

The Book of Hebrews

LESSON
ONE

The Background and
Purpose of Hebrews
Discussion Forum



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The Book of Hebrews

Lesson One: The Background and Purpose of Hebrews

Discussion Forum

With

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Dr. David Talley
Dr. K. Erik Thoennes
Dr. Simon Vibert
Dr. Stephen E. Witmer

Question 1:

Who wrote the book of Hebrews?

Dr. Dennis E. Johnson

The question of who wrote the book of Hebrews has been debated from the very earliest days of the church. In the Eastern empire, especially in Alexandria, Clement of Alexandria and then his student, Origen, were aware of traditions that Paul wrote Hebrews, that Luke may have written Hebrews. But Origen in the early third century probably said the truest thing that anyone can say, and that is, “As to who actually wrote the book, God alone knows the truth.” Other theories were that Barnabas wrote Hebrews, that was held by Tertullian. Much later in the Reformation period, Martin Luther suggested that Apollos wrote Hebrews, but there’s no tradition of that in the early centuries of the church. We really don’t know. Calvin, aware of those early traditions, weighed in on the question of Pauline authorship, saying he just could not imagine that Paul would group himself among those who heard the gospel through the other apostles rather than through direct revelation from Christ, as Paul so clearly claims in his epistles. So, Calvin said 2:1-4, for his mind, were pretty conclusive against Pauline authorship. But we really don’t know.

Dr. Simon Vibert

There’s been a lot of speculation about who wrote the book of Hebrews, and one obvious candidate would be the apostle Paul. There’s lots in it that’s very similar in theology to other writings of the apostle Paul, but most scholars agree that it doesn’t exactly read like the apostle Paul’s writing style, a letter that’s written to a very Jewish community, lots of quotations from the Greek version of the Old Testament. And, in a nutshell, the conclusion, I think, is that we actually don’t know who the author the letter to the Hebrews was, but somebody who was clearly associated with the apostolic band.

Dr. Barry Joslin

Well, the question of who wrote Hebrews is probably the question that I get asked most often. Since the earliest days of the church, this has been a mystery. In fact, Origen said in about 215 A.D., a famous quote that's been circulating now for centuries, he said, as to who wrote Hebrews, "only God knows who wrote Hebrews." Many suggestions have been made: we've got Priscilla; we've got Luke; we've got Barnabas; we've got Apollos; of course, Paul. And down through the centuries of the church, Paul has arguably been the most popular. That was because he was tied to the book in order to get it, one of the things that was used in order to get it into the Canon. And so, based on what we know, particularly as we compare Paul and Hebrews and how they rise, the usage of the Greek, rhetorical style, things like that, we can say with quite a bit of confidence that it's not Paul. They just say things differently, use words differently, argue differently, speak about the same things quite differently. And so, people say, "Well then who wrote it?" Well, I mean, I agree with Origen; God knows and that's sufficient for us. But we want to know who, we'd like to know who it was, who wrote it, but we have to be satisfied with knowing that it's fully inspired, that God wrote it, ultimately, through some pastor in the first century. And yes, that's been posited for hundreds of years as Apollos or someone like him. Based on what we know about Apollos, he perhaps fits the bill, but we certainly can't argue that with certainty. We just have to be content that it's inspired, the Lord has given it to us, and it's a tremendous gift as one of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament.

Dr. Craig S. Keener

Who wrote the book of Hebrews? I think it was Origen who said, "Only God knows." But there have been a number of suggestions through history of Barnabas and others. One of the strongest possible suggestions is Apollos because he was from Alexandria and he was able to do the kind of things that we see in the book of Hebrews. We can be sure it wasn't Paul because it depends on the Septuagint so much, whereas Paul sometimes nuances things where he knows that the Hebrew is different. There have been other suggestions. One that I think hasn't been offered as much but would also fit would be Silas who was a Roman citizen and was apparently in Rome part of these times. I look at Hebrews 13 and it appears, you know — "Those from Italy greet you" — it appears that it's probably being written from Italy. Timothy has just been released from jail. This may be, Timothy had come to visit Paul, as was requested in 2 Timothy 4, and wasn't able... Well, probably did meet him but then was probably arrested himself. There's no mention of Paul, so this may be after Paul's execution. But after Nero died, the prisoners probably would have been released, so, probably in the late 60s. This is probably someone from the Pauline circle, somebody who knew Paul, somebody who would have been in Rome at the time, but that doesn't tell us exactly who it is. It just tells us some things about them.

Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

The book of Hebrews doesn't actually tell us who wrote it, and I don't think we really know who wrote the book of Hebrews. There's been speculation in the past that it was the apostle Paul... But I think we don't know who wrote it. And there's

something I like about that because, as important as it may be at times to know who the human author is, I think it's helpful to get a reminder once in a while that God's the ultimate author, and that's what we really need to emphasize whenever we read the Bible.

Question 2:

What are your personal thoughts on the authorship of Hebrews?

Dr. Constantine Campbell

The question, who wrote the book of Hebrews, has about 101 different answers. There are a number of factors to consider. The first is I don't think it's a letter, at least not originally. There are all kinds of things about it that are strange for a letter: no greeting, no greeting at the end. I think, most likely, the letter to the Hebrews, as a number of scholars do, originated as a sermon, a speech, given by somebody and written down by somebody. So, I think that's key. Most scholars do not think the apostle Paul wrote it because Hebrews is different in language from Paul's other letters and different in form. The form can be explained because Hebrews did not originate as a letter. But the language I think can be explained by the fact that if, say, Paul preached the message that was later written down, someone else may have written it and put it in their own language. And in fact, if we compare the language of Hebrews to Paul's preaching as recorded by Luke in Acts, all of a sudden, the language starts to sound much more similar. So, I think Paul preached the message of Hebrews and Luke wrote it down. And the Paul of Hebrews sounds like the Paul who we hear preaching through the lens of Luke, if you like, in the book of Acts. And I guess the other thing to consider is Paul's other letters are not addressed specifically to Jewish believers — you know, he's the Apostle to the Gentiles — and so you have to imagine, what would Paul say if he was preaching? And we know that he did preach in the synagogues to Jews. What would he say if he was preaching to the Jews? And I think the letter to the Hebrews, i.e., the sermon to Jews, tells us the answer.

