

Introduction to the Epistle to the Hebrews

Galen Currah, 2021

Importance

The Epistle to the Hebrews stands as the most complete explanation, by Jewish Christians, of how, in the first century CE, they saw Jesus to be the fulfillment of their Hebrew scriptures (19:5-7), the promised Messiah (5:5), the incarnate Son of God (1:1-5), the mediator of the New Covenant (9:15; 12:24).

Language

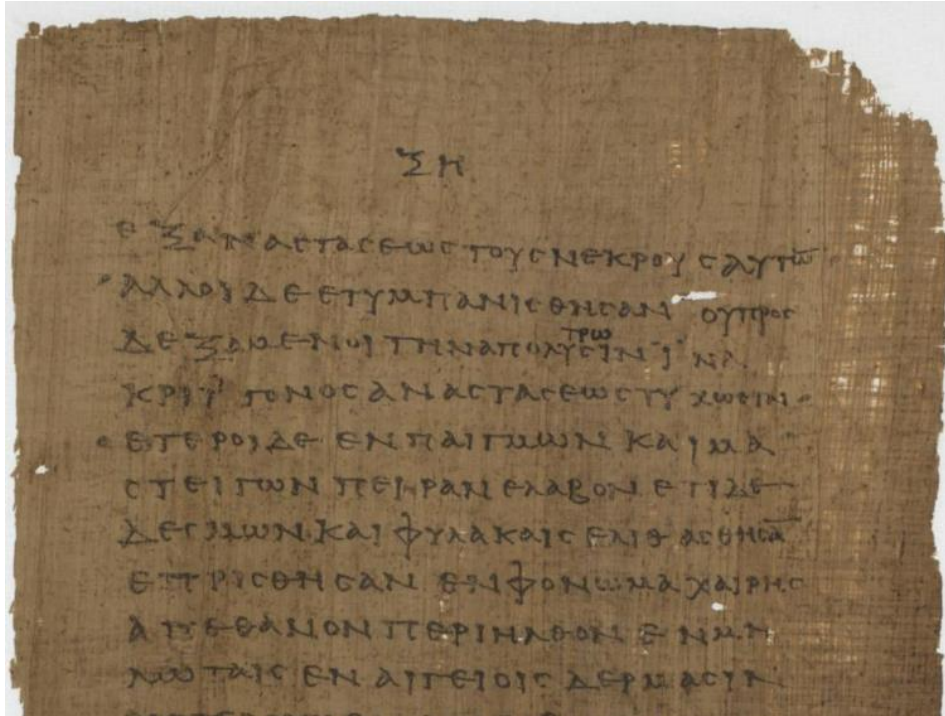
Hebrews was composed in the common (*koiné*) Greek of the Greek and Roman empires. However, its grammar and vocabulary differ notably from those of all other NT writers.



Hellenistic States 3rd century BCE — Bloomsbury Maps

Manuscripts

There exist more than forty Greek manuscripts (copies) from which modern Bibles translate Hebrews. Eight of them date from before the fifth century CE. Greek papyrus P46, dated to around the year 200 CE, contains 1:1-9:16; 9:18-10:20, 22-30; 10:32-13:25.



Hebrews 11:35–12:1, Papyrus P46, circa 200 CE

Reliability

Greek manuscripts from early centuries and different countries, translations made in other ancient languages, quotations found in ancient documents, and respect that copyists had for holy scripture, show that Hebrews is as well or better preserved than most books from antiquity.

Canonicity

Hebrews was one of the last books to be accepted into the New Testament canon, because it is anonymous and does not claim to have been written by an apostle.

By the fourth century, Hebrews was accepted by all the Christian churches, because of its sound teaching, upholding the Hebrew Bible, the apostles of Jesus, and the lordship of Jesus Christ.

Date

Hebrew's earliest possible date was circa 60 CE, for it is addressed to second and third-generation Christians (2:3-4; 13:7).

It was likely written by 64 CE when Nero started his persecution of Christians (10:34; 13:3), following the great fire in Rome (Tacitus' *Annals* 15.44).

It was probably written before 71 CE, because, although Hebrews refers only to tabernacle sacrifices, the danger of first-century Christians reverting to Judaism would have entailed making temple sacrifices, which ceased in 70 CE.

