

## Introduction to Hebrews:

### *The Nature of the Book*

- A written sermon
- Alternation between Exposition and Exhortation

### *Authorship*

- Much discussion since not signed and internal evidence sparse
- The things that are clear:
  - ♦ Knew Timothy
  - ♦ Planned to visit recipients with Timothy
- My opinion: Luke, but other conservatives differ
- Safe answer: no one knows

### *Other Historical Circumstances*

#### *Recipients*

##### A. Profile of the audience

1. Whoever these believers were, they had not seen Christ themselves, but learned of him from the apostles (Heb 2.3-4)

Heb 2.3-4 how will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard, <sup>4</sup> God also testifying with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will.

2. These believers had experienced persecution, but not to death (Heb 10.32, 12.4)

Heb 10.32 ¶ But remember the former days, when, after being enlightened, you endured a great conflict of sufferings,  
Heb 12.4 You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin;

3. They had even demonstrated their faith by serving other believers faithfully (Heb 6.10, 10.34)

Heb 6.10 For God is not unjust so as to forget your work and the love which you have shown toward His name, in having ministered and in still ministering to the saints.

Heb 10.34 For you showed sympathy to the prisoners and accepted joyfully the seizure of your property, knowing that you have for yourselves a better possession and a lasting one.

4. Despite their testimony, they were stumbling in their progress, and some might be slipping back (Heb 5.11-14)

Heb 5.11-14 ¶ Concerning him we have much to say, and *it is* hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. <sup>12</sup> For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food. <sup>13</sup> For everyone who partakes *only* of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is an infant. <sup>14</sup> But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil.

5. The author gives many warnings to them against falling back (Heb 2.1–4; 3.12–4.1; 6.4–8; 10.26–39; 12.15–29.)

“The danger the author envisions is that the believing Hebrew recipients of the letter were considering a return externally to the system they had left when, by baptism, they made their public confession of faith in Jesus Christ.”<sup>1</sup>

## B. Three major views:

### 1. Traditional: Jewish Christians

- a. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, the Church gave the title “To the Hebrews” to this document, reflecting the contents

<sup>1</sup> J. Dwight Pentecost and Ken Durham, *Faith That Endures : A Practical Commentary on the Book of Hebrews*, Rev. Ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2000), 21–22.

- b. Numerous OT quotations assume a Jewish audience with familiarity and respect for OT
    - 1) Gentile believers who enter Christianity enter an acceptance of the OT along with Christianity
    - 2) If Gentile believers are tempted to fall away from Christianity, their embrace of the OT would fall away at the same time
    - 3) Jewish believers would not necessarily fall away from *both* Christ and the OT, especially since the OT so culturally ingrained
  - c. The argument of Heb. is that living under the OT is pointless because of Christ
    - 1) Gentile Christians tempted to fall away would not think of falling away into living under the OT system
    - 2) Jewish Christians tempted to fall away could well think slipping back to Judaism might allow them to escape persecution, but still worship God
  - d. They are probably “Hellenized” Jewish Christians, as the author quotes mostly from the Septuagint, rather than the Hebrew OT
2. Alternative view: Gentile Christians (developed in 19<sup>th</sup> c.)
- a. Note late development
  - b. Basic thesis: the teachings of Hebrews can easily apply to Gentiles
  - c. Most Gentile believers do exactly that as we will as we study
  - d. But: the author doesn’t make this application — a clinching argument.
  - e. In addition, Pentecost points out that those who raise this view confuse the OT covenants with the Church, distorting the OT meaning.
3. Third view: a mix of Jewish and Gentile Christians (more modern view)
- a. See the arguments against the “Gentile Christians” view above

- b. The author doesn't address Jewish vs. Gentile conflict in the church, if the audience was mixed he couldn't avoid it

"There is no trace of any admixture of heathen converts among them; nor does the letter touch on any of the topics of heathen controversy (not 13:9, see note). It is therefore scarcely possible that it could have been written to a mixed Church generally, or to the Jewish section of a mixed Church. In either case allusions to the relations of Jew and Gentile could scarcely have been avoided."<sup>2</sup>

"The traditional view accounts for the evidence in the epistle itself."<sup>3</sup>

### C. Local church or wide distribution?

1. Peter wrote his epistles to a wide group of Christians (see 1 Pt 1.1)
2. The writer of Hebrews appears to address a specific local group
  - a. The author hoped to visit them (13.23)
  - b. The author had been with them previously (13.19)
  - c. He was well acquainted with them, and had a loving relationship with them (3.1, 6.9)
3. The specific group is not located in Jerusalem
  - a. Their knowledge of OT ritual seems to come from reading the law, not observing the performance
  - b. The author discusses much about the tabernacle, little or nothing about the temple (compare Stephen, Ac 7, speaking to Jerusalem Jews where he has much to say about the temple)
  - c. The recipients had not heard Jesus themselves, even at AD 68 or so, when those in the Jerus. church would include some who had

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<sup>2</sup> Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 3rd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1903), xxxvi.

<sup>3</sup> David Allen, *Hebrews*, The New American Commentary 35 (Nashville, Tenn: B & H Publ. Group, 2010), 62.

“Their special trials came through disappointment of their first expectations. They had failed to grow under the discipline of experience, and so had degenerated: 5:11 f. (νωθοροὶ γεγόνατε); 6:1; 10:25.”<sup>4</sup>

“We learn from this Epistle that the early difficulties of Churches were not dealt with tentatively, as if the truth were the result of the free conflict of thought. The false view was met at once by the corresponding lesson. Error called out the decisive teaching but it had no part in creating it.”<sup>5</sup>

### *Date of writing*

#### D. Date of writing unclear

1. Clement seems to quote or paraphrase Hebrews in his letter to the Corinthians: date of 1 Clement, trad. AD 96, but not certain
2. Internal evidence points strongly towards a date before AD 70 (destruction of Jerusalem and temple)
  - a. Given the lengthy description of Jewish ritual
  - b. And the present tense in describing it
  - c. It seems impossible that the author would not have mentioned the fall of Jerusalem if it occurred
  - d. The author is showing that the OT sacrifices are passing away, how could he miss mentioning the passing of the temple?
3. The theory of Luke as author supports a pre-AD 70 date
  - a. Luke mentioned in Rome with Paul (2 Tim 4.11)
  - b. Timothy called to come to Paul (2 Tim 4.11)
  - c. Then we find Timothy released from prison and planning to visit (Heb 13.23)
  - d. The date, pre-fall of Jerusalem, post release of Timothy, is most likely AD 67 or 68

<sup>4</sup> Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, xxxvi.

<sup>5</sup> Westcott, xxxvii.