Dr. Dan Lacich

The authorship of Hebrews is a really interesting question. Most people will tell you they have no idea who wrote it, and throughout history there's been all kind of names that have been put forth. For a long time, it was Paul that a majority of people would consider. I don't think that's a good option mostly because the author says that he also learned the gospel from others. Paul was pretty adamant that he got it from Jesus, not from any of the other apostles. Priscilla has been put forward as, I think, kind of a trendy option, you know, no name put to it because it was a woman, but I think that's more a twenty-first century trend than anything. Barnabas has been one option put forward. My personal favorite, though, I think it was Apollos. The only argument against Apollos was that he was from Alexandria, and the Alexandrian church fathers don't say it was him. I think that's an argument from silence that doesn't hold much. Clearly, the author knew Paul's circle of friends, knew Timothy well, was very fluent

in Greek, was well educated and was respected throughout the church. So, I'm going to go with Apollos.

Dr. Aida Besançon Spencer

So, it's a mystery who wrote the book of Hebrews. And the early church, some knew and some didn't know. And the interesting thing is that the book of Hebrews was written acknowledging Italian Christians in the letter, but the Italians all said they did not know who wrote it. But outside of Italy and Rome, they all thought that Paul wrote it. So, for myself, I do not think Paul wrote it because it seems like a second-generation Christian, and the writing styles are also very different from Paul's writing elsewhere, the way that he wrote the Greek. So, some theories are it could be Apollos, some said Prisca and Aquila, some said Barnabas. But all we know is that it most likely wasn't Paul but another devout Christian from the first century.

Question 3:

What kinds of things can we learn about the author of Hebrews from the contents of his letter?

Dr. Simon Vibert

Although we don't know who wrote the letter to the Hebrews, there are a number of things we do know about the author just from the way in which they wrote. So, here was somebody who was steeped in the Old Testament, quoting a lot from the Greek translation of the Septuagint, probably from a Hellenistic background, and writing to a group of Christians who themselves would have known the Old Testament Scriptures well, helping them to make sense of living the Christian life today with the background that they already knew from possibly the Greek world, but certainly from the Old Testament world as well.

Dr. Fredrick Long

Well, even though we don't know for sure who the author of Hebrews is, we can learn quite a bit about him from the letter itself. First of all, we think it's a "him" because there's a masculine participle that's used later in the letter, which would identify a male as the author. Secondly, the author seems to be someone from the Pauline school, someone that knows Paul. We know this for a couple of reasons. First, he refers to Timothy in the letter and is aware of Timothy's circumstances, and we know that Timothy was a close companion of Paul. Secondly, the author refers to the Pauline triad of faith, hope and love at a very critical juncture in the letter of Hebrews. In 10:22-25 he talks about pursuing faith and growing in hope and pursuing love in a very deliberate manner, which is reminiscent of Paul's own thought on those three as important virtues. Another thing that we can learn about the author is that he knows rhetoric very well. He's very persuasive in his presentation, and part of his presentation is exegeting Scripture. So, he knows Jewish Scripture very well and employs exegetical techniques that a good Jewish male who had been to school would have learned how to use... Also, throughout the letter of Hebrews, there's a

repeated use of a Jewish exegetical technique called the "*qol wahomer*" argument form, which basically is an argument that is made on the basis, if something is true of a lesser case, then it's true of a greater case. And this kind of reasoning runs throughout the book of Hebrews at critical points. For example, if under the old covenant people were punished because of their sins, how much more will we expect judgment if we disobey the word of the gospel, the word that comes through the Son of God, Jesus the High Priest.

Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

It's obvious that the author of Hebrews is a pastor who loves the people to whom he's writing. He is deeply concerned that they maintain a persevering faith in their lives, and he's convinced that Jesus being seen as supreme is the primary thing they need to know, that he really is everything he said he was and worthy of their ultimate trust. And so he cares deeply about these people. He realizes that Jesus' supremacy is the thing they need to know most, and he wants to make sure they get that. More than any other letter in the New Testament, this is a sermon even more than a letter, and so he's also a preacher first and foremost.

Dr. Eckhard Schnabel

One interpreter has said the author of Hebrews is about as elusive as Melchizedek; we don't know where he came from, nor where he went to. On the other hand, there are some things that we can learn. We know that the author could write good Greek. Some have argued that the Greek of Hebrews is among the best Greek language expressions that we find in the New Testament. At the same time, it is not like Atticistic Greek, it is not an artificial Greek of the high classes. It's not really literary Greek. It is still a Koine Greek, but it is a Greek that is written on a somewhat high level. We know that the author knew the Old Testament very well, which has prompted many to argue, a majority of scholars to, therefore, conclude that the author was a Jew. On the other hand, there are some passages that have prompted some scholars to say he was a Gentile Christian, because even as a Gentile Christian, maybe as a God-fearer attending the synagogues in his young days, one could know the Old Testament very well because the Old Testament had been translated into Greek, which is what we call the Septuagint. But all things being equal, the very detailed knowledge of the Old Testament seems to suggest that the author was a Jew. The book of Hebrews is not an epistle; it's not a letter in the traditional sense. There is no letter prescript giving the name of the author, and the addressees and then a greeting and maybe a list of names that are being greeted. At the end it is a homily; it is a sermon. So, we know that the author was used to preaching. He probably loved preaching. And if Hebrews is an indication, he seemed to have loved long sermons. And he loved theology. What is unique about Hebrews is that we have a theological section, and then we have application, and then we have a theological section, and then we have application as well. And the theological section is very often interpretation of Scripture, of the Old Testament. So, the author liked to integrate theology and application.

