

# FIRST THINGS

## An Introduction to the Book of Hebrews

Context is critical to the study of God's Word. When beginning a study of a book of the Bible it is essential to discover its historical context. Every good commentary will cover authorship, date, recipients and historical circumstances in its introduction. An excellent online resource for historical context of each New Testament book is Dr. Daniel Wallace's *New Testament: Introductions and Outlines*.<sup>1</sup>

### WHO WROTE HEBREWS?

This is one of the aspects of the book of Hebrews that makes it a puzzle; we don't know who wrote it. Even when we search the writings of the early church fathers we can't identify the author with absolute certainty. Potential authors include Paul, Luke, Clement of Rome, Barnabas, Priscilla, Jude, Apollos, Philip or Silvanus.

Though we don't know his name, the book itself tells us much about the character of its author.

- **He was a skillful preacher.**

By the first century A.D., the synagogue had become the center of Jewish community life throughout the Roman empire. It is now recognized that the book of Hebrews is much more a sermon than a letter. Studies have shown that Hebrews shares characteristics found in first century synagogue sermons. In chapter 13 verse 22, the author calls his document a "word of exhortation" a phrase used in the first century to refer to a sermon (cf. Acts 13:14-15).

- **He was well versed in the Old Testament.**

The book of Hebrews is saturated with references and allusions to the Old Testament Scriptures. It is obvious his mind was saturated with the Word of God and that he believed Scripture to be the final authority for the believer. He, like many first century Jews, used a Greek translation of the Old Testament called the Septuagint.

- **He was highly educated.**

In the ancient world when students went for advanced education, they studied a subject called *rhetoric*. *Rhetoric* dealt with the rules and practices of public speaking and argumentation. The author of Hebrews was skilled in rhetoric.

- **He was deeply concerned for the spiritual state of his audience.**

The author of Hebrews personally knew the past and present circumstances of the people to whom he wrote (cf. 10:32-36, 13:18-25).

This was a group of believers some of whom were drifting away from the faith and others outright defecting. As a shepherd, the author of Hebrews sought to strike a balance between strong warnings and warm encouragement. His sense of urgency and passion reflect his deep concern.

For reasons known only to God, we do not know the identity of the author, but we owe him respect, admiration and gratitude for his profound and enduring *word of exhortation*.

---

<sup>1</sup> Go to [bible.org](http://bible.org). Once there, follow the menus: Resources – Author – Daniel Wallace – *New Testament: Introductions and Outlines*.

## TO WHOM WAS HEBREWS WRITTEN?

Similar to authorship, there is no explicit statement in the book itself revealing to whom it was written. Speculations include 1) a house church of Jewish believers in Israel near Jerusalem, 2) a house church in the Lycus Valley (near Colossae) or 3) a community of predominantly Jewish believers near the city of Rome.

From clues in the book, the original recipients had a rich background in Jewish worship and interpretation of Old Testament Scripture.

The particular danger for the original audience of Hebrews was a temptation to reject Christianity and return to Judaism.

Members of this church were becoming discouraged in their Christian lives. Some were beginning to drift away from the faith as we see in Hebrews 2:1-4.

The members of this church had been in Christ long enough that they should have been more mature than they were as we see in Hebrews 5:11.

Not only were some discouraged, drifting and failing to mature, they were discontinuing to meet with their church family and forfeiting the encouragement and stimulation they so desperately needed.

From these and other warning sections of Hebrews we see that the original audience of Hebrews was a community of Messianic Jews some of whom were wavering in their faith in Christ and tempted to return to Judaism. The author of Hebrews wrote to this group of believers to warn them and encourage them to persevere in their commitment to Jesus.

## WHEN WAS HEBREWS WRITTEN?

Most conservative scholars believe that Hebrews was written in the mid-60s A.D. Animal sacrifices ceased to be made in 70 A.D. when the Romans destroyed the Temple of Jerusalem. Yet in Hebrews references are made to the sacrificial system as ongoing; so the book of Hebrews had to be written before 70 A.D.

The Roman historian Suetonius states that Emperor Claudius expelled all the Jews from Rome in 49 AD “because they were constantly rioting at the instigation of Chrestus.” The Jews expelled by Claudius included not only Jews, but also Jewish Christians. The expulsion of 49 A.D. may be the earlier time of testing referred to in Hebrews 10.

Finally, Nero’s rising threat to the church in the 60’s may account for the believers’ discouragement and diminishing commitment.

## LOOKING AHEAD

I believe our study of Hebrews will be both rich and challenging. Rich because of its high view of Christ and because of its extensive use of the Old Testament. Challenging because of thought patterns different from our own and because of its warnings to those who are drifting and those on the verge of defecting.

To enhance your study of Hebrews, I encourage you to read through it at least once in the coming week. In addition, I encourage you to memorize 1:1-4, one of the most majestic statements exalting our Lord Jesus in all of Scripture and the starting point of the book.

### Hebrews 1:1-4 (ESV)

*1 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.*