

Intro to Hebrews
Notes for Teaching
Sarah Cox, 01-21-2021

All right. I am so glad that you are all warmed up a little and talkative. Because I am going to put you to work. First let's see what you know about the book of Hebrews.

A great place to start is always with the who, what, why, when questions.

So... without looking at your study Bibles... 😊 Let's start with these first four questions:

Who wrote the book of Hebrews?

To whom was it written?

When was it written?

In what style was it written?

Usually for an epistle, there is a greeting at the beginning that tells us who wrote the book. For whatever reason, in God's providence, there is not that greeting at the beginning of this letter. We still know that it is a letter - look with me at verses 22-25 of chapter 13. {} This is very clearly a closing greeting. The author wrote to someone a word of exhortation. And exhortation means what? (to incite or encourage probably to action)

There is not a greeting at the beginning of the book and the final greeting is a little vague, but we are not left without any information about who wrote the letter or to whom it was written. Let's do a little digging into this.

Assign verses by table. As a group see what you can learn about either the author or the recipient of the letter from the verses

Table 1 – 1:1 (Jewish author and recipients)

Table 2 – 3:1 (recipients was also Christian)

Table 3 – 2:3-4 (author does not have first-hand knowledge of what Jesus said but second hand)

Table 4 – 5:11-14 (recipients are dull of hearing, still need teachers, unskilled in the word, lack discernment have been in the faith long enough that they should have some maturity, but they lack it)

Table 5 – 6:10 (recipients do some work and love for Jesus' name sake in serving the saints)

Table 6 – 10:32-36 (recipients joyfully endured plundering of property, endured suffering, publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, were compassionate to others suffering, need endurance)

Table 7 – 13:1 & 13:3 (They are showing brotherly love; some of their people are in prison and some are being mistreated)

Table 8 – 13:7, 17 & 24 (Written to the congregation and not to the leaders directly)

Let me pull this together for us and give a little more information.

Author

So what we know about the author is that he was not an apostle, but had received the gospel from men who had heard it directly from Jesus Christ. We know that the author is familiar with who he was writing to because he knew their strengths and weaknesses, where they were succeeding and where they needed encouragement. The depth with which the sacrificial system and the emphasis on the Levitical priesthood would point to someone of a Jewish background rather than a Gentile one.

When

The when is uncertain as well. It is probably before the temple was destroyed in AD 70 because the author's references sound like sacrifices were still happening at the temple. Most commentaries agree on a date of between AD 65 and 69. Persecution was increasing and Timothy had just been released from prison all play into those guesses.

Recipients

The recipients likewise were Jewish Christians. They had endured suffering already for their faith and apparently more suffering was coming. We see from the letter itself that the audience or recipients have received the gospel, most of them have embraced the gospel, but think of where, as Jews, they would have come from. If they had grown up learning the history of their people and practicing the Laws of the Old Covenant, they would have found great comfort in those rituals that they grew up learning and performing. Going to the temple, the washings, the ceremonies, the sacrificing and eating of the sacrifice. They knew that the priests would present their sacrifice and atone for their sins and it was all very visual and touchable. It was physical, tangible, probably even smellable. Is that a word? They could smell it and taste it. All very appealing and reassuring when you are tempted to doubt. Tempted to want to go back to living under the Old Covenant with its rituals and rites.

In addition to being more tangible, it was comfortable. The Jews were not being persecuted to the extent that the Christians were. The Jewish *Christians* were hated and persecuted by both the Jews and the non-Christians around them. Can you imagine the temptation to just go back to the old ways and blend in? We know that the apostles thought that the Lord could return any day. I wonder how long these Christians endured the suffering before they began to feel like the Lord would not ever return and was he all that the apostles had said that he was? Had they been foolish in accepting this gospel? Was it wise to no longer have the Jewish high priest present their sacrifice before God to atone for their sin? Did they wonder if their suffering was because they had angered God by turning away from the Law? Do you think they wondered these things as they suffered?

They were being imprisoned, publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, their property plundered.

This brings us to the next part of the background of Hebrews...

Why was the letter written? (Or what is the central theme of the book?)

The author goes back and forth between expositing Scripture that points to the superiority and sufficiency of Jesus Christ and exhorting the readers to hold fast to their faith in him.

As you study and read and reread the book, I hope this begins to stand out to you. The author again and again argues that Jesus Christ is better – better than angels, better than Moses, better than the Old Covenant. More than that, he is the perfect high priest and the perfect and perfecting sacrifice such that no further sacrifice is required. Interspersed with these arguments are exhortations to the people to hold fast to the confession of their hope – faith in Jesus Christ alone – without wavering.

Arguments that they needed to hear – and we need to hear too. Although I didn't grow up Jewish and so I don't have a temptation like the Hebrews to return to that way of life, I do need to know Jesus more!

Makes me think, how well do I know him, love him, adore him.

I have LOVED seeing all that the author says about Jesus here. We know he is the Good Shepherd, but how often do we think about Jesus being our high priest? "We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." from ch 4 and then in ch 6 we see that Jesus has gone before the very presence of God as a forerunner on our behalf. The very presence of God. We think too little on these things!

And in regards to the suffering, could this book be more timely? I am tempted to worry about what is coming. We may soon be able to relate to these Jewish Christians more than we would like to. We are quickly approaching a time – and I hope I am wrong on this – that the cultural 'Christians' around us will turn against us. Really, it is already happening. For those who believe that God means every Word He spoke in Scripture, 'Christians' and atheists and everything in between think we are wrong, that we must not love God at all if we think that critical race theory or homosexuality is wrong. How could we be so unloving? So not woke? So not like Jesus – they would say.

Just like the Jewish Christians were rejected by their Jewish community, we face rejection by our 'Christian' community, do we not? We need the same encouragements as the Hebrews did. We need the same exhortations to hold fast.

And above all, we need to know Jesus Christ more.

Pray.