

A Book Study in Hebrews
“The Glory of God in Jesus”

January 19th: Introduction: God’s Final Word Spoken in Jesus (1:1-4)

January 26th: The Position of Jesus in Relation to Angels (1:5-2:18)

February 2nd: Focus on Jesus, Warning against Unbelief and Promise of Rest (3:1-4:13)

February 9th: Since We Have Jesus, Let Us Hold Fast (4:14-16)

February 16th: Jesus the Great High Priest, Part 1 (5:1-6:20)

February 23rd: Jesus the Great High Priest, Part 2 (7:1-28)

March 2nd: The Superior Offering of Jesus, Part 1 (8:1-13)

March 9th: The Superior Offering of Jesus, Part 2 (9:1-28)

March 16th: The Superior Offering of Jesus, Part 3 (10:1-18)

March 23rd: Since We Have Jesus, Let Us Draw Near (10:19-25)

March 30th: A Call to Preference and Faith, Part 1 (10:26-39)

April 6th: A Call to Preference and Faith, Part 2 (11:1-40)

April 13th: Conclusion: A Call to Preference and Faith, Part 3 (12:1-13:25)

Matt Capps, West Campus, Wednesday Nights, 6:30 – 8:00 pm. Room 3204

Introduction to the Book of Hebrews

Matt Capps

The traditional title “to the Hebrews” reflects the ancient assumption that the original recipients were Christians who had great familiarity with the Hebrew Scriptures and religion. Hebrews is a personal epistle/letter¹ that functioned as a ‘written sermon’ (discourse) to be read aloud to its recipients. In the book of Hebrews one finds a wonderful blend of sermonic exposition and exhortation. The author weaves a beautiful “tapestry of concepts toward the accomplishment of his purpose.”²

Author

The author of Hebrews never names himself. The author's identity has been a matter of significant conjecture throughout church history. Authorship has attributed to figures such as Paul, Barnabas, and Apollos, to name a few.³ However, many today concede that this author remains anonymous. The conclusion expressed by Origen⁴ (A.D. 254) on the actual ‘penman’ of Hebrews was: “who actually wrote the epistle, only God knows”⁵, but he believed it to be of Pauline origin. At the very least we can say with Carson and Moo, “In all likelihood the author was a Hellenistic Jew who had become a Christian, a second-generation believer (Hebrews 2:3). He was steeped in the LXX⁶ and, judging by his excellent vocabulary and Greek style, had enjoyed a good education.”⁷

Audience

Ellingworth argues that Hebrews was written with the “needs of a particular community, personally known to the author, in mind”⁸, who longed to be reunited with them (Heb. 13:19). “One would expect it to go without saying that Hebrews was written to Christians: people for whom Jesus was God’s Son (1:2) and “the Lord” (2:3) without qualification.”⁹ What is most unclear is whether or not these readers were of Jewish or Gentile origin. What we can tell is that this particular audience would have well understood the book's many citations and allusions to the OT, which is illustrated by the

¹ See O’Brien, 20-22 for a brief discussion on the genre of Hebrews.

² George Guthrie, *Hebrews*, 28.

³ For the most detailed list of proposals see Ellingworth, 3-21. Carson and Moo provide the best concise survey of proposed authors, 600-604.

⁴ While Origen admitted that ‘only God knows’ who the actual writer of Hebrews was, his opinion was that Hebrews was of the Apostle Paul, and in fact often cited the letter as Paul’s. Pauline authorship of Hebrews is the earliest tradition in the Church, and was recently argued on the basis of internal and external evidence by David Alan Black in *Who Wrote Hebrews?* (Faith and Mission, Spring 2001).

⁵ Cited in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.25.14.

⁶ In fact, the author quotes the LXX 35 times (including repeated quotations). The abbreviation LXX is a referent to the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the OT.

⁷ D.A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2005, 604.

⁸ Ellingworth, 60.

⁹ Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 1993, 22.

authors' frequent usage of OT persons, institutions, texts, and with the Mosaic Law. Guthrie summarizes the dynamics which point to the audience's orientation with the OT.

