

## Five Things to Know

### *About the Book of Hebrews*

#### I. A Letter or a Sermon?

**What exactly is the Book of Hebrews?** Hebrews is the first and largest book in the latter part of the New Testament, known as the General Epistles (Hebrews through Revelation). But, much like the books of 1 John and Revelation, Hebrews does not resemble a normal letter from antiquity. There is neither a greeting nor a stated recipient (“From \_\_\_\_\_, to \_\_\_\_\_”) and there is little to suggest a personal or intimate connection between the sender and the audience. The feature that most resembles an ancient letter is the closing greeting and blessing found in the final four verses (13:22-25). **So, if it is not really a letter, what is it?** Well, more like a long sermon! Hebrews is a homily that circles around a constant theme: God has spoken decisively in Jesus Christ, and because Jesus is supreme, God's people must remain faithful to Him.

#### II. Author(s)

**Who wrote the Book of Hebrews?** For much of church history, the majority view was that the Apostle Paul wrote Hebrews. However, this presumption fell apart during the Reformation, with Martin Luther and John Calvin outright rejecting Pauline authorship. Advances in textual analysis over the next several centuries moved the consensus further away from Paul. **But if not Paul, then who?** Various biblical and historical figures have been suggested, including:

*Clement of Rome*, an Apostolic Father and bishop of Rome near the end of the first century

*Luke the Evangelist*, author of Luke and Acts

*Barnabas*, an apostle and Paul's first missionary companion (Acts 13–14)

*Apollos*, an influential teacher and missionary associated with the churches in Ephesus and Corinth (Acts 18:24-28; 1 Cor. 3:6; Tit. 3:13)

*Priscilla and Aquila*, two companions of Paul who became Apollos' teachers (Acts 18)

The bad news? It is impossible to determine the author of Hebrews. The good news? There are many plausible candidates. Like Luther, the writer of this document leans toward... Apollos!

#### III. Date of Writing

**When was Hebrews written?** It is hard to say, but several scholars place it sometime between 50 CE and 95 CE. The early end is attributed to the mention of Timothy (13:23), who joined Paul's missionary journeys around 49 CE. The later end is due to a letter written by Clement of Rome (*1 Clement*, c. 96 CE) which seems to contain references to Hebrews. Another significant reason for this range is that Hebrews deals with the challenge of persevering in faith under pressure. While the church was not yet experiencing empire-wide persecution, there were smaller but significant episodes of persecution between 60-90 CE, most notably under the Roman Emperor Nero (c. 64 CE). Additionally, many scholars note the comparison of Jesus with the Israelite tabernacle/temple in Hebrews and argue for a date sometime before 70 CE, when the Second Jerusalem Temple was destroyed by the Romans (presuming the author might have chosen a different comparison after such a catastrophic event). While we cannot be certain about the precise date, the message of Hebrews seems to have originally addressed Christians who lived during the particularly difficult period of 60-90 CE.

## IV. Audience

**To whom was Hebrews originally written?** For much of church history, it was presumed that Hebrews was written to Jewish Christians. This presumption was based on two key factors:

1. Some ancient copies of Hebrews include the inscription “To the Hebrews,” though this heading was likely added later and not part of the original Epistle.
2. Hebrews is saturated with Israel’s Scriptures and frequently interprets Christ through Israelite figures (Moses, Melchizedek, and the “heroes of faith” in Heb. 11) and Israelite religious imagery (angels, priesthood, the tabernacle/temple, etc.).

Some scholars speculate that Hebrews might have been written to a particular Jewish Christian congregation, perhaps those within the Roman Church. Or perhaps to combat the Judaizers, an early Jewish Christian group that insisted Gentiles had to enter into the Old Covenant before they could receive the New Covenant. However, this presumption overlooks an important detail: Gentile Christians in the early church would have been familiar with Israel’s Scriptures, too. *There was no New Testament at this time.* The only Scriptures were Israel’s Scriptures, and the most prominent version outside of Israel was the Greek Old Testament translation (the *Septuagint*). While Gentiles likely were not as familiar with the Old Testament as their Jewish brethren, some scholars today point out that Gentiles likely were not “Scripture illiterate.” Furthermore, when we consider the larger message of Hebrews—that Jesus is our supreme Lord and high priest, and we must hold fast to him in times of trouble—the possible audience becomes broader. The ethnicity and location of the audience remain debatable. The spiritual problem being addressed, however, is not. Hebrews was written to Christians experiencing pressure, discouragement, and the temptation to abandon their faith.

## V. Hebrews and the Old Testament

**Does Hebrews interact much with the Old Testament?** Yes! In fact, it quotes or alludes to the Old Testament at a rate of roughly once per paragraph! While Matthew and Romans contain more quotations and allusions to Israel’s Scriptures overall, Hebrews is saturated with the Old Testament. Many scholars even consider it the most “Old Testament dense” book in the New Testament because of the frequency and length of its Old Testament references. **Why does Hebrews interact with the Old Testament so much?** The author is reading Israel’s Scriptures as a unified witness to Jesus Christ, and nearly every major theological claim in the book is grounded in an exposition of those Scriptures. In that sense, Hebrews is a magnificent early Christian sermon on the Old Testament.

### *Bonus: Why Does the Message of Hebrews Matter?*

**Why should we care about the Book of Hebrews?** Hebrews contains some of the most profound teaching in the New Testament about who Jesus is, what He has accomplished, and why weary believers can continue to trust Him. It was written to Christians who were discouraged and tempted to drift away from Christ toward something easier or less dangerous. That is precisely why its message remains relevant today. In a world full of competing loyalties and distractions, Hebrews reminds us that Jesus is better than every rival hope and worthy of our enduring faithfulness.<sup>xs</sup>

