

HOLINESS REVEALED

A DEVOTIONAL STUDY IN HEBREWS

AMY REARDON

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PROLOGUE



The book of Hebrews is complex and full of tightly argued theology. As a literary work, it is masterful, but as a spiritual and theological guide, it can be quite challenging. However, many scholarly writings assist in wading through it. They give pages of detail and are truly fascinating. But this devotional study is meant to serve as a devotional with the aim of engaging both mind and heart.

This book is not for scholars, nor is it for beginners. It is for the Christian who is looking for a personal or group Bible study or devotion that involves both intellectual thought and inward reflection.

Some devotional books focus mostly on the personal application of Scripture. They include a rush to look within ourselves, to change, to fix, and simply to understand our own selves better. That is vital to be sure. But what is God

revealing to us about who *he* is? The glorious Christology¹ of Hebrews addresses this question by bringing us face-to-face with the terrestrial expression of God: the God-man, Jesus Christ. And when God gives us a glimpse of who he is, we don't want to miss it.

Hebrews is not an easy read for the twenty-first-century Christian. One often stumbles and sometimes trips over its content. But the serious Bible student is not satisfied with just glossing over the tricky parts. A love for God and a love for his Word compel us to dig in, to try to really understand what is written. With some portions of Scripture, definitive interpretations are dangerous. Two readers can understand one passage completely differently, even if both readers are biblical scholars. Even so, if we really care about God's Word, we can't be afraid of it. We must approach it with alert minds and devoted hearts.

This book will not reveal all the mysteries of Hebrews. But it is my hope that it will aid in addressing the bulk of what Hebrews contains without sweeping chunks under the rug. Let's try to connect the dots of the themes running throughout the book. Let's try to tackle the parts that alarm us. And even when we can't figure it all out, let's try to make ourselves aware of what the difficulties are, instead of turning a blind eye to them. What do we stand to gain? As commentator Donald Guthrie has noted, the book of Hebrews will help us answer the most important question

PROLOGUE

of all time—a question that incorporates both the idea of knowing God and knowing ourselves: How do human beings approach God?²

INTRODUCTION



Since the days of Adam and Eve, sin has always been with us. Even as I was in the process of writing this book, there was practically a reenactment of the garden of Eden in my own home. My young son had drawn a picture with a whiteboard marker on a small erasable board. I praised his picture and told him I wanted to show it to Daddy when he got home. My daughter, standing nearby, reached her finger toward the board to rub out the picture. As I snatched the picture before she could destroy it, she pouted and said, “I want to draw a picture, too.”

“OK,” I said. “Upstairs you have paper of all sorts. You have markers and crayons and colored pencils. You can draw anything you want! The only thing you can’t do is draw on this one board.”

“I want to draw on that board!” she hollered.

I couldn't help but think of our first parents. They wanted the one thing—*one thing* out of an entire garden—that they couldn't have. Of course, what they wanted wasn't so much a juicy piece of fruit as it was to be masters of their own fates. To be like God. To be in control. I'm pretty sure that's what my daughter wanted too.

As we all know, it was that egotistical sin that separated us from our holy God. Eventually, God formalized a covenant that would establish a means of human-divine relationship. He would be the God of the Israelites, and they would be his people. But they were expected to fulfill certain obligations—laws—in order to please God and connect with him. Above all, there had to be payment for sin. That took place in the form of animal sacrifice. But in God's good time, a new covenant was brought about because of the life and saving work of Jesus.

The book of Hebrews is written to prove that God's new covenant is an improvement upon the old system. That is not to say that God had made some sort of error with the first covenant. Rather, the original covenant was just a shadow of things to come. Hebrews 10:1 says, "The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship."

Jesus brought complete, perfect salvation. His sacrifice was once and for all and provided us with access to the

Father. In addition, he sent us the Holy Spirit, enabling us to live completely sanctified lives. These are the “good things” God promised. The shadow has been lifted. We live in the full light of the work and glory of Christ. We can be made perfect in him.

