

THE BOOK OF HEBREWS

ORIENTING DATA FOR HEBREWS

- **Content:** a “word of exhortation” (13:22) sent in letter form, encouraging faithful perseverance in light of the superlative final word God has spoken in Christ
- **Author:** unknown; a second-generation believer (2:3), who was a skilled preacher and interpreter of Scripture, with an excellent command of Greek (it came into the canon among Paul’s letters, but definitely not by him)
- **Date:** unknown; guesses range from A.D. 50 to 90; probably before 70 (since the author gives no hint that the Jewish temple has been destroyed)
- **Recipients:** an unknown but specific group of (predominantly) Jewish Christians; perhaps a house church in Rome (13:24) that is opting out of relationships with the larger Christian community (10:25; 13:7, 17)
- **Occasion:** the community is discouraged because of suffering (10:35–39) and perhaps from doubts about whether Jesus really took care of sin; the author writes to convince them to “not throw away your confidence” (10:35; cf. 2:1; 4:14)
- **Emphases:** God has spoken his absolutely final word in his Son; to abandon Christ is to abandon God altogether; Christ is superior to everything that went before—the old revelation, its angelic mediators, the first exodus (Moses and Joshua), and the whole priestly system; God’s people can have full confidence in God’s Son, the perfect high priest, who gives all people ready access to God

OVERVIEW OF HEBREWS

Hebrews is a long, sustained argument, in which the author moves back and forth between an argument (based on Scripture) and exhortation. What drives the argument from beginning to end is the absolute superiority of the Son of God to everything that has gone before; this is what his *exposition of Scripture* is all about. What concerns the author is the possibility that some believers under present distress will let go of Christ and thus lose out on the Son’s saving work and high priestly intercession, and thus their own experience of God’s presence; this is what the interspersed *exhortations* are all about.

The introduction (1:1–3) sets the pattern with a sevenfold description of the Son and his work that makes him God’s last word. This is followed by a series of two major arguments (1:4–4:13; 4:14–10:18), each with several subsets, and a final major application and exhortation (10:19–13:21), in this case interlaced with some further biblical arguments.

Part 1 is all about the Son—his superiority to angels despite (and because of!) his humanity (1:4–2:18), to Moses (3:1–19), and to Joshua (4:1–13). Here the author also sets the stage for

part 2: Christ's effective high priestly ministry is made possible through the preexistent and now exalted Son's having become incarnate. And the failure of the first exodus lay not with Moses and Joshua, but with the people's failure to faithfully persevere; the readers are urged not to follow in their footsteps.

Part 2 is all about the Son as the perfect high priest. After a transitional exhortation (4:14–16), the author then introduces Jesus as high priest (5:1–10), followed by a series of two warnings and an encouragement (5:11–6:3 [slacking off]; 6:4–8 [apostasy]; 6:9–20 [God's sure promises]). Then, drawing on the royal messianic Psalm 110, he uses Melchizedek as a pattern for a priesthood of a higher order (7:1–28). Based on a new, thus superior, covenant, the perfect priest offered the perfect (once-for-all) sacrifice in the perfect sanctuary (8:1–10:18).

Part 3 is all about faithful perseverance. It begins with an appeal—in light of all this, “let us ...” (10:19–25)—followed by warning (10:26–31), encouragement (10:32–39), example (11:1–12:3), instruction (12:4–13), and another warning (12:14–17). Finally, using marvelous imagery that contrasts Mount Sinai with the heavenly Mount Zion, the author affirms their future certainty (12:18–29), then concludes with very practical exhortations about life in the present (13:1–25).

You will want to watch how the author makes this work—by a series of seven expositions of key Old Testament texts, while making the transition between each by way of exhortation: (1) Psalm 8:4–6 in Hebrews 2:5–18; (2) Psalm 95:7–11 in 3:7–4:13; (3) Psalm 110:4 in 4:16–7:28; (4) Jeremiah 31:31–34 in 8:1–10:18; (5) Habakkuk 2:3–4 in 10:32–12:3; (6) Proverbs 3:11–12 in 12:4–13; and (7) the Sinai theophany (Exod 19) in 12:18–29.

