

The Book to the Hebrews

Introduction to the Book

1. The primary aim in the book is to encourage a group of Christians that have flagged in their zeal for the Lord due to adversity. "...we must pay closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it (2:1)." "Take care, brethren, lest there should be in anyone of you an evil, unbelieving heart, in falling away from the living God (3:12)." "...you have need of endurance... (10:32)." See also 3:14; 4:14, 6:9; 10:32,36; 12:3, 5, 28; 13:22.
2. The method the writer employs is to contrast the position of those under the Old Covenant, the source of the drawing away, to the superior privileges afforded in New Covenant. The secondary aim serves the primary aim, which is to encourage the recipients of the epistle not to return to Judaism for it is depicted as an empty, surpassed, ineffectual system. Key phrases in the book are "better than" (13 times), "more excellent than" (1:4) and "worthy of more glory" (3:3)."
3. The nature of the book is captured in 13:22, "a word of exhortation."
4. The authorship of the book is uncertain.
5. The recipients of the book were Jewish-Christian people who struggled with their relationship to Judaism due to the threat of persecution (hence the large number of OT citations). These Christians had left the synagogue and temple worship but faced persecution as a result. Some believers apparently discontinued gathering with the saints to avoid problems. This is what we know:
 - a. It was written to believers ("brethren [3:1, 12; 10:19; 3:22]," "dear friends [6:9]," and those who "endured a great struggle with sufferings [10:32]").
 - b. It was written to a small group, a local assembly (5:12; 12:4; 13:19, 23-24), likely a house church; however, the location of it is only conjectured. Some have recently suggested that it was a church group in Rome, because the letter was known there quite early and it is quoted in Clement of Rome's letter (late first or early second century). However, this seems unlikely based on 13:23, 24. Timothy was imprisoned in Rome, but the text says, "if he arrives soon." Also, the greeting to these people is of those "from Italy (v.24)."
 - c. It was written to those separated from leaders (13:17, 24). The writer was a leader among them and was in Italy for some unknown reason. Further some of the former leaders may have suffered death (13:7).
 - d. It was written in a time of a widening breach between the synagogue and the church.

- e. It was written to a second generation of Hebrew Christians (“our fathers [1:1], also 2:3, 13:7).
 - f. It was written to believers in danger of losing heart (12:3).
 - g. It was written to believers in danger of drifting from their profession of faith (3:1, 4:14).
6. The date of composition can be deduced from the fact that (a) the recipients were second-generation believers (2:3). Also (b), the entire Levitical system was still in operation. “...while the outer tabernacle is still standing (9:8).” See also 5:1-4; 7: 20, 23, 27 28; 8:3, 4, 13; 9:6. 13; 10:2-3, 11. Further, the reference to Timothy having been recently released from prison (13:23) is instructive. Timothy became a member of Paul’s team when the apostle revisited Derbe/Lystra on the second missionary journey (16:1-3, 50-52 AD). He accompanied Paul on the third journey (Rom 16:21, II Cor 1:19) and was in Rome during Paul’s imprisonment, involved in preaching.
 7. The theme of the book is a reasoned exhortation to endurance and the argument is that the provisions of the New Covenant are far superior to those of the Old Covenant. Why cling, other than the weak motive of avoiding temporally unpleasant circumstances, to the inferior covenant?
 8. In literary form, the book is not a letter by a stated author with specific credentials, a specific audience, a salutation or greeting, and commendation. It begins with an assertion and makes an argument with scattered exhortations and warnings.

