

NEW TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

Lesson 58

Hebrews – Part Three Introduction and Chapters 1 – 4

I. INTRODUCTION

We do not know for certain who wrote the book of Hebrews. Nor do we know for certain when it was written. We also do not know for certain who were the recipients of the book.

So, what do we know by way of background that can help us understand the book? Several things! First, we know that the recipients were Jewish Christians. It is apparent from even a casual reading of the book that Jews were the targeted audience who had previously embraced Jesus as Messiah. Also, we can fairly assume that the book was written before the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D. The book reads in ways that indicate Temple worship was ongoing at the time. Second, we know that whoever wrote the book was extremely well versed in Judaism. The whole book centers on Christianity as compared and contrasted with Judaism. Likewise, we see the author quoting extensively from the Hebrew scriptures.¹ Third, we also see that the author understood the nature and work of Christ as Messiah in significant doctrinal ways, providing perhaps the most thorough doctrinal treatment of the ministry of the Lord on Earth found in the Bible.

As we strive to unfold the beauties and riches in Hebrews, we do well to brush up along the way on our Judaism. For many of the keys of understanding are the Jewish doctrines and practices that are subject of the book itself.

What kind of Writing is Hebrews?

Scholars have debated the nature of Hebrews as a text. Some consider it a first century sermon reduced to writing for circulation among the church. Others see it as a letter written to a Christian/Hebrew audience. Some scholars differentiate between a common letter and a special writing of the

¹ The Hebrew quoted and referenced in Hebrews comes exclusively from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament that came out of the Jewish community in Alexandria Egypt.

first century that these scholars call an “epistle.” These scholars classify this as an epistle, rather than a common letter. Each scholar marshals good evidence in support of his respective case. Suffice it to say, this book contains elements of each type of text that further opens the depths of understanding and study available.

What was the Historical Usage of Hebrews?

Some of the earliest scholars and Christian fathers quote or reference the book of Hebrews. It clearly was read, respected, and used as a reference in the very earliest ages of the church. The early Bishop of Rome, Clement, quoted the book extensively. In Clement’s letter to the Corinthian church (written somewhere between 64 and 97 A.D.), Clement used Hebrews 11:37 (in chapter xvii) and 1:3-4 (in chapter xxxvi). One of the New Testament’s top textual scholars (Westcott) believed that Clement had a copy of Hebrews before him as a reference when writing his letter to the Corinthians. In addition to Clement, Polycarp (69 – 155) used the title for Jesus as “our everlasting High Priest” (in chapter xii). This title comes only from the book of Hebrews and is not found elsewhere in the New Testament. These two writers are not alone among the early church authors clearly using Hebrews; there are many more.

Also, there are some early places where the book is not used or referenced in the early church. Most notably, the Muratorian Fragment (one of the earliest lists of the gathering New Testament books) does not include Hebrews.

Authorship

In trying to suggest authorship for the book (a polite way to say, people trying to find reasons their “guess” who wrote it might be correct), scholars have noted reasons that Paul could have and could not have written it (likewise for Apollos, Priscilla – with or without Aquila, Clement, Luke, Barnabas, etc.). Reasons offered for Paul’s authorship include historical accreditation,² the reference in Hebrews to Timothy (13:23), and some

² Eusebius (263 – 339) writes that Clement of Alexandria (150 – 215) taught that Paul wrote the book in Hebrew and Luke translated it into Greek. Origen (~150 - ~215) taught that Paul was responsible as well. Other early Christian historians and scholars give differing accounts of the authorship.

similarities between Hebrews and certain writings of Paul.³ Reasons against Pauline authorship include that Paul always identified himself, but there is no identifier in Hebrews. Also, the style and vocabulary of Hebrews is substantially different from that of Paul's other writings.

The Title

In our earliest manuscripts, the book is titled "To Hebrews." Later, manuscripts change the title to "The Epistle to the Hebrews." Even later manuscripts call the book "The Epistle to the Hebrews of the Apostle Paul." While none of those titles would have originally been on the book, we can be fairly certain that the Hebrews was indeed written to Jewish Christians. There is no reference to Gentiles or Gentile controversies anywhere in the book (circumcision, food and idols, roles of Jew and Gentiles in the church, etc.) Instead, we read in the book teachings addressed to those whose hearts and thoughts were steeped in the Old Covenant and its teachings, rituals, and history.

The Purpose

A thorough reading of Hebrews indicates certain issues were cropping up among Jewish Christians that needed addressing. It seems a number of Jewish believers were thinking of leaving their Christian faith and returning to Judaism. This is understandable if we remember certain things apparent from other scriptures. First, many believers thought Jesus would return soon and no doubt as days, weeks, months, and years passed with no second coming, second guessing must have occurred. Similarly, Jesus clearly taught that the Temple itself would be destroyed and that had not happened as of the writing of Hebrews (though it would happen soon in 70 A.D.). These events must have caused ridicule among the Jewish believers as well as questioning about the truth of their faith.