1. "The author assumes his audience has extensive knowledge of the OT.
2. The author uses theological concepts that were popular in the Greek speaking synagogues of the first century.
3. A potential danger to this community seems to lie in the temptation to reject Christianity and return to Judaism [rituals and legalism]."¹⁰

The audience's social situation can be inferred from commands to "remember those who are in prison" and who are "mistreated" (13:3). The audience is commended for their former endurance of persecution, for their compassion on those in prison, and for having "joyfully accepted the plundering of your property" (10:32–34). Yet, the author also warned against "strange teachings" in the church (13:9). The author also repeatedly calls the listeners to persevere in the faith and cautioned them about the danger of leaving the Christian community. Carson and Moo make the sweeping assertion that "all agree that the book is written for Christians, who are urged to maintain their confession (3:6, 14; 4:14; 10:23)."¹¹

Date

The range of possible dates proposed for the composition of Hebrews ranges from A.D. 50 to A.D. 70, but many scholars would narrow these dates down to A.D. 64-70. Hebrews was almost certainly written in the first century, which would be within 30-40 years after Christ's death and resurrection.¹² The mention of Timothy (13:23) who was known to be active in the first century provides a strong case for this time table. It is also considerable that the author and, probably, his audience came to know the gospel from those who themselves had listened to Jesus in person (2:3). Also, Bruce notes that Hebrews was quoted in extra biblical literature before the end of the first century. He notes that Hebrews is quoted by Clement of Rome and Hermas in *Shepherd*.¹³ (Around the mid A.D. 90's)

Theme and Purpose

"Hebrews is a magnificent New Testament document. It is carefully constructed and beautifully written, theologically profound and powerfully argued."¹⁴ In fact, many scholars argue that it is one of the most difficult books in the New Testament to understand not only for contemporary readers but also linguistic scholars, it is a literary masterpiece.¹⁵

¹⁰ George H. Guthrie, *Hebrews*, 1998, 19-20.

¹¹ Carson and Moo, 609.

¹² Historians date the death and resurrection of Jesus around A.D. 33 (or 30). For a brief, but excellent summary of this see *the ESV Study Bible*, 1809-1810.

¹³ F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 1990, 3.

¹⁴ Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 2010, 1.

¹⁵ The language in Hebrews is complex and its structure is carefully constructed.

Yet, the main theme of Hebrews is somewhat straightforward, namely, the supremacy of Jesus Christ over all things. It becomes quite clear in the text that the glory of God in Christ is the gravitational center of this book (1:3). “Christ is greater than any angel, priest, or old covenant institution; thus each reader, rather than leaving such a great salvation, is summoned to hold on by faith to the true rest found in Christ and to encourage others in the church to persevere.”¹⁶

The purpose of this well crafted letter is primarily pastoral, it is a “word of exhortation” (13:22). The writer is aiming to develop a profound and distinctive teaching about the person and work of Christ¹⁷ so that his recipients will be satisfied in Jesus alone as they gain a fuller understanding of what he has accomplished. Hamilton argues that “this is not an evangelizing letter calling for conversion but a discipline letter calling for perseverance, growth in holiness, and a deeper perception of what God has done in Christ.”¹⁸ As a response to Christ’s work the listener is called to worship/right response “by encouraging words, stern warnings, as well as positive and negative examples.”¹⁹

A Textual-Linguistic Outline of Hebrews²⁰

Chapman rightly notes that “the book of Hebrews is one of the most stylistically polished books in the New Testament. The writer is a master of imagery and metaphor, allusions to the Old Testament, comparison and analogy, contrast, and long, flowing sentences that build to a climax”²¹ make it difficult to follow at times. The complex arrangement of this book becomes immediately clear when one surveys the literature of proposed outlines for Hebrews.²² One will notice that the detailed outline in this text is arranged under these three overarching section headers:

- 1. God has Definitively Spoken In His Son Jesus Christ (Hebrews 1:1-4:13)**
- 2. Jesus is the High Priest Who Offers Himself as the Once for All Sacrifice for Our Sins (Hebrews 4:14-10:18)**
- 3. We Must Draw Near to God through Jesus (Hebrews 10:19-13:21)**

These three section headers allow us to conceptually organize the material that is found within their markers.

¹⁶ David W. Chapman, Introduction to Hebrews, *ESV Study Bible*, 2009, 2358.

¹⁷ See Ellingworth’s article on Hebrews in the *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 2000, 338.

¹⁸ James M. Hamilton Jr., *God’s Glory in Salvation*, 2010, page 515.

¹⁹ O’Brien, 35.

²⁰ This structural outline follows the work of George H. Guthrie’s in *The Structure of Hebrews* (1998) which is also seen in *NIV Application Commentary: Hebrews* (1998, 39-40). See also Peter T. O’Brien’s commentary on *The Letter to the Hebrews* (2010). O’Brien bases the outline of his commentary on Guthrie’s work (34). While the structure of this outline follows Guthrie’s work, the wording closely follows O’Brien. D.A. Carson and Doug Moo comment that the discourse analysis method of Guthrie is the most detailed and consistent outline for Hebrews (*An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2005, 598).

