

## EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE NEW TESTAMENT

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### The General Epistles I

#### Hebrews

Out of all that's taught about the person and work of Jesus in the New Testament, the book of Hebrews is the only one that focuses on Christ's priesthood. In fact, the priesthood of Jesus is mentioned in every chapter from beginning to end (1:3; 2:17; 3:1; 4:14; 5:5, 10; 6:20; 7:3; 8:1; 9:11; 10:21; 11:28; 12:24; 13:12). These passages reveal that Jesus fulfilled the obligations of both the Aaronic and the Melchizedekian priesthoods (Kruger, 413). However, while Jesus' priesthood is the focus of Hebrews, the book contains many other doctrinal teachings and practical instructions, along with controversial passages and a mysterious authorship.

- a. **Authorship:** Unlike other inspired letters included in the New Testament canon, Hebrews doesn't identify its author. Countless theories and arguments have been given for who wrote this majestic book, but no consensus has been reached. Some have noted that the book was written with a sophisticated style of Greek rhetoric, giving the impression it was written by someone in the Roman world. However, others have observed the massive amount of Old Testament quotations and allusions, and reasoned that the writer must have been Jewish (Beale, 364). One important clue is found in Hebrews 13:23, "*You should know that our brother Timothy has been released, with whom I shall see you if he comes soon.*" The author's relationship with Timothy makes many feel that it was written by either Paul, Barnabas, Silas, Luke, or another missionary companion. These men, especially Paul, would have been educated in Jewish and Gentile traditions.
  - **Paul:** The ancient church father, Clement of Alexandria, believed that Paul was the author, but that Luke "translated it carefully and published it for the Greeks" (Beale, 364). He reasoned that Paul left off his name because the Jews had "formed strong biases against him" (Carson 601). The most ancient New Testament manuscript available today (*P<sup>46</sup>*, early third century) places Hebrews right after Romans, giving the impression that the early church believed it belonged with the Pauline letters, since the letters were arranged according to author and length (Kruger, 414). However, by the fourth century, Augustine and Jerome expressed doubts about Pauline authorship. Others objected on such grounds as: (1) The Greek language found in Hebrews is more polished than in Paul's letters; (2) Paul refers to God as "Father" around 35 times in his letters, but the writer of Hebrews never uses this description; (3) Paul uses the name "*Christ Jesus*" 24 times in his letters, but this title is only used three times in Hebrews; (4) the author of Hebrews states, "*[the Gospel] was first declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, which God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and gifts of the Holy Spirit...*" (2:3-4). Such a statement gives the impression that the author was not an apostle, but one who heard the gospel from an apostle (i.e., a second generation believer like Timothy or Titus).

- **Others:** Throughout history, other scholars have suggested that Hebrews was written by Luke, Barnabas, Silas, Apollos, Clement of Rome, and others. For example, Barnabas was a Levite from Cypress (Acts 4:36), and a member of the Hellenist party in the Jerusalem church. Barnabas grew up Jewish but was able to communicate in Greek, and was knowledgeable about the priesthood (Kruger, 414). He would fit the criteria based on the evidence. Martin Luther suggested it was Apollos, the first century preacher that was admired for his eloquence. He was a native of Alexandria. However, the third century church father, Origen, declared, "But who wrote the epistle, in truth God knows" (*Hist. eccl.* 6:25.14). Carson summarizes, "It is far better to admit our ignorance. We do not know who wrote it; almost certainly the first readers did. In all likelihood the author was a Hellenistic Jew who had become a Christian, a second-generation believer" (Carson, 604).
- b. **Date:** Without knowing the author, it's challenging to date when the book was written. Beale notes that since the book focuses so much on the sacrificial system, the Jewish Temple must have still been functional, indicating that Hebrews was written prior to AD 70 (Beale, 364). Another piece of evidence for an early date is that Hebrews is quoted by Clement of Rome in AD 96. Therefore, it seems to be written in the late AD 60s, within the lifetime of Timothy, by a second generation believer who followed those who have already passed on to heaven (Heb. 11).
- c. **Audience:** According to the context, the author seems to be writing to Jewish Christians and converted gentiles who lived near Rome (Beale, 364). These believers had experienced persecution, which might explain why some had "*neglected meeting together*" (Heb. 10:25). The writer wants them to understand that Jesus is their only High Priest, the only means of salvation, so that they will hold fast to their confession and not depart from the gospel. It appears that some were tempted to "*fall away from the living God*" (3:12). There was pressure from Judaizers to fall back into the teachings of Judaism, which minimized the person and work of Christ and taught salvation through obedience to the law. Hebrews was written to correct their teaching and strengthen the church. In fact, some believe that this "letter" was actually a sermon series preached to congregations (Beale, 365). The writer refers to it as "a word of exhortation" (Acts 13:15).
- d. **Contents:** The overall message of Hebrews is that Jesus is better.
- **Jesus: A Better Leader** – The Old Testament reveals that God raised up important men and women to serve his people (Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, Esther, etc.). However, no one is greater than Jesus. Not even the angels in heaven. The writer makes clear that Jesus is God in human flesh, "*the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, [who] upholds the universe by the word of his power*" (1:3).
  - **Jesus: A Better Sacrifice** – The Old Testament makes clear from the beginning that sacrifice is needed to atone for sin and avoid the wrath of God. Such truth is displayed in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3), the Mosaic Covenant (Exodus-Deuteronomy), the Tabernacle and Temple, etc. However, as Hebrews declares, "*It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins*" (Heb. 10:4). Isaiah predicted that a final sacrifice would be made by the Suffering Servant that would completely atone for sin (Isa. 53:10, 11). John the Baptist identified his final sacrifice when he looked upon Jesus and said, "*the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*" (John 1:29). The book of Hebrews was written to show that Jesus is a better sacrifice, the only sacrifice that really matters.