The Structure of the Book:

- I. The Argument of the Book: The Pre-eminence of Christ in His Person and Work, 1:1-10:18
 - A. The Superiority of Christ to the Angels. 1:1-2:18
 - B. The Superiority of Christ to Moses, 3:1-4:13
 - C. The Superiority of Christ to Aaron, 4:14-10:18
- II. The Application: The Life We Should Live Because of the Pre-eminence of the Person and Work of Christ, 10:19-13:39
 - A. Exhortation to Devotion, 10:18-39
 - B. Exhortation to Endurance in Faith, 11:1-12:29
 - C. Exhortation to Walk Honorably, 13:1-19
- III. The Conclusion to the Book, 13:20-25

Comments on the Book:

- I. The Argument of the Book: The Pre-eminence of Christ in His Person and Work, 1:1-10:18
 - A. The Superiority of Christ to the Angels. 1:1-2:18

The likely reason for beginning the argument with angels is two-fold: (1) the high regard for angels among the Jews (often called the “sons of

God” (Job 1:6, 2:1, 38:7 [in most places the Septuagint translates “angels” as “sons of God”]) and (2) the angels mediated the law at Mount Sinai (2:2).

1. The Preface, 1:1-4

The focus in the introductory paragraph is “in a son”. It consists of a comparison of the old and new revelations of God, followed by seven statements about the Son. Clearly, the new revelation, the revelation “in the Son,” is superior to the revelation in the Old Covenant because Christ is superior in his person and work. God has spoken fully and finally in his Son! What is implied in the prologue is that we should listen to Him!

a. The fact of a superior revelation, vv. 1-2a

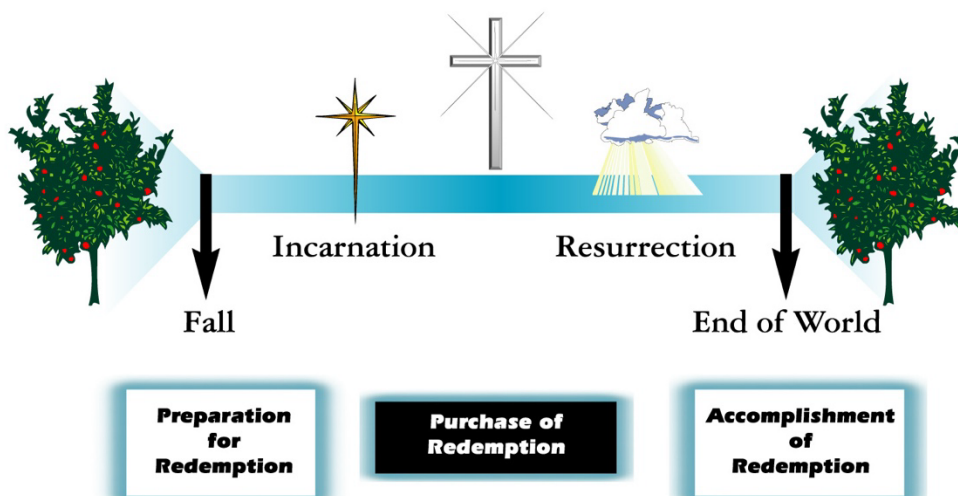
The revelation of God to his people came in two stages, corresponding to what we call the Old and New Testaments. God’s disclosure to his people has been progressive, first with shadows of anticipation, and second, with finality in the Son.

1) The revelation through the prophets, v.1

“Portions” and “ways (NASV)” speaks of the fragmentary, partial nature of the revelation of God in the Hebrew Scriptures (incomplete, not inaccurate; obscure, not clear). At best, though a wonderful disclosure of God, it was not full. It was a revelation in shadows! The Old Testament is a book of figures that anticipate the promised seed of Abraham, Christ. In figure and ceremony, the Old Testament taught the believer to expect a greater One to come who would bring a greater

deliverance. The Old Testament progressively reveals two things. First, it reveals details about who this person would be (Gen 12:3, 49:10; II Sam 7:14; Isa 7:14, 9:6; Micah 5:2) and second, what He would accomplish for His people (Lev. 16:1-34, Isa 52:12-53:12)

**The Meaning of Universal History:
God’s Glory Revealed, Redemption Accomplished**



The phrase can also be translated “in many and various ways (NRSV)” and would suggest the differing modes on the former communication (visions, floods, the still small voice, thunderous judgment).

2) The revelation through a son, vv. 2b-3

The point of the phrase is on the final of the revelation “in the Son.” The word “son” is the focus of the passage, the fulcrum.