Hebrews is written to reaffirm to Jewish doubters the central truths about the doctrine of Christ, the truth of his kingdom and ministry, and the need to hold fast in faith. The writer does this by demonstrating that the change from the Levitical system to the Christian system was predicted in scripture

³ For example, Hebrews 1:4 says Jesus "became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs" which seems to echo Paul in Philippians 2:9-10 that God gave Jesus "the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth."

itself, both as to the priesthood and sacrifices as well as the sanctuary and covenant itself.

With this in mind, we see logical divisions in Hebrews as:

Christ is superior to Angels (1:1 - 2:18)
Christ is superior to Moses (3:1 – 4:13)
Christ is superior to the Aaronic priests (4:14 – 7:28)
Christ's covenant is superior (8)
Christ's sanctuary is superior (9:1 – 12)
Christ's sacrifice is superior (9:13 – 10:18)
Therefore, persevere and live right! (10:19 – 13:25)

II. TEXT

A. *Christ is Superior to Angels (1:1 – 2:18)*

Hebrews begins by setting out Jesus as God's final word to mankind. Previously, God spoke through prophets in various ways, but in the "last days"⁴ God spoke through Jesus, his son. Jesus is the exact radiance and representation of God himself. Jesus provided for the purification of sins and then sat at the right hand of the majestic God in heaven. Sitting indicates that the work of Jesus is completed. There is nothing left to do to provide forgiveness of sins (1:1-4).

This is the Jesus that is superior to angels, in name and deed. Lest there be any doubt, the readers are reminded that God never called angels his "son." The angels themselves worshipped Jesus and were servants to Jesus. Jesus has the throne that endures forever. Jesus, from the foundations of the world, is the one who will never change, who will outlast all of creation. God never speaks of the angels as he does of Jesus. Angels are not Messiah. They are creatures that minister to the children of God through Jesus, to those who inherit salvation (1:5-14).

The readers are urged to pay careful attention. We have in Jesus a salvation announced by the Lord, a salvation necessary as the scriptures and angels themselves bear witness. For no one is in a position to approach God on his or her own merit. Not only do we have the witness of salvation in Christ from those who saw it first

⁴ Biblically speaking, the days after Christ's resurrection are the "last days" whether in 60 A.D. or 2005.

hand, but we also confirmation by the ministry and work of the Holy Spirit as well (2:1-4).

There is no dispute that for a time, Jesus was by all appearances made lower than angels. Jesus suffered a death (which angels do not suffer), but this lowering of Jesus, this taste of death on our behalf, is actually the proof that he is greater than the angels. It is the victorious crown of glory and honor that he wears. He is not only a hero who gave his life for others, but he is also a conquering hero, who lives with every thing now under his feet, even death itself (2:5-9).

Here, we see Jesus as not only the great ruling king of glory and salvation, but also as our leader. He brings us before God just as he bore our sin unto death. This means that through Jesus, we are now children of God, freed from the devil and his power, free from the fear of death itself. Jesus, who suffered and atoned for our sins, is our help in ways no other could help us. Name an angel of whom those truths can be said! There is none, for Jesus is greater than all the angels (2:10-18).

At this point, one must ask the doubting Hebrew Christians the question: Why would you want to turn from this Jesus and return to Judaism and the Old Covenant?

B. Jesus is superior to Moses (3:1- 4:13)

The Jews should take note: Jesus is not only greater than the angels, but he is also greater than Moses himself. Moses, the great lawgiver, the redeemer of Israel from slavery to Pharaoh, the man who saw the trail of God's glory, is less than Jesus. Certainly Moses, like Jesus, was faithful in his mission and purpose to God. However, Moses was a faithful servant. Jesus was a faithful son. Moses served in God's house; Jesus rules and presides over God's house (3:1-6).

So, the Jews should remember the experience of the followers of Moses. As the people hardened their hearts and rebelled against Moses' leadership, they lost their chance to live in the Promised Land. How much worse off would we be if we failed to follow and honor the leadership of Jesus? Before any Jew would abandon their Christian faith and return to Judaism, they would well heed the

experience of their fore fathers who wanted to abandon Moses and return to Egypt! (3:7-19)

Quoting scripture, the writer explains that God has a rest – a time – when labor and working DOES NOT OCCUR, and this rest is for Christians. Christ has done the work; Christ is seated; the time of rest before God is here. Those who hear and come before God in faith enter that rest. We no longer work for salvation. We no longer work to please God or merit his favor. We have rest before him. Such is the promise of the word of God.

This word of God is true and accurate. It is sharper than even a sword, able to penetrate and pierce the deepest things, able to judge even the hearts and minds of the heart. Nothing hides from God or his word. He sees and knows all. There should be no turning back! Jesus is greater than Moses and worthy of our loyalty and allegiance without wavering or faulting (4:1-13).

III. POINTS FOR HOME

1. Jesus - Anticipated Promise, Not Accident
2. Hold fast to Jesus.
3. He saves.
4. He redeems.
5. There is nothing greater.