

# An Overview of Hebrews

## The Theme

- A. Jesus Christ and His new religion are far superior to every aspect of Old Testament religion.
- B. This book more than any other focuses on the preeminence of Jesus Christ from many angles.
- C. If you love Jesus Christ and new covenant blessings and worship, you will love Hebrews!
- D. If you want to know the Old Testament better, as it pointed to Christ, you will love Hebrews!

## The Lesson

- A. Converted Jews should not backslide to Moses' Law and the Old Testament form of worship.
  - 1. Jesus Christ and His religion were superior to the Old Testament by every measure used.
  - 2. The Old Testament had prophesied Christ's new religion in various ways to the Jews.
  - 3. The Old Testament had presented the new religion via figurative events and ordinances.
  - 4. The religion of Jesus Christ was the only doctrine and worship that could save their souls.
  - 5. Terrible judgment was about to fall on the nation for crucifying Jesus Christ, which would make any backsliders guilty by association and profession with God's enemies.
- B. There were good reasons that going back to the Old Testament was a very strong temptation.
  - 1. They knew the Old Testament and temple worship was God's religion given to the elders.
  - 2. They had great national loyalty to their land, capital city, temple, priesthood, and Law.
  - 3. Relatives and former friends were persecuting them for their new faith, which appeared very inferior to the glorious national history and present splendor of temple worship.
  - 4. They were told Jesus of Nazareth did not match the Jewish idea of a Messiah, and it was impossible to be saved without the covenant sign of circumcision and keeping the Law.
  - 5. They were outcasts in the synagogues and temple for having followed Jesus of Nazareth.

## The Whom

- A. The book is named Hebrews to let you know the audience, just like the book of Leviticus.
  - 1. By this wonderful information, we direct its primary application to early converted Jews.
  - 2. The title is more than a word: it is the best piece of contextual evidence for interpretation (the second best contextual evidence for interpretation is the timing before 70 A.D.).
  - 3. Gentiles can enjoy secondary applications and the glorious details unfolded in its words, but the explanations, reasoning, and threats apply most directly to weak Jewish believers.
  - 4. When you read Leviticus, you know it was for the Levites and has limited gospel value, so you do not go there to learn much about living as a Gentile in the New Testament.
  - 5. The church began with many Jews in Judea (Acts 2:41,47; 4:4; 5:14; 6:7; 9:31; 21:20).
  - 6. We can prove it was written to Jews by considering 1:1-2 and 2:1-4 and the main theme, for no other group would understand or care about the old covenant details provided.
  - 7. These were definitely converted Jews, who were tempted to backslide (3:1,12; 10:19-22), rather than false professors and/or hypothetical cases of nonexistent persons.
  - 8. These were likely the Jews of Judea for (a) the greatest concentration of them, (b) the greatest losses and persecution, (c) the most false teaching about the covenants, (d) Paul's affectionate, financial care of their poor, (e) their proximity to the temple and its ordinances, (f) their proximity to the place of coming judgment, and (g) the most useful place for his epistle to spread to other Jewish communities.

- B. These converted Jews needed to unlearn their dependence on God's Old Testament worship, which they had grown up with from childhood and knew to be the true worship of Jehovah.
- C. These were Jews that had been converted for some time, as Paul expected much (5:12-14).
- D. There was great pressure by false teachers to go back to Moses (Acts 15:5; 21:20; Gal 2:12).
  - 1. There were both sincere and false brethren and teachers in Jerusalem, who were very zealous for the Law of Moses and remained zealous of it until God totally destroyed it.
  - 2. Paul was scared that ignorance made them vulnerable to such (5:12-14 cp II Cor 11:3-4).
  - 3. Therefore, we should not be surprised at exhortations to follow pastors, which indicates the problem was likely among the members, who were not fully grounded, for the apostles and elders had come to clear conclusions about the Law (13:7,17,24; 15:1-32).
- E. There was great persecution by the Jews, which made it very costly to leave the apparent religion of Jehovah for a carpenter's son (10:32-36 cp Acts 8:1; 9:1; 11:19; I Thess 2:14).
- F. It appears to have been addressed to a very large church or a number of smaller ones (13:24).