With the coming of the Messiah, Christian Jews realized that instead of two great divisions of history (the former age before the coming of Messiah and the latter age of His kingdom), there were three (the age that was [the time before the promised one], the age that is [the age of the dawn of Jesus’ reign], and the age that will be [the fullest manifestation of Jesus’ reign]). “In these last days” refers to the second age that stretches between the advents of the Lord. In 9:10, the period is called the “time of reformation” and in 9:36 “now once at the consummation of the ages.”

a) The fact of a superior person, vv. 2b

These verses give us a wonderful and succinct description of the person, character, and accomplishments of Jesus. Three observations are in order: 1) the section begins and ends with notice of the exaltation of Jesus (“heir,” and enthroned), 2) there are seven statements of the superiority of Jesus (the number seven suggests completion of perfection), and 3) facts 2 thru 7 provide the reasons that Jesus is the heir of all things (fact 1).

(1) The status of the son, v. 2b

Jesus is the “heir,” suggesting that he will inherit the possessions of God. It suggests equality of status. As redeemer/king, the nations of the world will be placed under his rule! This is certainly an allusion to Ps. 2:8.

“Ask of me and I will give you the nations
for your inheritance,

And the uttermost parts of the earth
for your possession.”

(2) The character and work of the superior person, vv.
2c-3

The literary artistry of the seven statements of the Son is truly beautiful. Points a, d and e deal with the creative works of Jesus; Points b and c talk about His person as it to His relationship to God; and Points e and f remunerate His redemptive work.

(a)The creator, v. 2c

The one who said, “Let us” in the Genesis narrative was the Lord Jesus. He was the agent of all things temporal.

See John 1:3, Col. 1:16.

(b)The one with God, v.3a

“Radiance” or effulgence means the expression or manifestation of God the Father, the flashing forth of true light. The son revealed the fullness of God’s character because he came from God and is God. As the radiance of the sun reaches the earth illuminating it, Christ has come to illuminate the character of God.

(c)The incarnate God, v. 3b

Jesus the fullest revelation of God, having come to us. The word “exact imprint or representation” refers to an engraving tool that leaves an exact duplicate impression. Here is a clear claim to Jesus’ deity (“exact representation”); He is in character and person all that God is; He is God in the flesh!

(d)The sustainer, v. 3c

Jesus governs the universe controlling movement toward a predetermined end. The universe would immediately collapse if He did not constantly replenish and control it. Continuity of creation depends upon constant renewal because of the laws of entropy. “He’s got the whole world in his hands. He’s got you and me sister in his hands.”

He is more of a comfort to us than Allstate, “The Good Hands People.”

(e) The cleanser from sin, v. 3d

Here the writer passes from the cosmic functions of Jesus to His personal relations to mankind, to his work as the great high priest. He purified us not *from* sins (its presence), but *of* sins (its penalty). What is in view is finality and absoluteness!

The use of the word, “purification,” is a clear indication that Paul likely did not write the book. He does not use this vocabulary to express redemption; it is the vocabulary of a Jewish audience, not Gentile. Paul’s emphasis is upon the consequences of Jesus’ atoning sacrifice, freedom from slavery to sin (his words are three: to buy, to buy out, to set free); it is slave-market terminology!

(f) The enthroned king, 3e

Jesus is now seated in heaven, the image being of the completion of His work, the perfection of His work for us, and his consequent exaltation (“...he thought lightly of the shame and sat down at the right hand of God [12:3]”) as the great king. The allusion is to Ps. 110:1.

Remember, there were no chairs in the tabernacle or temple, because the work of the priests was never completed (and also a success of them because priests died and the work had to continue until the final sacrifice). Jesus did what no priest could have done; He completed His work and the evidence is that He is enthroned in the presence of God today; He is triumphant.

(Verse four is a transitional verse in the writer’s argument that Christ is superior in word and deed to the shadowed revelation of Himself in the Hebrew Scriptures,