

**LETTER TO THE
HEBREWS
CLASS #22**

INTRODUCTION:

The Epistle to the Hebrews, or Letter to the Hebrews, or in the Greek manuscripts, simply To the Hebrews (Πρὸς Ἑβραίους) is one of the books of the New Testament. In the New Testament, Hebrews follows Philemon, and is before James.

AUTHORSHIP:

Usually Hebrews was attached in Greek manuscripts to the collection of letters by Paul. Although no author is mentioned (for there is no address), a reference to Timothy (Hebrews 13:23) suggested connections to the circle of Paul and his assistants. Yet the exact audience, the author, and even whether Hebrews is a letter have long been disputed (USCCB). The overall consensus of present day Biblical scholarship is that Paul **WAS NOT** the author of Hebrews.

Pauline authorship was contested in the West into the fourth century, but then accepted. In the sixteenth century, doubts about that position were again raised, and the modern consensus is that the letter was not written by Paul. There is, however, no widespread agreement on any of the other suggested authors, e.g., Barnabas, Apollos, or Prisc(ill)a and Aquila. The document itself has no statement about its author. Among the reasons why Pauline authorship has been abandoned are the great difference of vocabulary and style between Hebrews and Paul's letters, the alternation of doctrinal teaching with moral exhortation, the different manner of citing the Old Testament, and the resemblance between the thought of Hebrews and that of Alexandrian Judaism.



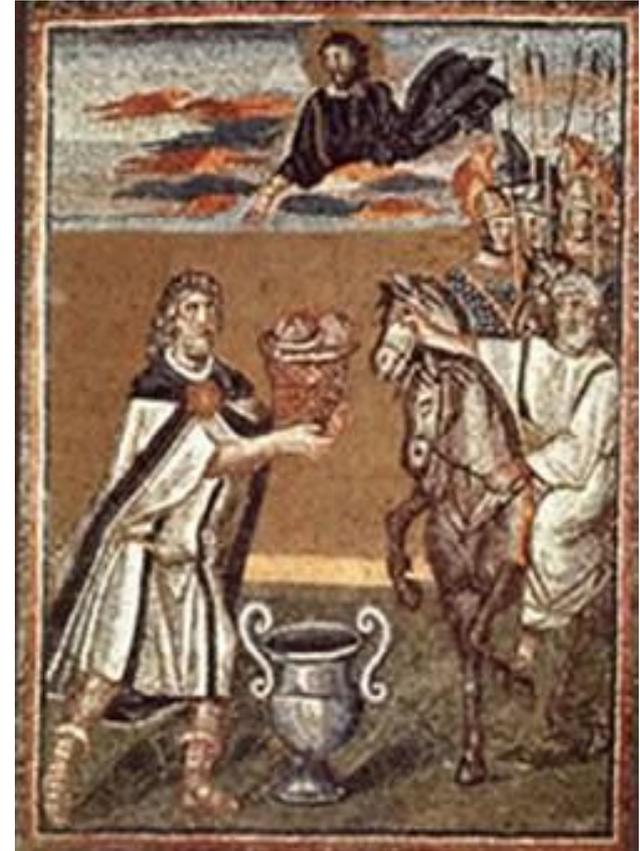
The Greek of the letter is in many ways the best in the New Testament. Scholars of Greek consider its writing to be more polished and eloquent than any other book of the New Testament.

WHEN AND WAS IT WRITTEN WHERE (AND CONTEXT):

When was Hebrews written is also a matter of disagreement. Since the letter of Clement of Rome (Patristic Church Father) to the Corinthians, written about A.D. 96 at the high end, most probably cites Hebrews, the upper limit for the date of composition is reasonably certain. While the letter's references in the present tense to the Old Testament sacrificial worship do not necessarily show that temple worship was still going on, many older commentators and a growing number of recent ones favor the view that it was and that the author wrote before the destruction of the temple of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. According to the Catholic Encyclopedia, the use of tabernacle terminology in Hebrews has been used to date the epistle before the destruction of the temple, the idea being that knowing about the destruction of both Jerusalem and the temple would have influenced the development of the author's overall argument. Therefore, the most probable date for its composition is the second half of the year 63 or the beginning of 64 at the lower end.

OVERVIEW:

Hebrews is an admonition to faithful pilgrimage under Christ's leadership. Hebrews eloquently defines Christ as high priest of Christianity, superior to the Aaronic priesthood, and the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets.