### **The Who**

- A. In spite of many skeptics' blather to the contrary, Paul clearly wrote the book of Hebrews.
- B. It does not bear much on the book's interpretation, but why reject the considerable evidence?
- C. Peter gave an inspired hint that Paul had written scripture to the Jews (II Peter 3:15-16; 1:1).
  - 1. Paul's other epistles were primarily written to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15; Romans 11:13), so this is the only inspired epistle that Paul wrote to Jewish believers who also read Peter's.
  - 2. Compare the difficulty Peter stated with Paul's admission of things hard to utter (5:11).
- D. Paul used a plain token in each epistle to prove his authorship to believers (II Thess 3:17-18).
  - 1. Examine each epistle written by Paul to see the constant use of this token salutation.
  - 2. Others wrote many of his epistles, so he endorsed them this personal way (Rom 16:22).
  - 3. This token clearly occurs in Hebrews 13:25, though it does not prove the point by itself.
- E. The author makes specific reference to Timothy as a fellowlabourer (Hebrews 13:23).
  - 1. Paul refers elsewhere to Timothy as his son and minister (Phil 2:19-22; I Thess 3:1-2).
  - 2. We lack evidence that Timothy was the fellowlabourer with any other apostle.
- F. Consider the following parallelisms with Paul's other epistles (Heb 1:2-3 cp Col 1:15-17; Heb 1:4 cp Phil 2:9-11; Heb 5:12-14 cp I Cor 3:1-2; Heb 12:1 cp I Cor 9:24; Heb 13:7,17 cp I Thess 5:12-13; Heb 13:9 cp Eph 4:14; Heb 13:18 cp I Thess 5:25; Heb 13:18 cp II Cor 1:12; Heb 13:20-21 cp Rom 16:25-27; etc).
- G. We may easily show that Paul was the most qualified of the apostles to write this epistle.
  - 1. Paul had the very finest Jewish pedigree and rabbinical training under Gamaliel (Acts 22:3; 23:6; 26:2-5; II Corinthians 11:22; Galatians 1:13-14; Philippians 3:4-6).
  - 2. Paul had a greater understanding of the New Testament dispensation (Ephesians 3:1-11).
  - 3. He likely wrote it in Hebrew for greater reception, just as when he testified (Acts 22:1-2).
- H. As Paul's manner was to progress from the doctrinal to the practical, he made just such a divide here at 10:19, just as he did in Romans 11:1 and Ephesians 4:1.
- I. The epistle includes a salutation from those of Italy, where Paul was held (13:24; Phil 4:22).
- J. The epistle has reference to the author having been in bonds, as Paul clearly was (10:34).
- K. The writer, professing honesty, asks to be restored to the Jews (13:19; Acts 21:17-22).
- L. Some will likely complain that Paul does not mention his name as his usual habit in writing.
  - 1. Paul was primarily an apostle to the Gentiles (Romans 11:13; Galatians 2:7; Acts 22:21).
  - 2. Jewish believers were prejudiced against Paul by false rumors (Acts 21:20-22,27-28).
  - 3. With the supreme goal being to glorify Christ, Paul leaves Him the only Apostle (3:1).

4. Should we doubt the writer of I John, because it also lacks a salutation with a name?  
M. Paul! The apostle of the Gentiles! But also used to write the greatest work to the Jews!