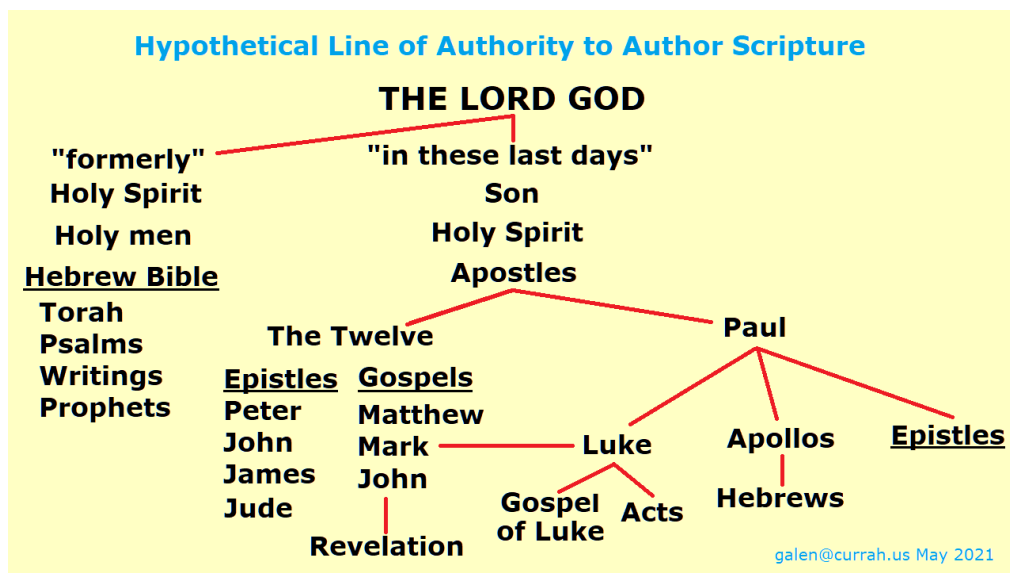


For a thousand years, Jews brought animal sacrifices to the Jerusalem temple

Author

The author was likely a Hellenistic Jewish Christian who was associated with an apostle, a requirement in order for a book to be accepted into the 'canon' of the New Testament.

A likely biblical personage is Apollos of Alexandria, who may have conferred with Barnabas and certainly did so with Paul. (See 'Did Apollos Author Hebrews?')



Paul was not the author of Hebrews, but may well have advised Apollos or another Hellenistic writer.

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Why are the author and recipients not named? Some scholars surmise that, if the earliest manuscript was a scroll, then the author's and recipients' names would have been inscribed on the outside and so been lost when the text was copied as a codex, a book with pages.



Scrolls were typically written on one side, though sometimes addressed on their other side.

Recipients

The earliest manuscript title reads, "To Hebrews".

These were likely Jewish Christians, including Gentiles brought to faith by Jewish-Christian missionaries, some of whom were tempted to return to Judaism, their family's faith and a legal religion.

The first ancient references to the Book of Hebrews came from Rome.

The recipients seem to have been located outside of Judea, for they sent financial aid to the Judean churches (6:10).



Hellenistic Jews and Christians read scripture and other literature in Greek

Provenance

Hebrews was likely written in a Hellenistic (Greek-speaking) city, outside of Rome (13:24b), that had a Jewish community including Jews who had come from Rome after Claudius expelled them.

This was possibly Alexandria, Egypt, where the Hebrew Bible had been translated into Greek, which is often cited in Hebrews.



Ancient Alexandria, Egypt, a Greek-speaking city

Genre

Hebrews is a well-polished discourse or sermon, alternating between exposition (explanations) and ‘exhortation’ (13:22). It would have been read aloud to congregations that were familiar with Hebrew Bible stories and laws (cf. 2:5; 5:11; 8:1; 9:5; 11:32).

The reading and discussion of long discourses was a common form of entertainment in Greco-Roman cities, where there was a lively industry producing paper, copying manuscripts, and selling scrolls and books.

Purpose

The main purpose of Hebrews is contained in its exhortation to “consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession” (3:1).

Five specific warnings describe dire consequences of abandoning faith in Jesus. See (1) 2:1–4; (2) 3:7–19; (3) 5:11–14; (4) 10:26–31; and (5) 12:25–29.

Note: The Alexandrian, Hellenistic, Jewish philosopher Philo (20 BCE - 40 CE) was widely read amongst Greek-speaking Jews. He allegorized the Hebrew Bible to make it compatible with Greek philosophy, whereas Hebrews treats the Hebrew Bible as true, reliable history and law.

Argument

Since the last quarter of the 20th century, bible scholars have sought to discover each biblical book's internal logic or argument through a process called 'discourse analysis'.

Hebrews builds a strong case, demonstrating that Jesus is superior to Jewish beliefs and practices.

In this series of lessons, we shall follow the analysis prepared by Wycliffe scholar Cynthia Westfall in *A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS: The Relationship between Form and Meaning* (2005).

16 Lessons

This study of the Book of Hebrews has been arbitrarily presented in sixteen lessons, as follow:

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| 1. | 1:1–2:4 | God Has Sent His Ultimate Messenger |
| 2. | 2:5–3:2 | We Confess Jesus Our Apostle |
| 3. | 3:3–4:1 | God Offers to Us Everlasting Rest |
| 4. | 4:1-16 | We Must Respond to Jesus |
| 5. | 4:17–6:3 | Jesus Serves God as our High Priest |
| 6. | 6:1–7:3 | Jesus Has Opened Access to God |
| 7. | 7:4-28 | Jesus Came in the Order of Melchizedek |
| 8. | 8:1-13 | Jesus' Death Provided the Final Sacrifice |
| 9. | 9:1-14 | Jesus Cleanses Our Conscience |
| 10. | 9:15-28 | Jesus Has Inaugurated a New Covenant |
| 11. | 10:1-18 | Jesus' Death Has Perfected Us Forever |
| 12. | 10:19-39 | We Love One Another by Doing Good Works |
| 13. | 11:1-40 | Our Ancestors Modelled Authentic Faith |
| 14. | 12:1-17 | We Run Our Race with Discipline |
| 15. | 12:18-29 | We Serve as Priests in God's Heavenly City |
| 16. | 12:28–13:25 | We Offer Thanks and Live by Grace |

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