In exploring the amazing thing God has done, the book of Hebrews falls into three major sections. The first section comprises the first three parts of this book and shows readers who Jesus really is. Hebrews indulges us with some of the Bible’s loveliest, most poetic Christology. It is thorough, exploring Jesus and his work almost exclusively for seven entire chapters. The main point of the first section is to prove that Jesus is a superior mediator between God and man. (I must acknowledge that the biblical text does not actually use the word *mediator* until chapter 8, which is in the second section of the book. However, the word so perfectly sums up what is taught in the first section that I felt free to make use of it.)

The second section is found in part 4, and it explores the covenant. It discusses the temporal status the first covenant had and the perfection and permanency of the second. Its main point is to prove that the first covenant was incomplete, and the second has replaced it.

With the third section (parts 5 and 6), the writer becomes pastoral. In view of all Christ has done, our response should involve our constancy. We are to be loving in all

our relationships and lead disciplined lives. In this section we also find the famous chapter on heroes of the faith, worthy examples of Christian commitment.

This book is divided into thirty-one devotional studies. It will also be helpful to have your Bible open to Hebrews and a notebook on hand as you read and reflect. The devotions in this book are not all equal in length, as some portions of the book of Hebrews are more complex than others. Questions follow each devotion, but some have fewer questions than others. The book has six parts that are each suited to a week's study for groups or individuals. You may wish to do one a day (five or six in a week), but if some Scripture portion really begins to dig into your soul, take your time.

Before we begin, however, it's important to take a look at the setting of the book: the author, the recipients, and the date of writing. Frankly, not much is known. But there are some educated guesses, and the text is better understood when the possibilities of the setting are considered.

May the Holy Spirit work in your life, speaking to both your intellect and your soul as you explore this rich portion of the Word of God.

THE SETTING OF HEBREWS

So much is unknown about Hebrews. While other Epistles have an identified author and audience, Hebrews leaves us guessing. Often, knowing the writer's or the recipients' situation makes a book come alive. For example, aren't we moved that Paul could write to the Philippians about rejoicing while he was chained in prison? Aren't we more inspired by the faithfulness of the Thessalonians, knowing they were suffering persecution?

Even without certainty of the details, Hebrews is a gold mine for Christians. Our hearts fill with gratitude when we realize what Christ has done for us. We jump at the chance to respond by imitating great saints of the past and give a ready ear to the admonishments toward the end of the text. Still, we can enrich our experience by considering theories about the background of the book.

WHO WROTE HEBREWS?

If you open a King James Bible, you'll see credit given to Paul as the author of the epistle. But you won't see that in *The New International Version* or in most other translations. Paul's name is not found in the oldest Greek manuscripts, and many of the church fathers—much closer in time to the

writing of the book than King James' team—did not believe Paul wrote it. Donald Guthrie says that now, in the twenty-first century, “Pauline authorship is almost universally regarded as unacceptable.”¹ But because for centuries Paul was believed to be the writer, it is worthwhile to review a few of the facts that persuaded scholars otherwise. Here are three reasons that Guthrie notes.

First, the author never gives a name. Paul always used his name in his letters. He had a personal relationship with most of the churches to which he wrote, having visited the majority of them, so including his name only made sense. In addition, Paul used his good name for its credibility. The message of the letter was nearly always readily accepted when his name appeared in it.²

Second, the writing of Hebrews doesn't sound like that of Paul. The Greek is too sophisticated for him, and the letter is quite focused. Paul's letters tend to have a bit of rabbit-trailing that is not found in Hebrews, and his style of Greek was a bit more commonplace.