Dr. Dennis E. Johnson

Although the epistle to the Hebrews never names its author, it actually does reveal a number of things that tell us about what this author is like. He's obviously one who is a master in understanding and interpreting the Old Testament Scriptures and showing how they come to fulfillment in Christ. His Greek style is polished, it's literary, and so he's obviously very skilled as a writer in a beautiful way. In chapter 2, he groups himself along with his readers as a disciple of the original apostles; "Jesus spoke the word of salvation and then it was confirmed to us by those who heard." So he's, in a sense, a second generation, although still perhaps living in the time... Well, would be living within the time of the apostles, but learned the gospel through others. He has a deep compassion for his readers. He knows them well. He knows their history. He can cite ways that they face suffering early on in their Christian life. He knows what's going on now among them in terms of their weakness of faith, at least some of them. So, he writes with great compassion. He somehow is identified with Timothy because at the very end of the epistle he says that he hopes to visit them, and if Timothy can join him, the two of them will make a visit. So, they know him, he knows them. We don't know him personally, but they have a very close relationship.

Question 4:

How did the audience of Hebrews respond to the persecutions affecting their community?

Dr. D.A. Carson

The original audience of Hebrews were Christians who had, in the past, been persecuted, though not to the point of suffering martyrdom... but more recently the pressure had come off somewhat, and they were in danger of drifting away from their first allegiance to the Lord Jesus. But they were drifting away apparently in a particular direction. They weren't drifting away toward secularism. They weren't drifting away towards contemporary pagan philosophy or the like. They seemed to be drifting away toward more allegiance to some sort of Old Testament-styled theology than to the Lord Jesus. In other words, it sounded as if they were drifting towards being Old Testament believers after the new covenant had already dawned, and that meant that they were focusing attention on the very Old Testament things that point to Jesus, instead of the Jesus to whom Old Testament things pointed. And we can infer the reasons for that, but they're only inferences. It may well be, though it's not certain, it may well be that they were converted Jews who wanted so to remain within the realm of social acceptability to their fellow Jews, that they were downplaying the uniqueness of Jesus and trying to show how kosher they continued to be, how continually in line with Jewish habits and traditions and theology and so on. So, their particular form of drift seems to be toward a kind of Old Testament view of God and worship and sacrifice and so forth, rather than seeing how Jesus is the consummation and fulfillment of all of these trajectories in the Old Testament that point forward to and are fulfilled in him.

Dr. Alvin Padilla, translation

The churches that received the epistle of Hebrews had several problems, or issues, they had to resist. Among these issues, there was the persecution that almost every single first-century believer suffered from. This persecution tempted them into thinking that maybe they could go back to the old way of living, that maybe they could find a slightly easier way to be saved. Therefore, they would consider not following Jesus as the only Savior, but instead they would conform to the [social] realities of the Jews of their time.

Rev. Michael J. Glodo

The original audience of Hebrews appears to be a primarily Jewish audience, and from the pastoral letter that Hebrews actually is, it appears that their struggle in the face of perhaps persecution, and just general difficulties of living in a fallen world, they're tempted to turn back to what's familiar to them. For them specifically, it was to turn back to the synagogue and turn back to the ordinances of the Old Testament, which in some ways has direct relevance to us today, not that we would be tempted to turn back to the synagogue, but the general temptation to turn back to what is secure, what is familiar, and rest upon one's heritage or tradition, rather than walk by faith in a world where faith is not generally well received.

Question 5:

How did the author of Hebrews address the concerns facing his readers?

Dr. Stephen E. Witmer

So, the audience of Hebrews is probably Hellenistic Jews who are being tempted to go back to Judaism, back to the Law. And the purpose of Hebrews seems to be, the author is saying, you don't need to go back to the Law to be right with God. He's holding up the supremacy of Jesus. It seems like the original audience here has maybe faced some persecution, they may be withdrawing from worship with the Christian community, according to Hebrews 10. So the writer is saying hang in there, continue to worship with the gathered Christian community. The writer is doing everything he possibly can to bring his audience back to the place where they're not sliding away, they're not apostasizing, they're holding fast to Jesus. So, he holds out the example of persevering faith in Hebrews 11. He talks about the supremacy of Jesus over every previous thing in God's economy of salvation. And he's just saying again and again every way, through warnings and promises and examples, hold fast to Christ.

Dr. David Talley

When we think about the book of Hebrews, we need to understand that it was a letter. It was written to people, written to people in a particular situation. And when we look through the book of Hebrews, we recognize that the Christians at that time were up against some really difficult odds. This book was especially written to those Jews who had become Christians, and as a result of their claiming Christ as their Lord and

Savior, they encountered various problems. They were being ostracized by the Jewish people. They were no longer allowed to be a part of that community... And that created a lot of difficulty for them, and they were in a lot of difficulty, wrestling with, “Should we continue on with Christ?” In other words, “Our life seemed to be so much easier and better when we were not following Christ. If we would just give up on Christ, perhaps we could get our families back, perhaps we would have a better standing in society.” Because Hebrews specifically tells us that they had lost property; that they had been thrown into prison... In other words, they’d been up against all kind of harm; “If I just give up Jesus, then maybe my life would be the way it used to be.” And that’s why the author of Hebrews continues to set forth Christ as supreme, continues to encourage them to keep their eyes on Jesus, reminds them if they turn away from Jesus, there is no sacrifice of sins. When they turn away from Jesus, there is no life in that. So, these people are really battling real-life stuff, and they’re trying to find their way through it.

Dr. Simon Vibert

The original audience to which the writer to the Hebrews wrote was clearly facing a number of challenges. In the early part of the letter, the author is keen to demonstrate that Jesus is superior to even the greats of the Old Testament. Also, the letter goes on to talk a lot about the need to persevere and endure in the Christian life, and that happens by appropriating and realizing the supremacy of Christ and his sustaining and motivating to the end: “who for the glory that was set before him endured the cross.” That’s the model that Christians follow. And, also, you have that list of the greats in the past who have, by faith, persevered to the end. And that’s what the Hebrew Christians need to be doing.

