



HEBREWS

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The Epistle to the Hebrews

The Epistle to the Hebrews is one of the major writings in the New Testament. Its author ranks with St. Paul and the author of the Gospel of John as one of the most profound theologians among the New Testament writers. The work is beautifully written, carefully argued, and reveals a pastoral concern for those to whom it is addressed.

The author sets forth in the introduction (1:14) the main themes of the work. God has in the past spoken to our forebears in many different ways through his prophets. This is a reference to God's revelation recorded in the Old Testament. But now "in these last days," that is, at this time of a new and final revelation, God has spoken to us in a new way by a Son; a Son who "reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature." This Son is

greater even than the angels, God's ministers and messengers in the Old Covenant. He has "made purification for sins," and, having completed that essential task, "he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high."

The theological argument of the rest of Hebrews spells out these themes in more detail. The argument can be summarized as follows:

Chapter 1:5-14. As the Son of God, Christ is superior to the angels. The author proves this from the Biblical quotations he uses (largely from the Psalms), in which the Christ is addressed as Son whereas the angels are "ministering spirits" (1:14).

Chapter 3:1-6. Christ is superior to Moses, the great lawgiver and leader of the people of Israel out of Egypt. Moses, although a key figure in the story of God's people, is "a servant in the household of God" (3:5). The Son is always superior to the servant.

Chapter 4:14-5:10. Christ is the great High Priest, superior to all the priests

of the Old Covenant. This priesthood is greater since God appointed him as priest in the order of Melchizedek (5:6). Melchizedek's name means "king of righteousness," and in Genesis 14:18 he is called "king of Salem, this is 'peace.'" Righteousness and peace are the qualities of the messianic age, and Melchizedek is an anticipation of the messiah who has now come. Melchizedek is also a priest who blesses Abraham and takes tithes from him (7:6). Since the one who gives blessings is superior to the one blessed (7:7), Christ who is a priest in Melchizedek's order is superior to Abraham. Since the Old Testament never mentions Melchizedek's birth or death, his priesthood foreshadows an eternal priesthood now fulfilled in Christ (7:3).

Chapter 8:1—10:18. Christ's priesthood is superior to all the other priests' and his offering is greater than theirs. They offer sacrifices in an earthly temple. Christ offers his sacrifice in

heaven itself (8:2). Christ's sacrifice is also greater than the sacrifices of the priests of the Old Covenant. They offer animals in sacrifice. Christ offers himself (9:2). The priests offer their sacrifices repeatedly. Christ offers his only once (9:25-26).

No summary will do justice to all the details and intricacies of Hebrews' argument. The one above attempts to help the reader understand the main points of the case that the letter makes. The author's arguments depend on accepting his premise that the Old Testament is an open-ended book which looks forward to a fulfillment, and that that fulfillment has come in the person of Jesus Christ. Like all the other writers of the New Testament, Hebrews believes that the Old Testament foreshadows Christ, so that, for the eyes of faith, many passages can be understood as referring to him.

This outline leaves out large portions of Hebrews in order to summarize the theological argument

of the letter. The purpose of the letter is not simply to state a theological case, vital though that case is. The author is a theologian, but he is also a pastor.

The passages omitted are intended to help and encourage the readers of the letter. They also reveal that the community to which the letter is addressed is going through a difficult time. One clue to where these pastoral exhortations begin is the word "therefore." Chapter 2:1-3 is a good example. Having shown that Christ is superior to the angels, the author writes, "... Therefore we must pay the closer attention to what we have heard lest we drift away from it. For if the message declared by angels was valid and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?"

The "message declared by the angels" is God's law revealed in the Old Testament. If violations of that law brought punishment, how much

greater will the punishment be if we neglect the new and greater revelation, indeed the message of salvation, that has come through the Son?

The author is clearly concerned that the people being addressed are in some danger of "drifting away." We do not know exactly what the problem was. It is possible that some of the people addressed may have decided that the Gospel is not really true after all and are returning to Judaism or to some other religion. We do know that the earliest proclamations of the Gospel stressed that Jesus would come again very soon. Paul believed that he would still be alive when Jesus returned (I Thess. 4:15). If, as seems likely, Hebrews was written about 80-85 A.D., then perhaps people were becoming discouraged because Christ had not returned.

There are also indications the community was experiencing some form of pressure or persecution from their non-Christian neighbors (10:32-34).

In any case Hebrews sees any turning away from Christ and from the truth of the Gospel as "apostasy" (6:6), and like a good pastor he warns the people of the terrible consequences of abandoning the wonderful gift of salvation and grace which God has given them.

The pattern of making an affirmation about God and what God has done (the theological statements outlined above), and then following that affirmation with a call to act in a certain way is a typical Biblical pattern. It goes back to the Ten Commandments. The Commandments begin not with a direction to do or to avoid an action. They begin with a theological statement, an affirmation of who God is and what he has done. "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage" (Exodus 20:2). Because that is so, then we are called to have no other gods, to honor our fathers and mothers, not to murder or steal, and so forth. Our duties are always a

response to God's gift, his gift of life and freedom and forgiveness, and the hope of salvation.