Third, the subject matter doesn't resemble that of Paul's other letters. Paul demonstrated consistency as he wrote to different people and churches. But we don't find his favored themes in Hebrews. Also, much of what *is* in Hebrews isn't echoed in Paul's other letters. Gareth Cockerill gives an example: “[The author of Hebrews] is more interested in the kind of faith that enables a Christian to persevere in the

face of difficulties (11:1–40) than in Paul’s more frequent theme: the kind of faith through which one becomes a Christian (Rom. 1:16; 5:1–5; Eph. 2:8–9).”³

Scholars have suggested many possible authors, including Apollos, Philip, Peter, Jude, and even Priscilla. Some may be surprised to see a woman’s name in this list. The people of that day would have been equally surprised! In fact, one of the reasons Priscilla is suspected is because no author’s name is given. If a woman had written it, she might well have left her name off, since many people would have rejected a letter with female authorship. But why is this woman in particular considered as a possible author? She and her husband both served as theological instructors to Apollos, so she was an important teacher (Acts 18:24–26). Paul considered her his coworker, which underscores her status as a respected woman of the church (Rom. 16:3). Of the few prominent women with whom the New Testament acquaints us, she seems most likely.

It is exciting to think that a woman could have written a book of the Bible. But most likely, the authorship of Hebrews will remain a mystery until we meet the author face-to-face! One thing is certain: Hebrews is one of the most beautifully crafted Epistles in the New Testament. Peter O’Brien, who refers to the writer as a “creative theologian,” offers the following praise: “His writing has been regarded by many as the finest in the New Testament, both

in its use of grammar and vocabulary and in its style and knowledge of Greek rhetorical conventions. He was probably trained in rhetoric, as his use of alliteration, antithesis, chiasm, and many other stylistic elements attests, and he is familiar with philosophy, both Jewish and Greek.”⁴ Unfortunately, most of us read the epistle in English, not ancient Greek, so we lose much of the style and grace of the writing.

It is only fair to acknowledge that it would be rare for a woman to have been trained so extensively. (Why not a woman with extraordinary natural gifts, not to mention the inspiration of the Holy Spirit?) What really matters is that the book is the inspired Word of God, and as such it is “alive and active” (Heb. 4:12). If we recognize that God directed the process, the person who actually put words to papyrus is fairly inconsequential.

Because we have no name for the writer, we will often see him or her referred to as “the writer” or “the author.” These terms do not refer to the writer of this devotional study, but to the person who penned Hebrews.

FOR WHOM WAS THE BOOK WRITTEN?

Although the book is called “Hebrews,” it isn’t quite clear for whom it was written. It might have been for Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. It might have been for Jewish

Christians elsewhere. Or, despite its nomenclature, it might have been written for Gentiles.

One can't read Hebrews without noticing all the Old Testament passages quoted and, of course, all the discussion about Jewish faith and practices. But the quotes are from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. This may indicate that the intended audience was non-Jewish. As converts to the Christian faith, the readers would have become familiar with the Septuagint quickly, since there was no canonized Christian Bible yet. In so doing, they may have been asking questions as to how all the business of priests and sacrifices related to them, which is a major subject of Hebrews.⁵

If the intended audience was actually Jewish, the recipients may have been living outside Palestine. The text mentions that none of them had actually heard Jesus himself. That would be a stretch if the community were in Jerusalem. The use of the Septuagint, rather than the Bible of the Hebrews (the *Tanakh*⁶), makes Jerusalem a remote choice. There is also a heavy Hellenistic (Greek) influence in the book, which is why places such as Alexandria are suggested. Many other cities have been proposed, one of which is Rome. Rome is often considered the strongest possibility.

We can be confident that the recipients of the letter were in an urban area of the Roman Empire, just as is true of the

other epistles to church communities. The favored theory seems to be that the audience was a community of Jews somewhere other than Jerusalem. F. F. Bruce notes that the writer's great conviction about the old covenant being replaced by the new wouldn't have had much zing if it weren't written to people who were accustomed to following the Hebrew faith—that is, Jews.⁷ And Cockerill notes that Greek-speaking Jews were very caught up in God revealing himself through Moses⁸—a subject the writer used to make his argument about the supremacy of Jesus.

As we try to understand Hebrews in the twenty-first century, it may not matter too much if the recipients lived in Rome, Jerusalem, or wherever. It helps to know, however, that this group of believers had suffered insult, imprisonment, and persecution—although none had been martyred (Heb. 10:32–35). They were beginning to back away from their faith, and it seems they wished to return to the traditional Hebrew ways. Perhaps that isn't too surprising when we consider that while persecution was beginning to heat up for Christians, the Jewish faith was still protected by Roman law. When we think of the challenges they faced and their temptation to turn tail and run back to something more familiar, we may be able to apply the lessons in Hebrews to our own personal situations in a more meaningful way.