Question 6:

When we compare the book of Hebrews with other New Testament epistles, should we still call Hebrews an epistle?

Dr. Mark A. Jennings

The epistle to the Hebrews is interesting. We’re not sure who wrote it, we’re not sure who the Hebrews are, and we’re not even sure if it’s an epistle... The question of its relationship to the epistles, and the other epistles, if it is an epistle, has been called a riddle by some. What is the genre of Hebrews? We look at some of the early canonical lists ... those lists that have the books of the Bible that would be part of the New Testament. And Hebrews is usually located in the letters section, often with Paul, but in epistles. So, there seems to be some thought that it is an epistle. And in fact, if you look at the end of Hebrews, we have a sign-off like we do in the other New Testament epistles. Hebrews also has teaching followed by exhortation, again consistent with epistles. But some other elements of Hebrews are not quite what you would expect in terms of ancient letter writing. For example, the beginning: We don’t have an opening salutation. We don’t have something identifying who the author is of the letter and who the audience is. You know, you think of Paul, “I, Paul, and

Timothy to the church in Philippi,” for example. And there is this sense then that Hebrews is similar to an epistle but also different. And I think the key, as we begin to just wonder how to unlock this riddle, is where the author of Hebrews, in Hebrews 13:22, describes what he’s just done as a word of exhortation that has been written. I think that’s important because that phrase, “word of exhortation,” had become almost stock phrase as referring to a form of oral rhetoric, a speech. And when we look at Hebrews through the genre of homily, of sermon, of speech, of oration, we begin to see some elements that are very consistent with that type of presentation ... And as we look at Hebrews, and others have noted this, that a lot of the characteristics of a homily show up in Hebrews. So, what do we make of this? I think Hebrews is *like* a New Testament epistle in that it was written down and was sent, but it was sent as a speech, as a sermon to be delivered, to be heard.

Dr. Mark L. Strauss

The book of Hebrews is both similar and different from other New Testament epistles. It’s similar in the sense that it is an occasional document. By that we mean it’s written to a specific group of Christians to address their specific concerns. In this case, almost certainly a group of Jewish Christians who are struggling because some of them are considering returning to their Jewish faith and rejecting Christ and returning exclusively to their Jewish faith. So it’s very specific. It’s written probably to a house church or a group of house churches to address their specific needs. It’s different from the other New Testament writings probably mostly in its literary quality. It is the finest literary Greek in the New Testament, incredibly well structured. In many ways, it is written like a theological essay meant to convince it’s hearers of a particular perspective concerning who Jesus Christ is and what he accomplished on the cross. So, similar in that it is occasional, it’s an occasional document, a true letter in that regard; different — it’s got more literary qualities, it’s highly theological in its focus, very creative theologically as well.

Dr. Barry Joslin

The book of Hebrews has some similarities to some of the other New Testament books. It has many differences to other New Testament books, particularly as it’s typically referred to as one of the letters or the epistles. Actually, more properly speaking, firstly, it’s a word of exhortation — 13:22 refers to the entire work as a “word of exhortation.” It’s actually a sermon in a written form that was designed to be read aloud. So, that’s a bit different. You see his use of rhetoric, use of alliteration, assonance in other places, where it’s clearly designed to be read aloud and heard just as a sermon is. Now, one of the biggest distinctions between, for example, Paul and the writer of Hebrews, in Paul’s writings, Paul always, in terms of structure, Paul will have the indicative and teach first and teach and teach and teach, *and then* he will exhort with the imperative following behind that. The letter of Hebrews doesn’t do that. He will teach and exhort, teach and instruct, and then he’ll exhort. Then he’ll come back to more exposition, more of the indicative and explain things. And then he will exhort based on that, much like a Sunday morning sermon at my church or your church.

Dr. Stephen E. Witmer

I think the main way the book of Hebrews is similar to other New Testament epistles is that it's written, it seems like it's written to a particular local Christian congregation. So, the author, in chapter 13, appears to have plans to visit this congregation. He speaks in chapter 10 into some particular circumstances, and to past suffering that this congregation has gone through, and so it appears that he's writing to a particular congregation. And the epistles are written to particular congregations as well. There's also at the beginning some thanksgiving, and that's similar to the epistles. And yet it's very different at the same time. So, typically, epistles start with the person who's writing them and then an address to whoever is receiving the epistle. The book of Hebrews doesn't start that way, and it seems therefore that it's probably less an epistle and more a homily, an extended sermon that's been put into a form that's going to reach this local congregation.

Question 7:**How does the structure and content of Hebrews compare to other New Testament epistles?****Rev. Michael J. Glodo**

The book of Hebrews is similar to other New Testament epistles, but it's also dissimilar. It's similar in that it holds up the supremacy of Christ. It begins this way: "In days past God spoke through various means in various ways, but in these final days he's spoken to us in his Son." So, it's the supremacy of Christ and what God has done in Christ, and that's a similar theme to other New Testament letters. Perhaps what's dissimilar is it's, rather than being more geographically directed, it's directed at the Jewish believer, and one of the striking dissimilarities might be the degree to which the writer of Hebrews warns believers, or warns the church as a whole about persevering in faith and not presuming upon their status as members of the household of God. So, the warnings of Hebrews are pretty stark compared to many other New Testament books. But again, we can return to a similarity which is, say, in comparison to 1 Peter, affirming the pilgrim status of the people of God, that we are not home yet, that the world is not yet a consummated kingdom of God, that though he's been exalted, we do not yet see all things subjected to Christ the way we will one day see them, as Hebrews 2 says.

Dr. Simon Vibert

There are a number of similarities in the way that the writer to the Hebrews articulates his case, similar to the other Pauline letters, but there are differences as well. This letter reads a little bit more sermonical, homiletical in form. There are some features of it that feel similar to Paul, but you don't have the greetings at the beginning, for example, and you have a lot of quotations from the Old Testament Scriptures, particularly the Septuagint version, with applications as you go along. So, in that respect, the argument is not so dense at the beginning as they would be in a Pauline letter. But nevertheless, there is sort of a dominant theme that the writer

makes, particularly this need to endure and persevere in the Christian life by looking to the examples that you have in the rest of the Bible.