SPECIFIC ADVICE FOR READING HEBREWS

Most contemporary Christians do not find Hebrews an easy read, for at least two reasons: (1) its structure (just noted) of a single, sustained argument, interlaced with application and exhortations, and (2) the author's thought-world (basic ways of perceiving reality), which is so foreign to ours. Thus there are two keys to a good reading.

First, keep in sight the two foci that concern the author throughout: (1) the overwhelming majesty of Jesus, the Son of God, who stands at the beginning and the end of all things and whose suffering in his incarnation made him a perfect high priest on their behalf (he both dealt with sin finally and perfectly and is also a merciful and empathetic intercessor), and (2) all of this is spoken into the present despondency of the people to whom he writes, who have had a long siege of hardship (10:32–39) and who are beginning to wonder whether Jesus really is God's final answer. Try to put yourself in their shoes: Jews who had long ago put their trust in Christ, believing that at long last the fulfillment of their messianic hopes had come—only to have suffering (and sin) continue long after they had first believed.

Second, since everything for him (and them) hinges on his exposition of Scripture as pointing to Christ, it is especially important for you to have a sense of how the writer of Hebrews uses Scripture and what Scriptures he actually uses.

Four things are important about his use of Scripture: (1) His and their only Bible was the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. This means at times that his citations, which are very exact, do not always read as does your Old Testament, and sometimes his point is made from the wording in the Greek Bible. (2) He regularly uses a very common rabbinic way

of arguing, namely, “from the lesser to the greater” (= if something is true of *a*, how much more so of *z*). (3) He reads the entire Old Testament through the lens of Christ, understanding well that the royal psalms point to David’s greater son, the Messiah. (4) His form of scriptural argument is to cite his text and then show how other texts and the event of Christ support his reading of these texts.

It is especially important for you to be aware of what Scripture the author actually cites and then argues from. For example, even though he alludes to the sacrificial system in 9:1–10:18, he never cites from Leviticus. Rather, he focuses his argument almost altogether on Jesus as fulfilling a key royal psalm—Psalm 110. At the same time he presupposes that Jesus also fulfills the first royal psalm—Psalm 2. The latter declares that the Messiah is God’s Son (Ps 2:7), which is the very *first* thing the author says in his introduction (Heb 1:2). He then elaborates in terms of the Son’s being heir (as well as the Creator and Sustainer) of the universe, and of his being “the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being.” Psalm 2:7, joined with the Davidic covenant (2 Sam 7:14), is then the first citation (Heb 1:5) in the series of proof texts that follow. You will find it cited again—for the final time—in 5:5, where it is joined with a citation from Psalm 110:4.

Observe next how the *last* thing said in the introduction of the Son (Heb 1:1–3) is that he “provided purification for sins” and “sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.” These allusions to Psalm 110 (vv. 4, 1) are then picked up as the final citation in the following series (Heb 1:13). Thus in this one messianic psalm, you find two crucial matters: (1) the Son, now called “Lord,” is seated at the right hand of God (Ps 110:1), the place of his high priestly ministry (see Heb 8:1; 10:12; 12:2), and (2) God by oath promised that the exalted King/Son will also be a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek (Ps 110:4). So after the author joins Psalm 110:4 to Psalm 2:7 in 5:5–6, the rest of the argument from that point on will be about Christ’s fulfilling this promise.

Now add to these points the following: (1) the failure of Israel to enter into rest (Heb 3–4, based on Ps 95); (2) the fact that God promised a new covenant (Jer 31:31–34, cited in full in Heb 8:8–12); (3) the fact that Christ’s death effected both that new covenant and a perfect, once-for-all sacrifice for sins (9:1–10:18, thus bringing the old order to an end); (4) the long list (ch. 11) of those who faithfully persevered as they awaited the future promise; and (5) the concluding analogy in 12:18–29 of the superiority of heavenly Zion to Mount Sinai—and you should be able to see not only where the whole argument is going but also how persuasive it should have been for these early Jewish Christians. So read and enjoy!¹

¹ Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, [*How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 390–393.