The author also saw the addressees in danger of apostasy from their Christian faith. This danger was due not to any persecution from outsiders but to a weariness with the demands of Christian life and a growing indifference to their calling (Hebrews 2:1; 4:14; 6:1–12; 10:23–32). The author calls this work a “*message of encouragement*” (Hebrews 13:22), and his main theme, the priesthood and sacrifice of Jesus (Hebrews 3–10), is not developed for its own sake but as a means of restoring their lost fervor and strengthening them in their faith. Christians are to reflect that it is their humanity that Jesus took upon himself, with all its defects save sinfulness, and that he bore the burden of it until death out of obedience to God. God declared this work of his Son to be the cause of salvation for all (Hebrews 4:14–5:10). Although Christians recognize this fundamental teaching, they may grow weary of it and of its implications, and therefore require other reflections to stimulate their faith (Hebrews 5:11–6:20). Another important theme of the letter is that of the pilgrimage of the people of God to the heavenly Jerusalem (11:10; 12:1–3, 18–29; 13:14). This theme is intimately connected with that of Jesus’ ministry in the heavenly sanctuary (Hebrews 9:11–10:22) (USCCB). It is in the nature of faith to recognize the reality of what is not yet seen and is the object of hope, and the saints of the Old Testament give striking example of that faith (Hebrews 11:1–40). The perseverance to which the author exhorts the readers is shown forth in the earthly life of Jesus. Christ’s priesthood fulfills the promise of the Old Testament (Hebrews 8:1–13). It also provides the meaning God ultimately intended in the sacrifices of the Old Testament (Hebrews 9:1–28): these pointed to the unique sacrifice of Christ, which alone obtains forgiveness of sins (Hebrews 10:1–18). The trial of faith experienced by the readers should resolve itself through their consideration of Christ’s ministry in the heavenly sanctuary and his perpetual intercession there on their behalf (Hebrews 7:25; 8:1–13). They should also be strengthened by the assurance of his foreordained parousia, and by the fruits of faith that they have already enjoyed (Hebrews 10:19–39).

CONTENT OF HEBREWS:

The letter begins with the Introduction. There is no salutation, the letter simply begins with the assertion that Jesus, the Son of God, has appeared, atoned for our sins, and is now seated at the right hand of God in heaven (Hebrews 1:1-4). Jesus is higher than the Angels: “For to which of the angels did God ever say: “You are my son; this day I have begotten you”? Or again: “I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me”? And again, when he leads* the first-born into the world, he says: “Let all the angels of God worship him.” (Hebrews 1: 5-6). It also opens with the solemn announcement of the superiority of the New Testament Revelation by the Son over Old Testament Revelation by the prophets (Hebrews 1:1-4).

Throughout the letter, Jesus is referred to as the great high priest whose ministry exceeds in importance the services performed by the priests of ancient Israel. Jesus is the Faithful and Compassionate High Priest: “Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has similarly been tested in every way, yet without sin. So let us confidently approach the throne of grace to receive mercy and to find grace for timely help.” (Hebrews 4: 14-16).

Jesus is: “high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek” (Hebrews 6: 20). Jesus’ Priesthood is heavenly, Divine: “The main point of what has been said is this: we have such a high priest, who has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, a minister of the sanctuary and of the true tabernacle that the Lord, not man, set up” (Hebrews 8: 1-2). The priestly office of Christ forms the chief subject-matter of the Christological argument and the highest proof of the pre-eminence of the New Covenant over the Old.

The author exhorts the faithful to Spiritual Renewal: “About this we have much to say, and it is difficult to explain, for you have become sluggish in hearing. Although you should be teachers by this time, you need to have someone teach you again the basic elements of the utterances of God. You need milk, [and] not solid food. Everyone who lives on milk lacks experience of the word of righteousness, for he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those whose faculties are trained by practice to discern good and evil”. (Hebrews 5:11–14).

The letter concludes with specific moral commandments (Hebrews 13:1–17), in the course of which the author recalls again his central theme of the sacrifice of Jesus and the courage needed to associate oneself with it in faith (Hebrews 13:9–16). The advice is to remain firm in Christian living: “Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect hospitality, for through it some have unknowingly entertained angels. Be mindful of prisoners as if sharing their imprisonment, and of the ill-treated as of yourselves, for you also are in the body. Let marriage be honored among all and the marriage bed be kept undefiled, for God will judge the immoral and adulterers. Let your life be free from love of money but be content with what you have, for he has said, “I will never forsake you or abandon you.” (Hebrews 13: 1-5). Jesus is constant and unchanging: “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.” (Hebrews 13: 8). Hebrews has 13 Chapters.

THE OUTLINE OF HEBREWS IS:

- 1.) Introduction (Hebrews 1:1–4).**
- 2.) The Son Higher than the Angels (Hebrews 1:5–2:18).**
- 3.) Jesus, Faithful and Compassionate High Priest (Hebrews 3:1–5:10).**
- 4.) Jesus’ Eternal Priesthood and Eternal Sacrifice (Hebrews 5:11–10:39).**
- 5.) Examples, Discipline, Disobedience (Hebrews 11:1–12:29).**
- 6.) Final Exhortation, Blessing, Greetings (Hebrews 13:1–25).**

RESOURCES USED AND RECOMENDED:

- NAB Bible, at: <http://www.usccb.org/bible/books-of-the-bible/index.cfm>
- The New Jerome Biblical Commentary, Edited by Raymond E. Brown, S.S., Union Theological Seminary, New York; NY, William J. Dalton, S. J.; Roland E. Murphy, O. Carm. (emeritus) The Divinity School, Duke University, Durham, NC; [The Johannine Epistles, PHEME PERKINS], with a foreword by His Eminence Carlo Maria Cardinal Martini, S.J.; Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1990
- Agape Bible Study at: http://www.agapebiblestudy.com/Agape_Bible_Studies_Menu.php
- New Testament Letter Structure, from Catholic Resources by Felix Just, S.J.