Dr. Barry Joslin

No other book explains old covenant and new covenants over and against one another in showing how one anticipates the next, like the book of Hebrews does. Another distinction is that no other book of the New Testament even *mentions* Melchizedek. And yet, in the book of Hebrews, Melchizedek plays a *big* role. Christ's part is a Melchizedekian priest. In other words, Hebrews 7 makes sense of Psalm 110. Without Hebrews 7, we still wouldn't know. To this day, we wouldn't know what David was referring to in Psalm 110, particularly verse 4: "I'll make you a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek." What on earth is he referring to? Well, God has given us Hebrews 7 to show us exactly what he was referring to. Another distinction of Hebrews is the skilled rhetoric that he uses. Paul certainly was educated. Peter writes decent Greek. Both are inspired, but the writer of Hebrews uses rhetoric in a way that's meant to be heard, hooking things together simply by use of assonance and alliteration, tying sections together that may be a chapter apart by usage of these hook words that, if you're hearing it in the original language, you can instantly tell he's going right back to what he had mentioned before... This lastly, one other final point; it's kind of an obvious one, but no other New Testament book is anonymous. Every other book, through church history or through just the author telling us who is writing it, we know who wrote the other twenty-six books. It is the only one that is anonymous.

Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

More than any other epistle in the New Testament, the book of Hebrews is filled with Old Testament references and imagery. It's targeting a Jewish audience, and so, grounding faith in Christ in the fulfillment of Old Testament promises is essential to the argument the author is trying to make. And so, there are a lot of references to the priesthood and the sacrificial system, even Melchizedek, because the author wants them to know that their faith is well grounded and not something radically new, but something radically, wonderfully old that's now fulfilled in Christ.

Question 8:

How does the highly rhetorical character of the book of Hebrews support the author's purpose?

Dr. Dennis E. Johnson

The rhetorical character of Hebrews is so intriguing because, although we group it as an epistle, it really, in many ways, is presented by the author as a sermon. In chapter 13 he calls it a "word of exhortation" and asks the brothers to bear with it because it is only a brief sermon. I've read it aloud. It runs forty, forty-five minutes if you read it in Greek, and I'm not an eloquent oral Greek speaker. But when you read it as a sermon, you begin to see some fascinating things in terms of the rhetoric, and it

further his purpose. Among other things, when he quotes Scripture, he doesn't do what Paul typically does, and Matthew does, and others, and that is introduce it by, "It is written..." Instead, it's much more "present." It's "The Holy Spirit is saying ..." or "The Holy Spirit is testifying..." The Old Testament Scripture is addressing us personally. And so he's making that point, that God is addressing the people of God from his ancient Scriptures in a very personal, direct, face-to-face kind of way. It's the best you could do at a distance. And he's urging them to stand fast, urging them to trust in Christ. Another fascinating factor is that, unlike a Pauline letter, where typically Paul does the doctrinal teaching up front, and then with a transition, leads to his application, Hebrews, really, is a word of exhortation, as the author says, by embedding exhortation all the way along the way at every point in his sermon. So, when he talks about the superiority of Jesus to angels in the first couple of chapters, right in the midst of it there's the application in 2:1-4: "If it was important to listen to the law God gave to Moses through the mediation of angels, how much more that we listen to the word of salvation now spoken in the Son." And so on, through the various sections and movements of the sermon — I like to call it a sermon — the preacher is really speaking very directly to the hearts of his hearers and urging them to stand fast and to persevere in their faith in Christ.

Dr. Barry Joslin

The author expresses his purposes using every ounce of biblical, theological and, of course, rhetorical skill. Among the New Testament books, he demonstrates the most rhetorical skill, moving back and forth from exhortation to exposition, teaching and driving home his points with a massive number of Old Testament citations to drive home his points. At times, rhetorically he will ask questions. And you can just think of this: it's a sermon in written form. Hebrews 13:22 refers to it as a "word of exhortation." But, as a sermon in written form, as a sermon manuscript basically, designed to be read out loud, he oscillates between driving points home by usage of Old Testament theology, Old Testament concepts, massive numbers of Old Testament citations, and then moves back and forth, after making his point, he'll drive it home. And at times, during the sections of exhortation, you find him asking questions, these rhetorical questions... But he uses these rhetorical questions and the whole structure of the book to drive home his pastoral purpose of their perseverance to ensure that in their mind, in their soul that they've been motivated with every possible means to persevere, to endure.

Question 9:

How much did first century Jewish writings like the Dead Sea Scrolls and the works of Philo influence the writer of Hebrews?

Dr. D.A. Carson

It's not surprising; it can't be surprising, that a document written in the first century, including a document written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit but mediated through human beings reflects something of the language and outlook, vocabulary,

and so on, of surrounding documents. The first century writers were historically, culturally located. On the other hand, the differences between the letter to the Hebrews and parallel documents actually stand out more than their similarities. Many people show parallels in vocabulary, for example, between Philo and Hebrews, but more sober judgment shows that their worldview really is very different indeed. With respect to the Dead Sea Scrolls, there are two or three parallels that are often cited. In a document called "1QS" there are often light/dark, good/evil type contrasts that you find in a lot of Jewish literature at the time, and some vocabulary parallels pop up. But they're so frequent in that kind of literature you can't make much of it... These are separate minds that are thinking through the Old Testament documents and coming up with very different readings of those Old Testament texts.