To put this idea into theological language, grace always precedes law. Hebrews observes that fundamental Biblical pattern. The author's affirmation about the superiority of Christ, the perfection of his priesthood and sacrifice, and his assurance of salvation to those who believe, are the basis of his call to remain faithful, steadfast, even in spite of temptations to "drift away."

The other exhortations in the letter have a similar purpose to the one in Chapter Two. In Chapter 3:7—4:13 the author compares the situation of the community he is addressing to that of the Israelites in the wilderness. The people of Israel had just experienced the great saving event, the rescue at the Red Sea. God had brought them safely out of slavery in Egypt and had promised that he would bring them to a new land of their own. But the people of Israel were often disobedient. The

most dramatic example was the making of the golden calf. Hebrews suggests that the community he is addressing is doing a similar thing. They have experienced the new and greater saving event, the salvation brought to them through Christ's sacrifice and the promise of "rest," not in an earthly land, but in heaven itself, in the very presence of God. He warns them of the consequences of falling away. The words of Psalm 95:11 "I swore in my wrath that they shall never enter my rest" are applied now to the community Hebrews is addressing as a warning that they are risking the loss of heaven itself.

The warnings of Chapters 3, 4, and those in 6:1-8 are stern. They reflect that somber warning of the Old Testament prophets. The author of Hebrews as a pastor is convinced that it would be irresponsible to fail to warn his flock of the danger they are in. But also, like a good pastor, he seeks to encourage them. In 6:9-10 he says, "Though we

speak thus (the reference is a stern warning) yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things that belong to salvation. For God is not so unjust as to overlook your work and the love which you showed for his sake in serving the saints, as you still do." He calls them to press on to the "full assurance of hope."

In the final long exhortation, 10:19—12:29, he assures them that they can have confidence because of Christ's sacrifice. He gives them additional support in Chapter 11, surely the best known part of Hebrews. This is the chapter on faith "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen," a classic definition of faith. The greatest part of the chapter is the catalogue of people of faith from Abel and Enoch through Abraham and Sarah, Moses, and all the heroes of the Old Testament and the martyrs of the Maccabean times. These people, like the community Hebrews is addressing, faced temptations and struggles,

but they were faithful. They constitute a "great cloud of witnesses" which, to us, is an example of those who testify and help us to persevere.

The final chapter of Hebrews, which begins, "Let brotherly love continue," gives important ethical injunctions. Faith rightly results in love for others, concern for those who are ill-treated, respect for marriage, and respect for the community and its leaders. The chapter ends with some final greetings.

Christians throughout the life of the Church have been indebted to the author of Hebrews for his teaching and the comfort and support that it offers us. Hebrews is the primary source for our understanding of Christ as the great High Priest who represents us before God and offers himself as the perfect sacrifice for our sins. Christ can do this for he is one with God and "bears the very stamp of his nature" (1:3). But Hebrews also emphasizes that Christ is one with us. He is truly

human, like us in all respects but "without sin," and, because he is fully human and has been tempted as we are, he can "sympathize with our weaknesses"(4:15). Hebrews' picture of the struggles of our Lord in Gethsemane (5:7-10) is as deeply moving as any of the Gospel accounts.

There are, however, ways in which Hebrews is a difficult book for us to understand. The author assumes a wide and deep knowledge of the Old Testament, something we do not all have. Furthermore he interprets the Bible in ways that are strange to us although they were common to students of the Bible in the author's time.

The most difficult issue for us is probably Hebrews' focus on the importance of sacrifice. That is a category that is somewhat foreign to us. The Eucharistic rites in the Book of Common Prayer use the words "Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us." The prayer of Consecration in Rite I says,

in language dependent on Hebrews, that Christ made "by his one oblation of himself once offered, a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world . . ." The sacrifice is not something we offer to God, but that God offers for us. The sacrifice is an expression of God's love, but that love is holy. Actions have consequences. A holy and just God cannot simply ignore the sins of the world. Forgiveness is costly. It costs the death of God's only Son. As Hymn 167 puts it, "There was no other good enough to pay the price of sin." The sacrificial language of Hebrews helps to keep that truth before our eyes.

There is much about Hebrews that we do not know. There is debate over when it was written. Some scholars think that it was written before the destruction of the Jewish Temple in 70 A.D. Most, however, place it some time in 80 A.D. We do not know for sure to whom it was written. There is a

probability it was intended for the Christian community in Rome. It is called an epistle, but it does not have the normal opening of an epistle though it has an ending like one. The author describes what he is doing as "speaking" and not "writing," and refers to the work as a "word of exhortation" (13:22). That phrase is a technical term for a sermon, and perhaps that is the best way to describe it.

Unfortunately, we do not know who the author of Hebrews was. For a very long time it was assumed that Paul was the author. But the style of writing makes that impossible. The great Biblical scholar of the third century, Origen, said that God alone knows who wrote Hebrews, and we shall have to be satisfied with that.

There is much that we do not know about Hebrews, but what we do know is far more important. Hebrews is a wonderful proclamation of the Gospel, the good news of the salvation that



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God has given us in Christ. It speaks to all ages, perhaps especially to ours. We, like people to whom Hebrews was originally speaking, are in danger of "drifting away." We need to hear the words of judgment and even more of comfort and support, which the Epistle offers us. Our faith needs to be deepened and strengthened so that we may truly know and live in "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

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