### **The Why**

- A. The primary theme of the book by far is the superiority of Christianity to Moses' religion.
1. The treatment here is far more systematic and complete than anywhere else in the N.T.
  2. The great number of Jewish converts and their O.T. zeal made this issue very critical.
  3. Consider the divine origin of the nation, religion, scriptures, priesthood, temple, and city.
  4. Obeying Jesus Christ meant rejection from the worship of God as God had appointed it.
  5. Though logical and persuasive, Paul wrote differently when writing Gentile churches and warning against Judaizers, such as Romans, Galatians, Philippians, and Colossians.
  6. By the time you get done reading Hebrews, backsliding to Moses seems entirely absurd.
- B. Terrible judgment was imminent on the nation for the wicked crucifixion of the Son of God.
1. From John to Jesus to Peter to Paul to James, the New Testament is full of warnings of God's wrath about to fall on these impenitent and profane people (Matt 3:7-12; 16:27-28; 21:33-46; 22:1-7; 23:34-38; 24:1-35; 26:63-64; Acts 2:40; I Thess 2:14-16; Jas 5:1-9).
  2. Yet Jesus had taught clearly that obedient disciples would be spared (Matt 24:16-25).
  3. As Peter at Pentecost, Paul warned against being judged with the wicked Jews, who had a most profane character (Acts 2:40; Matt 11:16-19; 12:43-45; I Thes 2:14-16; etc.).
  4. There are at least four warnings of terrible judgment in the book that are impossible to interpret without a Jewish perspective before 70 A.D. (2:1-4; 6:4-9; 10:26-31; 12:25-29).
  5. The cure was to turn entirely away from the old Jewish system and fully embrace Christ.
  6. The need for assembling was based on this coming day of judgment, for it was the one approaching as described next and the only one to be seen (10:23-25; Matt 24:6,15,33).
  7. The coming judgment on Jews would fulfill the days of vengeance (10:26-31; Lu 21:22)!
  8. Note that Paul covertly and subtly introduces the horrible consequences of backsliding in some of his strongest language, yet without being offensive to the reader through the use of rhetorical questions and only indirect hints at the coming Roman destruction of Israel.
- C. The doctrinal importance of this book can hardly be overstated. It must be taught to all.
1. The errors of Legalism (Judaism) are most clearly destroyed in this powerful epistle.
  2. The errors of Ritualism (Catholicism) are also clearly destroyed in this powerful epistle.
  3. The glory and sufficiency of Jesus Christ as a Saviour is set forth in numerous ways.
- D. The true "Reformation" that God blessed occurred between 30 and 70 A.D., when John, Jesus, and the apostles preached the kingdom of God against the Law of Moses (9:10; Isaiah 61:1-6; Matt 17:11; Luke 16:16; John 4:21-24; Acts 15:16; Col 2:16-17).

### **The What**

- A. The basic matter of Hebrews is a logical comparison and contrast of Christianity to the O.T.
- B. Paul systematically compares Jesus Christ to all Jewish objects and shows His superiority.
1. He is superior to the prophets and their messages (1:1-3), the angels (1:4 – 2:18), Moses (3:1-19), Joshua and his rest (4:1-13), Aaron and the Levitical priesthood (4:14 – 7:18), the Old Testament (7:19 – 10:39), the Old Testament saints and any living by sight (11:1 – 12:21), and Jerusalem itself (12:22 – 13:25).
  2. Consider the frequent use of the comparative adjective "better" in this book (1:4; 7:19; 7:22; 8:6; 9:23; 10:34; 11:16,35,40; 12:24).
  3. Consider the similar use of "more" (1:4; 2:1 3:3; 8:6; 9:11,14; 10:25; 12:25).