Dr. Craig S. Keener

I've explored Hebrews in light of the Dead Sea Scrolls and also in light of Philo of Alexandria, who was basically a Greek-speaking, Jewish philosopher, and I found some parallels with both. I think there are more with Philo, although Philo seems to move in a more elite, philosophic world than Hebrews does. And yet there are some with the Dead Sea Scrolls too. It's very interesting, for example, Melchizedek was an exalted figure in the Dead Sea Scrolls, almost a messianic, sometimes even an angelic figure. So, there were ideas circulating about Melchizedek. The writer of Hebrews isn't the only one, and he may be able to play on those, as he's appealing to his audience's background. Of course, even more than that is just that Psalm 110, which says, "Sit at my right hand" — to the Lord who is at the right hand of my Lord — "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet." It goes on to say, "You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek." And so, the writer of Hebrews goes on to exegete what Genesis 14 means by being "after the order of Melchizedek." So, I think reading the Old Testament in light of certain methods is his primary background.

Question 10:

What goals did the author of Hebrews intend to accomplish with the many exhortations in his letter?

Dr. Fredrick Long

The author of Hebrews has a main goal that the audience experience salvation completely. And this is what he's concerned about, that they've wandered away from the faith and are going to miss out on God's salvation. Now, we need to understand salvation in a comprehensive sense here. It's just not being forgiven from sins, but it's also being freed from sins. It's like a two-sided coin: freedom, as well as, forgiveness. So, in Hebrews, the author is wanting the audience to experience this salvation completely, and he explains that in terms of perfection and cleansing and sanctification. In fact, the mission of Jesus is a cleansing mission. In the opening four verses of Hebrews, we have a lot of description of Jesus as the Son of God, and his superiority, and his preexistence with God, and sustaining all of creation, and we just

have one statement that explains and encapsulates a description of his earthly ministry, and it's summarized in this way: "cleansing from sins." And so, his ministry of offering salvation is really a salvation that involves freedom, freedom to live differently in the world and a freedom that comes out of being cleansed, and then being perfected in one's conscience from evil deeds. This is the salvation he's offering us, and he does so precisely because he's a perfect priest himself. He had no blemish, and he sets an example for us to live differently in the world, and then also provides a means for us to live differently as well, particularly the Holy Spirit. And the author makes it real clear that unless we are holy, we're not going to see the Lord, and that the Lord God shares his holiness with his people. The focus of these exhortations is to have the people have a sustained vision of living a holy life modeled after Jesus as the author and perfecter of their faith.

Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

Well, pastorally and devotionally in the lives of his hearers, he wanted them to be living out persevering faith. He wanted them to be strong in their faith and pursue holiness and find hope in Christ in his fulfilled promises. And so he exhorts them to that end. He does that by holding up Jesus. The supremacy of Christ really is the theme of his letter, and so his target for them is to see Jesus as indeed supreme.

Dr. Dennis E. Johnson

The many exhortations that we find sprinkled throughout this letter, or sermon, to the Hebrews is really intended to strengthen some Jewish Christians who were being excluded, I believe, from the Jewish worshipping community, synagogue and temple, to encourage them that they really had access to God and the forgiveness of sins, through the work of the Lord Jesus Christ, and so to encourage them to persevere in their faith in Christ despite the rejection that they might be experiencing from their Jewish community, from their own family perhaps. And so, he makes that case again and again in deep theological terms, showing how Jesus is superior to the Old Testament institutions, and then, he urges them to hold fast to the blessing that God has given — the *blessings*, really — that God has given to them in Christ: forgiveness of sins, the privilege of drawing near to God with full assurance because Christ is at the Father's right hand as their eternal high priest. And confidence to face persecution as well. Hold fast, persevere, and hold together, because he emphasizes throughout how important it is that this perseverance takes place in the context of the new covenant community of the church. It's not a solo enterprise, but it's really a calling to them to care for one another deeply and to come together as they draw near to God.

Dr. James D. Smith III

I have loved the epistle to the Hebrews since I was a kid. I was looking at a very large Old Testament and a smaller New Testament and thinking to myself, how do they fit together? And there were references in our Bibles that connected the two, in terms of, simply the text, but it was Hebrews that really began to weave that together for me when I was a teenage Christian person years ago. And I've loved it ever since. I think part of the essence of that lies in the Greek word *paraklesis*... The word breaks out as "comfort, exhortation, and encouragement." And the book of Hebrews to me is

comforting because it reveals to me both a Lord who is able to bring the full righteousness of God to bear, the very presence of God, and yet says, “It pleased him to be made in all ways like his brethren that he might become a fitting, acceptable high priest.” “He was tempted in all ways like we are.” So whatever the miles are that we walk, there’s a comfort there... Exhortation is to call forth the very best from me to help me become, as some people will say today, my best self.

Question 11:

How does the book of Hebrews contrast Jesus with aspects of the old covenant?

Dr. Dennis E. Johnson

Hebrews contrasts Jesus with aspects of the Old Testament from start to finish. From the prologue, the first four verses of the first chapter, he’s emphasizing that now, in these last days, God has spoken a far better word than he spoke through the prophets in the Old Testament. Now he has spoken in the Son, who is the radiance of the Father’s glory, a greater messenger sent to reveal the Father to us. And from there he goes on to speak of Christ being superior to the angels, emphasizing by application that while the angels were God’s accompaniment when God came down on Sinai to give the law to Moses, now the Son has come and spoken salvation to us. Chapters 3 and 4 contrast Jesus to Moses. They’re alike. Both are faithful, as Numbers 12 speaks of Moses’ faithfulness. But Numbers 12 also speaks of Moses being a servant, and Jesus is the Son who is over the house of God. Chapters 5 and 6 and 7 show that Jesus is a priest like Aaron, appointed by God, but so much better than Aaron because Jesus’ appointment, as Psalm 110 says, is by divine oath and by virtue of his eternal life that never ends; whereas, Aaron and his sons are always prevented from continuing in their priestly ministry by death. Sacrifice, in the next several chapters — 8, 9, 10 — the sacrifice of Christ that consecrates the new covenant is his once-for-all offering of himself, not the blood of bulls and goats, which cannot remove the ultimate defilement of sin on our conscience, but rather the sacrifice of Christ which never needs to be repeated. And so, at the very end there’s this emphasis on God bringing us, along with Old Testament believers who looked and hoped to Christ, into the fullness of inheritance as they looked ahead but could not be perfected without us and what Jesus would do on our behalf in the fullness of time.

