

Hebrews Outline

Introduction: Although traditionally ascribed to Paul, there is near universal agreement today that Hebrews was written by some other leader. Candidates for the author include Barnabas, Apollos, or Priscilla, however no one really knows for sure. Scholars date the writing of Hebrews from 60 CE to 95 CE, where it is mentioned in an early work called 1 Clement.

Although it appears to be a letter on the surface, Hebrews is really more of a sermon than a letter, with a long, sustained argument that takes all 13 chapters to conclude. Letters, in contrast, even great letters like Paul's letter to the Romans, include multiple arguments and practical elements like personal instruction and introductions. While sometimes it is possible to quote small samples of text in the New Testament and have a fair chance of understanding it on its own terms, this is less the case with Hebrews where the argument builds from beginning to end.

The argument of Hebrews is based mainly upon the priestly work in the temple. The writer takes time to establish the practice of the priests in the temple, arguing that the temple is a kind of connecting point between our world and God's kingdom. Then, after establishing this, the author paints Christ as a priest as well- only he is priest who sacrifices his own blood rather than an animal's blood, and instead of entering a temple, he enters into heaven itself. With the rich temple and priestly imagery and generous quotations from the Hebrew Bible, it is safe to say that anyone who doesn't have a thorough knowledge of and appreciation for the Old Testament simply won't be able to understand the letter.

If it's challenging for us to understand the imagery of the letter, though, it is easy to understand the pastoral context. The letter of Hebrews is written to a people who are exhausted- tired of being different, tired of being put down. And so much of this sermon is encouragement and exhortation: encouraging tired people to keep going; and exhorting people who are thinking of throwing in the towel to think twice.

Chapter 1: Long ago God spoke through prophets- today God speaks through a son

Chapter 2: Jesus the pioneer of salvation made perfect through suffering

Chapter 3: Jesus like Moses, but better- a son rather than a servant; exhortation to obey

Chapter 4: God's rest; God's word like a two edged sword; Jesus our high priest

Chapter 5: Christ our high priest, who offered prayers on our behalf

Chapter 6: Warning against falling away; the hope of God's promise

Chapter 7: Abraham and Melchizedek; Jesus a priest like Melchizedek not Aaron; Christ's Sacrifice is once and for all

Chapter 8: Christ mediator of a new covenant; Jeremiah quote

Chapter 9: Description of temple and priesthood; comparison with Christ- invisible temple and offers his own blood; Christ entered into heaven itself- no mere copy

Chapter 10: Christ's sacrifice once and for all unlike the priests ongoing offerings; call to hold fast

Chapter 11: Definition of faith; various examples of faith; Abraham; Moses; other heroes

Chapter 12: Great cloud of witnesses; warning against refusing grace

Chapter 13: General ethical instructions; final exhortation

Stories to know: Christ the pioneer of salvation (2); definition of faith (11); the great cloud of witnesses (12)