²¹ Chapman, 2359.

²² For a complex and detailed presentation of proposed structural outlines for Hebrews see William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, 1991, lxxxv-xcviii. For a more concise presentation see Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 22-34.

The Outline

Hebrews 1:1-4:13 - God has Definitively Spoken to Us in His Son Jesus Christ!²³

1. Introduction: God's Definitive Word Spoken to Us in Jesus (1:1-4)

- a. Jesus contrasted with the Prophets (1:1-2a)
- b. Jesus as messianic heir (1:2b)
- c. Jesus' creative work (1:2c)
- d. Jesus' three-fold relationship to God (1:3ab)
- c'. Jesus' redemptive work (1:3c)
- b'. Jesus the messianic king (1:3d)
- a'. Jesus contrasted with angels (1:4)²⁴

2. The Position of Jesus in Relation to the Angels (1:5-2:18)

- A. Jesus is Superior to the Angels (1:5-14)
 - 1. Warning: Do Not Reject the Word Spoken Through Jesus (2:1-4)
- Ab. Jesus for a Time Became Positionally Lower Than the Angels (2:5-9)
- B. Jesus Became Lower in Order to Suffer for the Sons (2:10-18)

3. Focus on Jesus: A Warning Against Unbelief and a Promise of Rest (3:1-4:13)

- A. Jesus the Only Faithful Son (3:1-6)
- B. Warning: Avoid Israel's Example of Unbelief (3:7-19)
- C. The Promise of Rest of Those Who Persevere (4:1-11)
- D. Remember the Power of God's Word (4:12-13)

Hebrews 4:14-10:18 - Jesus is the High Priest Who Offers Himself as the Once for All Sacrifice for Our Sins!

4. Since We Have Jesus the Great High Priest, Let Us Hold Fast (4:14-16)

- a. Hold fast to Jesus (4:14)
- b. Jesus and temptation (4:15)
- c. The Christian and God's grace (4:16)

5. Jesus' Appointment as the Great High Priest (5:1-7:28)

- A. Jesus from Among Men and Appointed According to the Order of Melchizedek (5:1-10)
 - 1. Qualifications for Priesthood (5:1-4)
 - 2. Christ's Qualifications for High Priesthood (5:5-10)
- B. Warning and Encouragement: The Present Danger (5:11-6:12)
 - 1. The Problem of Immaturity in the Hearers (5:11-14)
 - 2. Let Us Move to Maturity (6:1-3)
 - 3. Warning: The Danger of Falling Away from the Faith (6:4-8)

²³ The three bold/underlined units in this outline are adapted from William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1-8* (1991, 1xxxlxxxiv.)

²⁴ This chiastic pattern has been identified by D.J. Ebert in *The Chiastic Structure of the Prologue of Hebrews*, *Trinity Journal* 13 (1992). See also Lane (5-9) and Ellingworth (95).

- 4. An Encouragement to Persevere (6:9-12)
- 5. God's Promise Our Basis of Hope (6:13-20)
- C. The Superiority of Melchizedek (7:1-10)
- D. Jesus, Our Eternal Melchizedek High Priest (7:11-28)
 - 1. The Order of Melchizedek Replaces that of Aaron (7:11-19)
 - 2. The Superiority of the New Priesthood (7:20-28)

6. The Superior Offering of Jesus, the Appointed High Priest (8:1-10:18)

- A. The Ministry of the Heavenly High Priest (8:1-6)
- B. The Superiority of the New Covenant (8:7-13)
- C. The Superior New Covenant Offering (9:1-10:18)
 - 1. The Sanctuary Under the Old Covenant (9:1-10)
 - 2. The Decisive Cleansing through the Blood of Jesus (9:11-28)
 - a. Jesus' death has secured an eternal redemption (9:11-14)
 - b. Jesus is the mediator of the new covenant (9:15-22)
 - c. Jesus' perfect sacrifice (9:23-28)
 - 3. The Eternal Sacrifice (10:1-18)
 - a. Shadow and reality (10:1-4)
 - b. Sacrifice versus obedience (10:5-10)
 - c. The finality of Jesus' priesthood (10:11-14)
 - d. The finality of Jesus sacrifice (10:15-18)

Hebrews 10:19-13:21 - We Must Draw Near to God through Jesus!