Dr. D.A. Carson

Jesus is contrasted with the Old Testament; sometimes compared. He’s compared with Moses and then contrasted primarily by the use of one word that shows up again and again and again. It’s the word “better.” If I have to summarize in popularizing form the theme of Hebrews it would be, “Jesus is better.” So, in chapter 1, he’s better than the angels. In chapters 4 and 5, he’s better than Aaron; chapter 3, he’s better than Moses, his new covenant is better than the old covenant, his priesthood is better than the old priesthood. In chapter 9, his sacrifice is better than the Old Testament sacrifice of the Day of Atonement, and so on. Again and again and again, Jesus is better. And,

that's the nature of the contrast. So therefore the exhortation implicit in all of this is, why do you want to go back to that which has been eclipsed, to that which is inferior compared with the sheer excellency of Christ? Why go to a sacrificial system where the sacrifices have to be offered year after year after year after year and don't finally handle sin? How can the blood of bull and goat finally cancel sin? But the blood of the eternal Son, who offers up his life by the Spirit, that sacrifice is once for all, and you don't need more than that. To seek for more than that is almost an insult to Christ and his sacrifice. So, that's the way the contrast runs predominantly.

Dr. Edward M. Keazirian

A main theme in the letter to the Hebrew believers was to look at Jesus in comparison to the old covenant. We're told that Jesus brought the new covenant and brought a whole new order, and so the contrast between the new order and the old order is very much a central theme in the letter of Hebrews. The first comparison that we get is the comparison of Jesus to the prophets. In the old covenant, the prophets were the ones who spoke for Almighty God. And they spoke well, but we are told that Jesus was, again, superior to them as the one who brought the word of God and embodied the word of God and was the perfect representation of God. And so, in his character, in his body, in his words, in his spirit, Jesus was a perfect exemplar and speaker communicator in behalf of God. So, with respect to the spokesman of the old covenant, Jesus was superior... In terms of mediating the covenant, Moses mediated the old covenant, and because the new covenant is superior to the old, and Jesus is the mediator of the new covenant, then Jesus is superior to Moses in that regard as well. Jesus was also declared a priest, and the priests are the ones who went to God on behalf of the people, and in this regard Jesus is superior to the priesthood of Aaron, the Levitical priesthood. We are told that those priests had to repeatedly offer sacrifices because they were offering sacrifices not only for their own sins, but for the sins of the people. And their sacrifice was not effective; it was not efficacious. The sacrifice of bulls and goats cannot bring redemption, cannot bring salvation. They were only a shadow of what was to come, and Christ brought the reality. He was the sacrifice, so he was not only offering sacrifice for the people, he had no sin that he had to offer sacrifice for for himself. And so, his sacrifice was superior to the Levitical sacrifices ... And finally, all of this takes place in the temple, in the tabernacle. And under the old covenant, there was the Most Holy Place in the center of the tabernacle, and various priests would have access to various parts of the temple, but it was the high priest who once a year went in to make atonement for the sins of the people. He went into the physical temple, into the center of that and made atonement. But Jesus is superior in that Jesus is not in the physical temple that is a shadow of the temple yet to come, but he was in the reality, he was in the heavenly temple, he had access to the Most Holy Place in the heavenly temple. And so, he was able to go there and not only make a sacrifice of atonement in behalf of the people, but also to intercede for the people and to continue his ministry of prayer and intercession. And that priestly function, that high priestly function of Jesus is superior to the high priests of the Aaronic order or the Levitical order. And so, we see in regard to the prophets, in regard to Moses, in regard to the priesthood, in regard to the

sacrifice, in regard to the temple, in all of these ways, Jesus was superior to the old covenant.

Rev. Michael J. Glodo

The book of Hebrews contrasts Jesus with aspects of the old covenant in two general categories. One is in terms of origin. He's better than Moses because he's a son, whereas Moses was a servant. He is better than Aaron because he is a priest from an eternal order, the order of Melchizedek, rather than from among the Israelites as was Aaron. He is superior in terms of his origin as the Divine One and, therefore, when he shares in our flesh and blood, he is an able and — that leads us to the second category — efficacious mediator of a new covenant. So, his divine origin and his efficaciousness are the two general categories. By being more efficacious, we can think of the Day of Atonement sacrifice where that had to be offered every year, year after year after year in perpetuity, where Christ's sacrifice is once and for all. It's more efficacious in that his sacrifice was performed not merely on the cross, but in the heavenly realms, in the tabernacle built without hands, in the Holy of Holies, which is in heaven. And the fact that it did not need to be repeated means it was more efficacious; it finally and fully accomplished that thing. So, his divine origins as the God-man and the efficaciousness of his work, the once-and-for-all-ness of everything that he did, are the two ways in which Hebrews contrasts Jesus with the old covenant.

Question 12:

Who is Melchizedek, and what is his significance in the book of Hebrews?

Dr. D.A. Carson

Melchizedek is a priest-king. He's around in Genesis 14. That's in Abraham's time. By the time you have the priesthood and the kingship set up — the priesthood under the law of Moses, centuries later, more than a half a millennium later, and then the Davidic king set up several centuries after that — at that juncture, God insists that no priest can be a king; no king can be a priest. The priest comes from the line of Levi; the king comes from the line of Judah, a particular house, and so, no priest can be king; no king can be priest. King Saul in the Old Testament is removed partly because he wants to violate that absolute barrier. But dear old Melchizedek was a priest-king back in the time of Abraham. And David, for reasons that are too complex to unpack, borne along by the Spirit of God, David, who is himself one of these kings, says in Psalm 110, that he anticipates one at God's right hand who is simultaneously priest and king. Priest and king, when God has forbidden it? But he points out priest not in the order of Levi — that's what's forbidden — but priest in the order of Melchizedek. So, he harks all the way back to the Melchizedek who is there before the Levitical priesthood is installed. Now, later, centuries later, a millennium after David, the writer to the Hebrews is thinking about all of this. And what he's really saying in Hebrews 7 is this: If the Melchizedek figure is roughly 2000 B.C., and the Levitical priesthood and the Davidic kingship are in place by 1000 B.C., when David then

