

Hebrews Bible Study Introduction to Hebrews

Why we do Introductory Study

In order to better understand the author, audience, and times in which the book was written. Although this is not all that is required for interpretation, this gives us better insight into the meaning of the text.

Who wrote it?

The bottom line is that the book doesn't say, and we don't know. But the Greek is excellent, the argument is lawyer-like (and flawless rhetorically), the author is intimately familiar with the OT law and how Christ corresponds to the OT revelation.

He is likely not an apostle (ruling Paul out) since he never claims this for himself, and implies that he heard of Christ from someone else (2:3). But having heard it from a witness, our author is certainly a 1st century person, and since it is widespread, implies middle of the 1st century (see below).

When was it written?

Probably prior to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple (AD 70), since so heavily "Jewish" a book would have certainly mentioned this. More than that, the author is anxious to point to the passing of the old system, and the destruction of its symbol would have been a great point indeed in favor of his argument. For other subtle reasons, probably AD 64.

To whom was it written?

A Mixed Christian Community

- a. Most Christian communities, especially outside Palestine, were a mix ethnically of Jew and Gentile. Many of these gentiles were previously "God-fearers" who worshipped the God of Israel and knew the Old Testament.
- b. Fits better with overall theology: The church is not two peoples, but one. At this point in church history, it becomes difficult to separate the two.
- c. If he is writing only to Jews, he must be writing to a community within a community, and there is no evidence for this.

Why was it Written?

Probably persecution. If our dating of the mid-60s is correct, this would be the persecution under Nero in Rome. Persecution throughout the empire was episodic, and so not unknown by many Christians at this early date.

Major Theme

The Old Testament – especially the Mosaic Covenant and its law – points to Christ and is fulfilled in Christ, so that the Mosaic Covenant and all its types are now to be abandoned in favor of Christ, who is better. **You cannot have Moses (the man or the Covenant) AND Christ. Christ is ultimate.**

Structure/Outline

By considering the outline we are able to better see the author's argument and also to keep track of where we are in that argument as we go. This outline is taken from *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* by Philip Edgcumbe Hughes.

Christ is Superior to the Prophets (1:1-3)

Christ is Superior to the Angels (1:4-2:18)

Christ is Superior to Moses (3:1-4:13)

Christ is Superior to Aaron (4:14-10:18)

Christ is Superior as the New and Living Way (10:19-12:29)

Concluding Exhortations, Requests, and Greetings (13:1-25)

Genre

It might seem obvious that this is a letter – after all, it is “the Epistle to the Hebrews” and an “epistle” is a letter. However, the structure and style suggest it is a sermon sent as a letter. Perhaps there was once a “cover letter” but as it now stands, the letter does not open with any of the devices associated with letter writing in the first century. In fact, apart from the closing chapter, there is not much about this letter that feels like a letter other than it is clearly being addressed to someone in writing.