7. Since We Have Access to God through Jesus, Let Us Draw Near (10:19-25)

- A. Let Us Draw Near to God (10:19-22)
- B. Let Us Hold Fast to the Hope We Possess (10:23)
- C. Let Us Encourage One Another (10:24-25)

8. A Call to Perseverance and Faith (10:26-12:29)

- A. Warning Against Falling Away and a Call to Perseverance (10:26-39)
 - 1. Warning: The danger of rejecting God's truth and God's Son (10:26-31)
 - 2. The example of the hearers past and an admonition to persevere (10:32-39)
- B. Examples from the Old Testament of Faithfulness and Perseverance (11:1-40)
 - 1. Faith in the unseen (11:1-7)
 - 2. The faith of Abraham and his descendants (11:8-22)
 - 3. The faith of Moses (11:23-31)
 - 4. Further examples of those who endured in faith (11:32-40)
- C. Reject Sin and Fix Your Eyes on Jesus, the Only Faithful One (12:1-2)
- D. Endure Discipline as Sons (12:3-7)
- E. The Blessings of the New Covenant (12:18-24)
- F. Warning: Do Not Reject God's Word (12:25-29)

9. Conclusion: Exhortations, Prayers, and Greetings (13:1-19)

- A. Serving God Involves Serving His People (13:1-6)
- B. Instructions to the Congregation (13:7-19)
- C. Prayer and Doxology (13:20-21)
- D. Personal Comments, Greetings, and Benediction (13:22-25)

Appendix 1: The Importance of the Outline in Studying a Book of the Bible

The Bible is not a collection of short disconnected sentences or unrelated paragraphs. The Bible is a large unified story, and each book of the Bible is a unit within that larger story. Just like verbal communication, written communication presents meaning in an organized way. Grant Osborne explains that “words come together to produce sentences, sentences unite to produce paragraphs, and paragraphs flow together to produce discourse as a whole.”²⁵ While this is completely obvious, it is also important for biblical interpretation.

Every book in the Bible is written and organized for a specific reason – to communicate. When studying the organization of a book it is important to look at what causes the story/argument to hang together, literary scholars call this ‘cohesion’ or ‘unity’ of the discourse. Linguist²⁶ Johannes Louw notes the importance of organization in a story/argument.

Whenever a person has something to say on a given subject, he is faced with the problem of how to say it, for it is by no means a matter of merely “throwing together” a number of randomly selected utterances. The material must be put in some order, and language normally offers a multiplicity of arrangements.²⁷

The arrangement of these letters, words, sentences, and paragraphs are a vital part of the message being communicated. Therefore, a key to understanding any act of communication is to understand the organization of the material. “If one does not have a degree of understanding of a whole discourse one cannot adequately appraise a unit under consideration.”²⁸ When one attempts to outline a book of the bible one is essentially taking a foundational step in the discipline of discourse analysis. Bible scholar George Guthrie defines discourse analysis as,

A process of investigation by which one examines the form and function of all the parts and levels of a written discourse, with the aim of better understanding both the parts and the whole of that discourse.²⁹

Traditionally exegetical concerns have focused on syntax, which is the relationship between words, clauses, and phrases in the Bible. This is perfectly needed in biblical

²⁵ Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 2006, 150.

²⁶ Linguistics is simply the study of human language, particularly the inner dynamics of relationships that come together to form coherent meaning in communication.

²⁷ Johannes P. Louw, *Discourse Analysis and the Greek New Testament*, 1973, 101.

²⁸ George H. Guthrie, Discourse Analysis, in *Interpreting the New Testament: Essays on Methods and Issues*, Edited by David A. Black and David S. Dockery, 2001, 256.

²⁹ Guthrie, 255.

studies. But too often the context of the cannon and the context of the book which the particular passage under investigation are ignored. Vital to the proper study God's word is the need to expand analysis to demonstrate "how the words, clauses, and sentences in a paragraph work together to accomplish the authors goal for that paragraph in relation to the whole book or section of the book."³⁰ The whole discourse provides the context for the words, sentences, and paragraphs. The primary meaning of a text often resides above the word or sentence level.

Themes are intertwined throughout the text from paragraph to paragraph. Numerous markers and connections tie these paragraphs together. While it is critical to work through the small details at the sentence level, it is also important that we move to the paragraph level, and also the discourse level – this is often grasped or understood better by becoming familiar with an outline of the book, or attempting to outline the book itself.

Review Questions

- 1. What do we know about the audience for whom the letter to the Hebrews was written?**

- 2. What is the main theme of Hebrews?**

- 3. What are the three overarching sections of Hebrews? (*With verse references*)**
 - 1.**
 - 2.**
 - 3.**

- 4. How does becoming familiar with a book's outline help when studying the Bible?**

³⁰ Guthrie, 257.