WHEN WAS HEBREWS WRITTEN?

The date for the writing is hard to determine when we cannot verify the author and audience. However, we do have one enormous clue. The book of 1 Clement is dated at about AD 96. That book quotes Hebrews. So the book of Hebrews must have been written before AD 96.

A few other clues are key. Hebrews mentions Timothy, and it is believed that this is the same Timothy who accompanied Paul. So the book would have been written during Timothy's lifetime. The lack of mention of Paul may indicate that Paul was no longer alive. He died around AD 67.

Hebrews makes no mention of the destruction of the temple and the conquering of Jerusalem in AD 70. In fact, the book seems to be written to address the regular, continuing practice of temple activities that would have ceased in AD 70.⁹ Writing a book like Hebrews without mentioning the destruction of the temple really doesn't make sense. This seems a strong indication that the book was written before the year AD 70.



PART 1

THE INCOMPARABLE **CHRIST**

HEBREWS 1-2

1

WHO CHRIST IS, PART 1

HEBREWS 1:1-4



GOD'S COMMUNICATION BEFORE CHRIST (HEB. 1:1)

The Lord had been communicating with his people for centuries before the incarnation of Jesus Christ. The Old Testament is full of stories of this communication. The writer of Hebrews mentioned prophets as deliverers of God's Word, and implied that angels did the same. The emphasis in Hebrews 1:1 is on the prophets.

The deeds of some of the prophets were sometimes so bizarre they might have qualified them as mentally unfit if they weren't known to be men of God. Think of Ezekiel lying on his left side for 390 days and for 40 days on his right, all the while eating only a starving man's rations prepared over cow dung (Ezek. 4). Think of Hosea purposefully marrying

a prostitute (Hos. 1). These were not acts of insanity. These were powerful, living metaphors that communicated God's displeasure with Israel.

A prophet might do a spectacular thing, as when Elijah called down fire from heaven to ignite a sopping wet altar (1 Kings 18). He might see visions, as Isaiah (ch. 6) and Zechariah (chs. 1–6) did. Or a prophet might just preach or guide, as seems to have been the case with the prophets Micah and Nahum.

Enemies ran in fear of prophets, and kings submitted to them. If a person received the blessing of a prophet, it meant that person received the blessing of God. Although the prophets were often isolated from the rest of the population, their status in society was well established. They were God's human mouthpieces.

GOD'S NEXT COMMUNICATOR (HEB. 1:2–4)

Verse 2 opens with “in these last days.” That was written millennia ago, yet we are still waiting for the return of Christ. How does the first century qualify as “last days”?

Jews and early Christians, similar to ourselves, viewed all of salvation history to be in two major eras. The first era is full of prophecy and prediction about the future. The second era is the fulfillment of the prophecies. The Greek

term translated as “last days” is more accurately translated as “this final age”—that is, the second of the two major eras. The writer, then, was noting that the final age had been ushered in. Ever since Jesus’ birth, prophecy had been and was being fulfilled. So even in this brief term, the writer made an important claim. The Jews had been waiting for the final age. The writer declared that it had arrived.

The writer’s first purpose in the book of Hebrews was to demonstrate to the readers how and why Jesus was and is greater than even prophets or angels. Angels are servants and companions of God, but their status cannot be compared to Christ’s. The prophets spoke the Word of God well, as did the angels, but with the advent of the new covenant, God used a far superior mouthpiece: his Son, Jesus Christ.

Jesus is a better spokesman for God because he *is* God. This must be clear from the outset of the epistle, because it is the foundation of the letter’s discourse. The deity and supremacy of Christ are primary subjects. Even in just these first four verses we find Jesus’ status outlined. We read who he is in relationship to God, the universe, human beings, and angels.

