

# Background Reading

## I. Overview

The book of Hebrews is a letter of great exhortations given to the first century Christians restoring their confidence in Christ Jesus and stimulating growth toward maturity in service to Him and their fellow brethren. The writer plunges immediately into the major theme of the book forgoing any introduction of himself or the purpose of his letter. Just within the first few verses, the superiority of Christ and His message is made very clear. The writer continues this theme throughout the majority of this letter. In a logical progression, He makes the case for Christ's superiority over all aspects of God's dealings with man in the past. Christ is a better spokesman for God, and is a better High Priest. His lineage is better than that of the Levitical priesthood; He is God's Son. Christ is the mediator of a better covenant established by His own blood. And finally, Christ is the author and finisher of our faith so we as Christians should look only to Him for our salvation. Therefore, "let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water." (Heb. 10:22)

## II. The Author

The author chose not to reveal himself within the content of this letter. Many speculations have been made as to whom it could be, but knowing would have no added benefit and would not change the value of the message. In fact, the author's obscurity may have been intentional so as not to distract from the importance of the message and insure its endurance. The issue of canonicity has already been established, I believe through God's providence. We do, however, know some things about the Author which may be important to his credibility. He knew his readers very well (Heb. 5:11-14, 6:9, 10:32-34) so much so that he desired to be with them (Heb. 13:19). The readers most likely knew him as well since he asked for their prayers (Heb. 13:18). The author knew Timothy and considered him a brother (Heb. 13:23). As demonstrated from his extensive use and knowledge of the Mosaic Law, Levitical priesthood, and messianic prophecies, the author was {most likely} of Jewish decent. According to scholars, his knowledge of the Greek language and culture is evident as well demonstrated by his writings. Many authors have been proposed most notable Paul but others include Barnabas, Luke, Apollos, Silas, Philip, and Clement of Rome just to name a few. There are many good arguments made for each of these proposed authors especially Paul "for you had compassion on me in my chains" (Heb. 10:34) but remember most of the other candidates knew Paul, traveled with him, and would have shared many of the same experiences including prison. However, the author remains anonymous despite the opinions of many. In fact, this discussion dates back as early as the second century. The focus of this letter is clearly on our Lord and the better covenant that He established with man.

### III. To Whom It Was Written

Just as the identity of the author is unknown, the exact identity to whom this letter was written is unknown as well. The actual title of Hebrews was not found in the manuscripts until the second or third centuries. There are, however, some obvious clues found within the text to whom these readers may have been. The main subject matter of the text and the argumentation used to prove the writer's message are centered around the Mosaic law and all its implications. These subjects and arguments would generally be of interest only to those who have a significant Jewish background. The conclusion could be drawn that these readers are probably Jewish converts.

The location of these first readers is a mystery as well. The title or heading of this letter was not added until later. Rome and Jerusalem are the two most popular locations noted. Early manuscripts dating back to the second and third centuries were the first to title the letter as "to the Hebrews". This may provide an important clue as to the location of its readers. Usually devout Hebrew speaking Jews were referred to as "Hebrews" (N. Lightfoot). The majority of these "Hebrews" were located in and around Jerusalem. It may be reasonable to conclude from these facts that the letter of Hebrews was written to "Jewish" Christian converts in or around Jerusalem, although there are no strong evidences for any of these conclusions. The book of Hebrews was written before the end of the first century due to the fact that the author knew Timothy (Heb. 13:23) and desired to be with them (Heb. 13:19). Since there is no mention or reference to the destruction of Jerusalem in the letter, it was most likely written before this event in AD 70. Many of the more conservative commentators suggest that the letter was written around 63-66 AD. However, many of these commentators also attribute the authorship to Paul during his first or second imprisonment in Rome.

### IV. The Purpose of the Letter

The purpose of this letter appears to be obvious as presented in the arguments made in the text. The covenant of Christ is far superior to that of any other they have had in the past. The writer gives his readers many exhortations to remain steadfast and sure in this better covenant which has better promises. Christ is a better spokesman, a better High Priest, and a better covenant maker. He is better because He is God's Son, having His glory and express image. He sacrificed Himself freely so that the sins of man could be forgiven. Because He has no spot or blemish (sin), He could pass through the veil into the Most Holy of Holies; the true heavenly sanctuary, and now sits at His father's right hand making intercession for man. With these credentials and better promises, why would anyone want to turn back to an inferior covenant? Thus we see the theme the writer logically develops throughout the text. The readers, by this point, have already been taught the elementary principles of Christianity (Heb. 5:12), although they need to be taught again, the writer forgoes laying again these foundations (Heb. 6:1-3). As you study this letter, pay attention to the terms the author uses frequently to encourage his readers not to fall back into their former ways of the old covenant. He uses words like "better", "eternal", "once for all", "much more", "true", and "hold fast" to showcase Christ's superiority to anything else. Therefore, "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful" (Heb. 10:23)

# Tools for Studying Scripture

There are many study tools which help us study the scriptures and gain clarity of the message so we can both understand the information presented and apply it to our lives. We hope this sort list of tools will help you as we all study Hebrews together this quarter.

1. **Repeated Words/Phrases** It is one thing to see a repeated word such as, “the” and “a.” However, when you see a unique word/phrase repeated even twice, it is very important to understanding the message. Oftentimes unique words that are repeated become a key to understanding the main point of a text.
2. **How the Text Begins & Ends** Sometimes a text will begin and end with the same concept, and the verses in between help fill in that concept. Other times a text will begin with one concept and end with another, and there is a logical flow that the verses in between explain.
3. **Contrasts (Look especially for the word, “but” to see contrasts)** All throughout the Scripture, contrasts help us see major differences in people and concepts. If you put a square or circle around words that draw a contrast, it will help you understand the argument of the text.
4. **Poetic Imagery (Focus on the words, “as” and “like” to see imagery)** Scripture is filled with poetic imagery – even the New Testament! Whenever you see the words, “as” and “like” you will often find a way to imagine what is being said. For example, James 1:6 says, “...for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind.” James wants us to imagine someone who prays while doubting. To help us get the image, he wants us to picture a wave on the sea that is tossed everywhere. The word, “like” is what clues us in to the fact that poetic language is being used to imagine the concept. It is not the case that every single time “like” or “as” are used that poetry is involved.
5. **Important Linking Words**
  - “Therefore” – draws a conclusion from things previously said.
  - “And” – connects two words, concepts, and ideas.
  - “Because”, “for”, and “so that” – explains a reason for something stated.
  - “If” – describes something that is conditional.
6. **Commands** Another tool for observing a text is to simply look for the things that are commanded. Whenever you see something that we are commanded to do, the surrounding verses often help us understand how to obey it or why we ought to obey.







# Introduction Lesson

## I. Author

- A. The book of Hebrews does not tell us who the author is. Some have suggested Paul, Apollos, or Luke. We know from Hebrews 13:22 that the author knew Timothy. Why would (or wouldn't) it matter to know who wrote this book?
  
- B. Since we do not know the author, why do you believe Hebrews should belong in our Bible?

## II. Audience

- A. What does Hebrews 10:32-39 tell us about the audience of this letter?
  
- B. What does the author want to accomplish with this letter?

## III. Outline & Message

- A. Skim through Hebrews. What are some main themes you noticed?

IV. Christians receiving the Hebrew letter likely lived among Jews who still practiced Judaism. This brought them social pressure to conform to Jewish religious and social customs. Christians at Monte Vista don't likely face this pressure to convert to Judaism. List some ways you feel social pressure to conform to something other than true service to Christ.

V. What alternatives does the world offer to Jesus today? Are these alternatives "better" than Jesus?