

BOOK PANORAMA

Hebrews

By Dr. David A. DeWitt

Hebrews is an amazing book. We don't know who wrote it. We don't know to whom it was written. We don't know from where it was written. And we don't know where it was intended to go. Yet it is one of the most dynamic books ever written. It has been quoted by believer and unbeliever alike for nearly 2000 years (beginning with 1 Clement in 95 A.D. right on down to today).

The Author

There has been much speculation about who wrote Hebrews. Suggestions include: Paul, Barnabas, Silas, Apollos, Luke, Philip, Priscilla, Aquila, and Clement of Rome. Paul can probably be ruled out because the writer includes himself among those who had received the message of Christ from others, and those others were confirmed by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit (2:4). Paul's revelation was confirmed by those signs, so the author was probably not Paul. Besides, 2:3-4 seems to say the letter was written after the era of signs and wonders. But in the end we have to agree with Origin who, writing in the third century, said that only God knows who wrote Hebrews.

Where to?

The target audience seems to be Hebrew believers. The title "Hebrews," like all the titles of the New Testament books, was given when the books were brought together as a collection, sometime in the second century. Within the epistle there is no stated recipient. Contextually, though, there is a focus on the issues which concerned Hebrew Christians. There are repeated references to the Jewish law, their priesthood, their temple, their history, and their sacrificial system, but there are no references to Gentile or pagan practices or traditions. So it is safe to assume it was written to a Jewish Christian community.

Hebrew Christians away from any former dependence on the earthly Mosaic Law and the Levitical Priesthood. Theirs was a better hope, a better promise, a better sacrifice, and a better age, mitigated by a better priesthood. They were to focus on a heavenly Savior, a heavenly calling, a heavenly gift. Theirs was a perfect High Priest who, through a perfect sacrifice, inaugurated a better covenant than the one given through Moses.

The Theme

The theme is, as usual, more difficult to determine than the purpose. This is because the purpose is historical for the intended audience, and the theme is applicable to all audiences. The author seems to come back to one key idea throughout the book—the assurance of the individual believer in the area of his salvation and his fellowship with God. We could say it's about THE ASSURANCE OF ONE'S POSITION BEFORE GOD. Understand that the author is not talking about the security of salvation. That is a function of God's predetermined choice (Ephesians 1:3-11; Romans 8:28-31), and therefore cannot be lost (John 5:24). But the question the author is addressing is "How does any particular person know he or she is one of God's elect?" That assurance is based on the superiority of Christ and our maturity in Christ.

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But where? The most natural guess would be Jerusalem. And in the end, that may be the right answer. But there are several clues that suggest it was a Jewish Christian community elsewhere. One possibility would be northern Egypt, like Alexandria or Carthage. For one thing, they were apparently evangelized not by the apostles but by those who heard (2:3). Also, all the quotes (29 direct quotations from the Old Testament and 53 allusions to other passages) are from the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, done in Alexandria in 250 B.C.). Then there is the fact that this community was not new, yet they were immature and in need of teaching (5:11-14). Although that is a possible need in Jerusalem, it seems less likely than in a more remote community.

Where from?

Here the biggest clue is in 13:24. It reads: *Those from Italy greet you*. Some say this means those outside Italy are greeting those in Italy. But that assumes the Jewish Christian community receiving the letter was in Italy—possible, but unlikely. Most likely, it is those in Italy, and most likely Rome, who are greeting those who are outside Italy.

Date

Here we have some more definite clues. The use of the present tense for the Levitical priesthood and sacrificial system (in chapters 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, and 13) would suggest the those institutions are still in use. This would place the writing of the book before the temple was destroyed in 70 A.D. But not much before. Timothy had been just released from prison (13:23), and the persecution was becoming severe (10:32-39; 12:4; 13:3). There is no indication of Timothy's imprisonment during the life of Paul, and he seems to be free at the end of Paul's life (2 Timothy 4:9, 21). But Paul was killed sometime in the late A.D. 60s, like 67 or 68. That would place the writing of Hebrews around A.D. 68 or 69.

Purpose

The purpose of the epistle was to orient the

Hebrews

Theme: Maturity Brings Assurance. That is, our maturity in Christ is the assurance of our position in Christ.
 [Position is salvation and fellowship.]

The Foundation of Assurance The Superiority of Christ			The Path of Assurance Maturity in Christ					The Practice of Assurance		Benediction and conclusion
Christ is better than the angels	The effects of the incarnation	Christ is better than Moses	God's Rest The goal of assurance	Maturity The way to assurance	Melchizedek The priesthood of assurance	Christ's Priesthood The provision of assurance	Faith The hope of assurance	Discipline The evidence of assurance	The author's applications for a life of assurance	
Chapter 1	Chapter 2	3:1 ----- 6	3:7 ----- 4:16	Chapters 5-6	Chapters 7-8	Chapters 9-10	Chapter 11	12:1 ----- 11	12:12 ----- 13:19	13:20 ----- 25