NOT A LESSER MEMBER OF THE TRINITY
(HEB. 1:2)

At first glance, one may think that the first few verses of Hebrews portray Jesus as a lesser member of the Trinity, subservient to God the Father. Nothing could be further from the truth. Rather, the description given identifies Jesus' role within the Trinity, and the intersection of his role as human with his role as God.

The first complication is that he is referred to as "heir." When we think of an heir, we think of someone who is the recipient of someone else's treasure. The heir didn't earn it; he got it because he was the son of someone who had it first. But looking at the rest of verse 2, why does that situation not apply here?

Donald Guthrie writes: "In human affairs the eldest son is the natural heir. In the analogy [in this verse] a more profound thought is introduced. The heir is also the creator. He is not inheriting what he has not been connected with. He inherits what he himself made."¹

The verse hearkens back to Psalm 2:8: "Ask me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession." What are the similarities between the two verses? What is the key difference?

Peter O'Brien writes: "The oracle in the psalm echoes Genesis 17:5, where the inauguration of Abraham as heir

marks a significant step in redemptive history.”² The first era began when Abraham, in covenant with God, inherited all nations. The second era is signified by Jesus Christ becoming heir to all that exists.

“Through whom also he made the universe” is a pretty curious statement. We’ve already discussed that Jesus is heir of what he himself has created, but it isn’t the role we usually think of for the Son of God. Savior, not Creator, is the first thing that comes to mind. However, it has been declared elsewhere in Scripture that he is Creator. Take a moment to look up John 1:3 and Colossians 1:16. What do you think it means that God the Father made the universe *through* Jesus the Son? Do you think it matters?

Guthrie says: “The Christians were convinced that the same person who had lived among men was the one who created men.”³ The recipients of Hebrews had not seen Jesus, but many of them had walked the earth when he did. We know that Immanuel means “God with us,” and God is with us even today. But for the people of that time, God’s presence was palpable. The readers of the letter may have known people who had been with Jesus. God had been with them in such a real sense that they could reach out and touch him. And this Jesus—this man who had walked among them—was the same One who had created them!

Just as ancient Greeks gave much consideration to wisdom, so the Jews reflected upon the wisdom of God. In fact,

in passages such as Proverbs 8:22–31, divine wisdom is personified and is said to be God’s companion in the creation of the universe.⁴ It seems that some Christians began to identify Christ as the living, breathing “Divine Wisdom.” The author of Hebrews paws at “wisdom theology” as a cat paws at a dangling string. But in wisdom theology, divine wisdom’s personification is still quite mystical, never becoming flesh, never affecting salvation. The author of Hebrews, on the other hand, emphasized that Christ is quite real, quite earthy. While he is the exalted Son of God, he is also the man who walked among us.⁵

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Note that the writer of Hebrews wrote that the prophets spoke “to our ancestors” (Heb. 1:1). Why do you think he said their writings were for people of the past? Why were the ancient prophets still so revered by the Jews during the days of early Christianity?

2. Within the following parallel passages, what are some of the prophecies that were fulfilled, indicating that the final age had begun?

- Isaiah 7:14 and Matthew 1:22–23
- Genesis 49:10 and Luke 3:33

- Isaiah 53:3 and John 7:5–7
- Psalm 34:20 and John 19:33–36
- Psalm 16:10 and Matthew 28:2–7

3. What is Jesus' position in the Trinity (Heb. 1:3)?

4. What is Jesus' relationship to the universe (v. 2)?

5. What is his relationship to the angels (v. 4)?

6. What is his human form (v. 3)?

7. What is his relationship to us? What did he do for us?
(v. 3)?

8. As you've read and reflected about the author's description of Christ, what have you learned about who he is? How have you looked at the nature of Christ in a new way?

9. Why is Christ a superior communicator of God's message? Does this mean there is better access to God for those of us who live in the era of Christ, as opposed to those who lived in the days of only the Law and the Prophets?

10. How do you think your relationship with God is different as a Christian than it would have been if you'd been an everyday Israelite in the times of the prophets? Do you think the everyday Israelites experienced intimacy with God?

11. When you think of who Christ is, what do you think your response to him should be today?