- **Jesus: A Better Priest** – The Old Testament outlines that sacrifices for sin must be administered by a faithful priest. However, even though God appointed earthly men to be priests in Israel, none of them were holy and pure. In fact, a major ceremonial cleansing was required for the high priest to perform this duty on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16). However, as Hebrews 4:15-16 makes clear, *“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”* He later writes, *“So Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him”* (Heb. 9:28).
- **Living by Faith** – With Jesus providing redemption through his perfect life and sacrifice, believers are called to live according to faith and to endure until the end. The famous “Hall of Faith” (Ch. 11) is given to inspire believers to continue living in obedience to God. The writer follows these short biographies with, *“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted”* (Heb. 12:1-3).

## James

The book of James is regarded as one of the most practical books in the Bible. While it doesn't contain deep theological teaching or difficult concepts, James is an invaluable guide for how to live the Christian life. The letter contains more imperative verbs than any other New Testament epistle, showing that his main goal is to instruct believers on how to live for Jesus. Some have even noticed similarities between James and the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), where Jesus describes the way of life for those who belong to God's kingdom. In fact, James either quotes or alludes to Jesus' words twenty-one times.

- a. **Authorship:** While other New Testament authors mention their name, title, and associations, James simply tells us his name. The issue is that there are several men named James who could have written an inspired letter. For example, two of Jesus' twelve disciples were named James. In Matthew 10:2-4, we find “James the son of Zebedee” and “James the son of Alphaeus.” While much less is said about James the son of Alphaeus, we know that James the son of Zebedee was in Jesus' inner circle, along with Peter and John, and he would become one of the leading apostles in the early church. However, while this James would certainly be qualified to write a New Testament letter, we discover in Acts 12 that he was martyred by King Herod during a massive outbreak of persecution in Jerusalem, which makes it unlikely that he wrote this letter. However, as we continue to move through the book of Acts, we find another James that was also a major leader in the Jerusalem church. According to Acts 15, while seeking to settle a serious theological dispute over how Jews and Gentiles are saved, Luke records that Paul joined Peter and many other apostles and elders at a meeting known as the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:6). One of the major voices in that meeting was a man also named James (Acts 15:13). But this James couldn't be the disciple that followed Jesus during his ministry. As stated above, that James was martyred years before in the persecution detailed in Acts 12. This James, the one presiding over the

Jerusalem Council, was none other than the half-brother of Jesus, one of Mary and Joseph's natural sons. Paul affirms that this James was still presiding over the church when he went to Jerusalem (Gal. 1:18-19), even noting that he was one of the "pillars" of the church (Gal. 2:9). Therefore, it's most likely that the letter of James was written by James, the half-brother of Jesus. So, why doesn't he identify himself better? It's most likely because his readers were so familiar with him. As Carson notes, "The lack of elaboration points to a well-known James" (Carson, 621).

- b. **Date:** James appears to be one of the earliest written letters, around AD 48.
- c. **Audience:** James is included in the "General Epistles" because he does not address a specific church. However, James does address "*the twelve tribes in the Dispersion*" (1:1). The phrase "twelve tribes" refers to Jewish believers. The word "Dispersion" is a reference to believers who have been dispersed from Israel throughout the region due to persecution. Therefore, James wrote this letter to instruct these scattered believers on how to live for Christ wherever the Lord led them.
- d. **Contents**
- **Trials and Temptations:** One of the most recognizable sections of James teaches believers about trials and temptation. James writes, "*Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing*" (1:2-4). He wants believers to understand why God sends trials and how to endure them. However, he doesn't want anyone to confuse a trial with temptation, for "*God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one.*"
  - **Hearing and Doing:** While studying God's Word is crucial, only those who obey will live a life pleasing to God. He states, "*But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves*" (1:22). Along with the teaching, he describes the relationship between true faith and works (2:14-26).
  - **Godly Speech:** James warns against using sinful speech, noting that the tongue is the source of some of the most damaging sins. He declares, "*The tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness*" (3:6).
  - **Worldliness:** One of the greatest enemies of the Christian life is worldliness, which is being influenced by the fallen culture. James commands, "*Cleanse your hearts, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded*" (4:8).
  - **Prayer:** James concludes his letter by discussing the importance and power of prayer. He reminds believers, "*The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working*" (5:16).