announces, with those things in place, that a priest-king is coming in the order of Melchizedek, in principle, he's already made the Levitical priesthood obsolete. It's already declared to be temporary. There is a figure coming who will be priest and king, who will bring things together, but not from the order of Levi but from the order of Melchizedek, which shows that the entire Levitical structure is temporary; it's not eternal. And that means that by reading the sequence of the Old Testament narrative, he has drawn the inference, the necessary inference, that to base yourself on that Mosaic covenant, which establishes the Levitical priesthood, is to base yourself on something that the Old Testament narrative itself says is already, in principle, obsolete and has been eclipsed by the coming of Jesus who is the priest-king. Now, there are a lot of subtle arguments like that in Hebrews where the nature of the comparison between Jesus and what comes before is drawn out with very careful, exegetical, theological arguments that turn on getting the sequence of the Old Testament right.

Dr. Fredrick Long

Melchizedek is this interesting figure who shows up very briefly in Genesis 14, and Abraham actually receives a blessing from Melchizedek and gives a tenth, or a tithe, to him. This really shows that Abraham is subordinate to Melchizedek, this mysterious figure. Now, so interesting was Melchizedek that in the Psalms, in Psalm 110, Melchizedek is mentioned again and that he's going to be a priest, some kind of priest that is linked to a Messiah, and there's going to be an order of priesthood that's going to be set up. Well, the author of Hebrews capitalizes on this mysterious figure and this insight that there's a priesthood that is prior even to Abraham, that even Abraham and the people of Israel in his loins submits to, and he argues that this is what Jesus represents, a priesthood of a different order, an order of Melchizedek... He offers a better hope, an end of sacrifices, and cleaned conscience, consciences that are cleaned, cleansed from evil deeds. That is, there's a forgiveness that's offered. Despite all the bad that we've done, despite the sinfulness of our lives, Jesus offers forgiveness, and that allows our consciences to be cleansed from that terrible past that we all have in order that we can live differently in the world. And this is the great thing of his new covenant, the new covenant, is that we have forgiveness of sins so that we can be freed from our sins and live differently in the world as God's people.

Question 13:

What is the purpose of Hebrews?

Dr. Dan Lacich

Anytime we try to understand the purpose of a piece of literature, we really need to look at what does the author focus on? And with Hebrews, what we see time and again is the author is exalting Jesus. Every step along the way in that piece of work is all about how Jesus is greater than something that came before, and I think really trying to help his audience understand the supremacy of Christ in all things, and in that, motivate them to continue to live out their Christian life with a real dedication,

with a fervor, with a perseverance that seemed, for whatever reason, to be starting to lag in their lives. So, it's Christ being supreme in all things and above all things, and for that reason, our devotion and dedication to Christ needs to be first and foremost in our lives.

Dr. Edward M. Keazirian

The letter of Hebrews was written to a predominantly, if not exclusively, Jewish audience. It was written at a time when they were undergoing persecution, and under the pressure of the persecution, they were tempted to reject their newfound faith in Jesus Christ and to revert back to Judaism as they had known it through the history of the nation of Israel. The letter was written to encourage them to persevere through that persecution and to prepare themselves for the worst that might yet come, but not to lose hope, not to lose faith, not to abandon Christ and Christianity in the course of what they might suffer. Probably, the example of Christ is the primary motive for writing, but other examples of the patriarchs are there as well, all of whom went through suffering and did not give up their faith. And so, a part of the purpose is to warn against giving up the faith, warn with the consequences that may come from that. And the warning is given in three specific directions. There's a warning against drifting away from the message of salvation. There's a warning as well of turning away from the Lord through rebellion or idolatry. And finally, there's a warning against falling away. If they fall away there is no remedy; there is no hope; there is no salvation; there is no promise for them to inherit. And so, in the context of writing the letter, there's a lot more that is dealt with in the course of the letter, but that's the basic framework and the basic intention for the Jewish audience to keep them encouraged, encouraging one another, and faithful in the midst of persecution.

Dr. Sean McDonough

The main thrust of Hebrews is simply, "Listen to Jesus." Now, the reason that becomes so important for the Hebrews is they're being tempted to go back to the old covenant and to kind of shrink back, as the author says, from their commitment to Jesus. Now, when we say, "Listen," we're not simply talking about, have this set of beliefs in contrast to this other set of beliefs. We're talking about a persevering obedience to Jesus that matches and feeds off of Jesus' own obedience to the Father. That's why we're going to get a lot of passages stressing the need to endure, stressing the need to keep going in the faith. That is what it means to truly listen to Jesus. When you claim him as Lord, to simply let his words pass in and out of your head, and claim that that's belief, is never going to match the standard Hebrews sets, particularly in chapter 11. Faith is an active, obedient faith.

Rev. Ric Rodeheaver

Yeah, I probably could give you the purpose of Hebrews in three words. Now, it might be a simplification, but I think it gets to the heart of what Hebrews is trying to get at. "Look to Jesus." Jesus is everywhere in the book of Hebrews. You start off with, in chapter 1, the author talks about in times past that the prophets spoke to us, but in these later days God spoke to us through his Son. Chapter 1 verse 3 says that he is the radiance of the glory of God. That is huge, that the radiance of the glory of God

is in Jesus. It also says, he is the exact imprint of his nature. All throughout Hebrews, it is as if the author is just obsessed with this concept of, you've got to understand Jesus. You've got to understand who he is, what he's done, why he's significant, why he's superior to all other things. And I love how chapter 12 talks about, says that phrase, "looking to Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith." Jesus is the example; Jesus is our hope; Jesus is our deliverer. That's the message of Hebrews. That's the purpose of it, to get people, weary people, people discouraged, people being put in prison, people having their property plundered, people who are just tired, look to Jesus.

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