships, swords, fields, anchors) all speak to this work being original crafted for the ear. Hebrews is a sermon.

Date:

The time of the writing of Hebrews was in the first century, probably prior to AD 70. It seems clear the priestly temple service was still a functioning reality when it was written (see Heb 9:7-8). Also, it does not mention the destruction of the temple, most likely because it had not yet occurred. The mention of Timothy (Heb 13:23) and the citation of Hebrews by Clement (1 Clement was written in A.D. 96) support an early date, certainly within the first century.

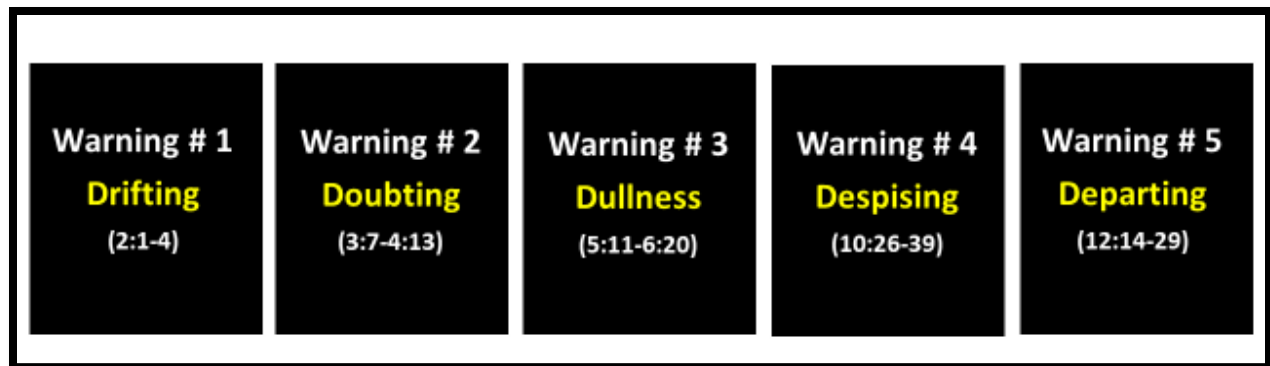
Audience:

The audience was most likely a group of Jewish converts in the first century. The author assumes the audience possesses a thorough knowledge of Judaism, (Note - the title "to the Hebrews" found on later manuscripts was not original.) Some view the audience as Jewish Christians living in the land of Israel, facing marginalization for their faith in Christ and put out of the synagogue. (John 16:2, 9:22) They had experienced persecution and financial loss as a result of withdrawing from their Jewish roots and were tempted to return to the Jewish system. Others view this book as geared toward believers living in Rome. These difficulties could have to do with trouble under the edict of Claudius, causing an expulsion of Jews from Rome over riots. (see Acts 18:2) At some point in the 40's CE the Jewish community in Rome was divided over questions of the identity of the Messiah, probably Jesus. As a result, the emperor Claudius

followed the precedent of the earlier emperor Tiberius and banished the Jews from Rome.² The author's use of the LXX (Greek OT) rather than the Hebrew scriptures points toward those in Rome rather than to those living in the Palestinian region. Internal evidence suggests this book was written to a group of 2nd generation Christians (those who had not seen the Lord first hand but who received the message from the first generation, Heb 2:3-4). The audience had experienced some persecution for their faith already (10:32-34) The spiritual condition of the audience is also uncertain. This is important as one considers the warning passages.

The Warning Passages:

Great debate surrounds the nature of the five warning passages of Hebrews:



Some view these warnings as pertaining to Christians in danger of losing rewards, or some other benefit. (Pentecost) Others view the warnings as against those who professed Christians falsely and in danger not possessing true salvation, such as in 1 Jn 2:19 (Toussaint). Still others would see the possibility of them actually being genuine believers who could lose their salvation. (Roman Catholic, Arminian). It seems clear that the audience are true Christians as Hebrews 3:1 refers to them as “holy brethren.” However, other scriptures make clear that true believers possess eternal security. (Rom 8:28-30, Phil 1:6, John 10:28-30) Pentecost states, “These serious warnings were designed to arrest the attention of the hearers, to warn them of the consequences of not living by faith, so that they might exercise patient endurance.”³

Major Themes:

- **The Supremacy of Christ.** Hebrews teaches the Supremacy of Jesus Christ as greater than all. The adjective better is used 13 times, with the cluster of words “better,” “more,” and “greater” appearing a combined total of 25 times. Hebrews teaches that Christ is superior to the entire Jewish system which offers nothing of benefit to return to. Christ is better than Angels (Ch. 1), Moses (Ch. 3), and Aaron (Ch. 4-7) and His covenant is better (Ch. 8), His sacrifice is better (Ch. 9), and His temple is better (Ch. 10). Hebrews encourages the worship of Christ for His person and work as the Heir, Creator, Sustainer, our Priest, our King, and the climax of God's revelation (Heb 1:1-3)

² Craig Keener, *Romans: A New Covenant Commentary* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2009), 12.