4. Consider the similar use of “great (2:3; 4:14; 9:11; 10:35; 12:1; 13:20).
  5. Knowing the importance of the Jewish priesthood, Paul emphasizes Jesus Christ as High Priest (2:17; 3:1; 4:14-15; 5:6,10; 6:20; 7:3,24-26; 8:1; 9:11; 10:21).
  6. Knowing the Jewish inheritance, religious things, and hope to be glorious on earth, note how Paul emphasized the “heavenly” (Heb 1:3; 3:1; 6:4; 8:5; 11:16; 12:22-23).
- C. This book deals with the types and figures of the Old Testament more than any other book.
1. Observe the frequent use of “example” (8:5), “figure” (9:9,24; 11:19), “pattern” (8:5; 9:23), “shadow” (8:5; 10:1), and “similitude” (7:15).
  2. The Jews needed to see the substance and purpose of their figurative, ceremonial religion.
- D. Observe the doctrinal – practical division of the book that occurs at 10:19 with “therefore.”
1. Such a division is a Pauline trademark. Consider it in Romans 12:1 and Ephesians 4:1.
  2. The doctrine is the superiority of Christianity, and the practical theme is steadfastness.
- E. Hebrews warns and exhorts with greater emphasis against apostasy than do other books.
1. Having lost hope in fleshly Judaism, these saints were open to doubt and backsliding.
  2. Furthermore, they faced an onslaught of false teachers and general persecution by Jews.
  3. With the total destruction of Jerusalem coming, these Jews would face great trouble.
  4. Consider the emphasis on warning against apostasy and exhortation to constancy (2:1-3; 3:6-15; 4:1; 5:11-14; 6:9-12; 10:23-39; 12:1-3,12-17,28-29).
- F. Consider the “Hall of Faith” of Hebrews 11. Paul’s methodology is rather plain to see here.
1. Jews were bred on ceremonial ritual, carnal ordinances, and an emphasis on sight.
  2. In great detail, Paul sets forth an analysis and description of the life of faith, not sight.
  3. He showed how the greatest elders looked beyond this world to a better world to come.
  4. And Paul further showed the superiority of Jesus Christ in the first verses of chapter 12.
- G. Observe the great confirmation of inspiration that Paul makes in using the O.T. scriptures.
1. When quoting the Old Testament, he credited the words to God Himself (1:5-9; 3:7).
  2. He built arguments from single words (2:8,11; 3:2-6; 3:13; 4:9; 8:13; 12:27).
  3. See Paul’s heavy use of scripture to establish his points from the Hebrew Scriptures.
    - a. There are at least seven quotations from seven different places in the first chapter.
    - b. There are at least four quotations from four different places in the second chapter.

### **The When**

- A. Paul wrote the book from Italy (13:24), but he appeared to be no longer in bonds (10:34).
- B. It was written before the destruction of Jerusalem, the temple, and the priesthood in 70 A.D.
  1. How do we know? There was no need to write about Old Testament religion after that.
  2. Paul made reference to an existing temple and its rituals still taking place (8:4; 10:11).
- C. It may have been written when Paul dwelled in his own hired house in Rome (Act 28:30-31).

### **The Where**

- A. Paul wrote the book from Italy after appealing to Caesar against Jews of Jerusalem (13:24).
- B. There were many Jewish saints in Judea remaining from the initial great influx (Acts 21:20).

### **The Difficulties**

- A. Hebrews 6:4-6 has been said to be the most difficult passage in the N.T. for the most people.
  1. Yet it is no more difficult than these similar passages: 2:1-4; 10:26-31; and 12:25-19.
  2. Each of these passages is wrested by both Arminians and Calvinists to their destruction.

3. If these passages are viewed as late warnings to Jews about backsliding in light of the imminent destruction of Jerusalem and the Jewish populace of Judea, they take on an entirely different light and are easily understood.
  4. Adam Clarke suggested this easy solution for the book's difficulties in his commentary.
- B. The language of 1:3 includes "by himself," which is a unique description of the King James.
  - C. The language of 1:8 proves the deity of Jesus Christ in spite of Russellites corrupting it.
  - D. The language of 3:16 condemns all modern Bible versions by excepting Joshua and Caleb.
  - E. The language of 4:1-11, though at times difficult and obscure, point out the gospel rest.
  - F. The common usage of 4:12 as referring to the Bible is false by considering the plain context.
  - G. The language of 12:26-27 is future only to Haggai (2:6-9), for the final kingdom was present.

**For Further Study:**

1. A complete verse-by-verse exposition of this book following the above overview was prepared and preached in late 1988 and early 1989 by the author.
2. For those who love Calvinistic tomes of interpretation of the book such as by Owens and Pink, there is great value in the Arminian commentary of Adam Clarke, who above the rest of the interpreters saw the importance of 70 A.D. Other useful commentaries are those by Barnes and Gill, who sometimes saw this application.