³ J. Dwight Pentecost. *Faith that Endures: A Practical Commentary on the Book of Hebrews*. (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1992), 37.

- **The relationship between the OT and the NT.** Hebrews refers regularly to the history, law and prophecies of the Old Testament as those things which all pointed toward their fulfillment in the person and work of Jesus Christ.
- **The Call to Perseverance and Faith.** Hebrews encourages the readers to persevere in the faith and press on toward Christian maturity (Heb 5-6)
- **Courage in the Face of Persecution.** Hebrews also encourages the readers to patiently endure suffering and prepares them for persecution (Heb 2:1, 4:14, 6:1-3, 10:23, 10:36 12:1-2), by exhorting them to live by faith in God's promises of a better city, as the saints of God always had as we are all looking for the reward (Heb 11:26).

Outline of the Book of Hebrews

- I. **Introduction (1:1-4)**
- II. **Christ as Superior to Angels (1:5-1:14)**
 - a. Warning # 1 – Drifting (2:1-4)
 - b. Christ as Superior to Angels as the Perfect Man (2:5-18)
- III. **Christ is Superior to Moses (3:1-4:13)**
 - a. The Lesson from Exodus (3:1-7)
 - b. Warning # 2 – Doubting (3:12-19)
 - c. The Promise of Rest (4:1-13)
- IV. **Christ as Superior to Aaron (4:14-7:28)**
 - a. Christ is Superior in His priesthood (4:14-)
 - b. Warning # 3 - Dullness (5:11-6:12)
 - c. The Certainty of God's Promise (6:13-20)
 - d. Christ in the superior order of Melchizedek (7:1-7:28)
- V. **Christ's Superior Covenant (Heb 8:1-10:39)**
 - a. The Old Covenant is obsolete (Heb 8:1-13)
 - b. Christ's Substitutionary Work is Superior to the Old Covenant Sacrifices (Heb 9:1-28)
 - c. Christ's Tabernacle is Superior (9:1-28)
 - d. Christ's Sacrifice is Superior (10:1-18)
 - e. A Call to Persevere (10:19-25)
 - f. Warning # 4 – Despising the Blood (10:26-39)
- VI. **Conclusion: The Exhortation to a Faith that Endures (11:1-13:25)**
 - a. Examples of Past Heroes of Faith (11:1-40)
 - b. Jesus: The Ultimate Example of Perseverance. (12:1-3)
 - c. The Discipline of God our Father (12:4-13)
 - d. Warning # 5 – Departing from God (12:14-29)
 - e. Final Exhortations (13:1-19)
 - f. Benediction (13:20-21)
 - g. Closing Remarks (13:22-25)

Recommended Resources for Hebrews:

Books:

- J. Dwight Pentecost. *Faith that Endures: A Practical Commentary on the Book of Hebrews*. (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1992).
- Warren Wiersbe, *Be Confident: Live by Faith Not by Sight*. (Colorado Springs: David Cook, 1982).

Commentaries:

- F. F. Bruce – *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Revised Edition (New International Commentary on the New Testament).
- Peter T. O'Brien – *The Letter to the Hebrews* (Pillar New Testament Commentary).
- Richard Phillips - *Hebrews*. (Reformed Expository Commentary Series).
- William L. Lane – *Hebrews 1-8; Hebrews 9-13* (Word Biblical Commentary Series).

Teaching Videos:

- Jen Wilkin “Better” A Lifeway Bible Study <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TeUlm0-uTiM>

Online Study:

- The Bible Project: Overview of Hebrews <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1fNWTZZwgbs&t=266s>
- Free course on Hebrews: Dallas Seminary by Dr. Stan Toussaint. https://courses.dts.edu/register/hebrews/?utm_source=facebook&utm_medium=newsfeed&utm_campaign=hebrews&utm_content=donorbureau_p&fbclid=IwAR3TSUtS0Y2JGSK65IwXrTT-1LiJb-nOSysNmOxSq0BQfAOixrttWVarUSw

Sermon Series

- Tim Keller – “Christ our Treasury” - Hebrews audio series – 14 weeks <https://gospelinlife.com/downloads/christ-our-treasury-the-book-of-hebrews/>

Articles:

- “Perseverance of the Saints: A Case Study from Hebrews 6:4-6 and Other Warning Passages in Hebrews,” in *The Grace of God, The Bondage of the Will*, eds. Thomas Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995),
- “The Warning Passages of Hebrews: A Formal Analysis and Theological Conclusions,” *Trinity Journal* 13 (1992).
- “A Warning for True Believers who Lack Faith” by Dr. Andrew Hudson. <https://www.mbu.edu/seminary/a-warning-for-true-believers-who-lack-faith/>