

The Book of Hebrews

Lesson 1

The Background and Purpose of Hebrews

Lesson Guide



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HOW TO USE THIS LESSON GUIDE

This lesson guide is designed for use in conjunction with the associated video. If you do not have access to the video, the lesson guide will also work with the audio and/or manuscript versions of the lesson. Additionally, the video and lesson guide are intended to be used in a learning community, but they also can be used for individual study if necessary.

- **Before you watch the lesson**
 - **Prepare** — Complete any recommended readings.
 - **Schedule viewing** — The Notes section of the lesson guide has been divided into segments that correspond to the video. Using the time codes found in parentheses beside each major division, determine where to begin and end your viewing session. IIM lessons are densely packed with information, so you may also want to schedule breaks. Breaks should be scheduled at major divisions.
- **While you are watching the lesson**
 - **Take notes** — The Notes section of the lesson guide contains a basic outline of the lesson, including the time codes for the beginning of each segment and key notes to guide you through the information. Many of the main ideas are already summarized, but make sure to supplement these with your own notes. You should also add supporting details that will help you to remember, describe, and defend the main ideas.
 - **Record comments and questions** — As you watch the video, you may have comments and/or questions on what you are learning. Use the margins to record your comments and questions so that you can share these with the group following the viewing session.
 - **Pause/replay portions of the lesson** — You may find it helpful to pause or replay the video at certain points in order to write additional notes, review difficult concepts, or discuss points of interest.
- **After you watch the lesson**
 - **Complete Review Questions** — Review Questions are based on the basic content of the lesson. You should answer Review Questions in the space provided. These questions should be completed individually rather than in a group.
 - **Answer/discuss Application Questions** — Application Questions are questions relating the content of the lesson to Christian living, theology, and ministry. Application questions are appropriate for written assignments or as topics for group discussions. For written assignments, it is recommended that answers not exceed one page in length.

Notes

I. Introduction (0:20)

II. Background (1:56)

A. Authorship (2:17)

1. Identity (2:40)

The author of Hebrews never identified himself.

In *The History of the Church*, Eusebius (quoting Origen) wrote: “But as to who wrote the epistle [of Hebrews], God knows the truth of the matter.”

Hebrews was omitted from both the Marcionite Canon (A.D. 144) and Muratorian Canon (A.D. 170).

By the end of the patristic period the majority of influential interpreters acknowledged the canonicity of Hebrews.

During the medieval period, most scholars attributed Hebrews to the apostle Paul.

Today, the majority of interpreters reject Pauline authorship for three reasons:

- Anonymity: Paul always named himself in his epistles.
- Themes: The book of Hebrews emphasizes subjects that don't receive much, if any, attention in Paul's letters.
- Generation: The writer of Hebrews distanced himself from the first generation of Jesus' followers.

2. Profile (8:28)

- Hellenistic Jew:
 - Knowledge of the Old Testament

 - Sophisticated Greek

- Passionate Intellectual:
 - Complex theological arguments

 - Devotion and passion for the Christian Faith and fellow Christians (Hebrews 10:33-34; 12:1-2).

B. Original Audience (14:07)

The author wrote to a specific audience with whom he was personally familiar (Hebrews 13:19-24).

1. Jewish (15:01)

The author referred to the Old Testament Israelites as “*our* forefathers.” (Hebrews 1:1).

2. Hellenistic (15:50)

Hebrews contains theological teachings that were common among Jews living outside of Palestine.

3. Immature (16:46)

The author of Hebrews expected church leaders to teach his book to their congregations (Luke 4:16, Acts 13:15, 1 Timothy 4:13).

The original audience may have remained theologically immature because they didn't respect their leaders (Hebrews 5:11; 13:17).

4. Persecuted (19:03)

They had faced persecution in the past, some were suffering in the present, and some would suffer in the future (Hebrews 10:32-35; 12:3-4; 13:3).

5. Near Apostasy (23:03)

Some were in danger of turning away from Christ entirely (Hebrews 10:26-27).

C. Date (24:45)

The earliest (*terminus a quo*) and latest (*terminus ad quem*) possible dates for this book can be established rather firmly:

- Earliest possible date: After Paul's death, around A.D. 65

- Latest possible date: Before the destruction of the temple, A.D. 70

III. Purpose (27:38)

The author of Hebrews wrote to exhort his audience to reject local Jewish teachings and to remain faithful to Jesus.

The author of Hebrews urged his audience to receive his book as a word of exhortation (Hebrews 13:22).

A. Intensity of Exhortations (31:24)**1. Frequency (31:57)**

The frequency of the author's exhortations helps us understand the urgency of his message.

The author used the hortatory subjunctive — a Greek verbal form used to urge or implore (Hebrews 4:14, 16; 12:12-16).

The author also exhorted his audience by using imperatives.

2. **Rhetorical Style (33:54)**

Hebrews employs many literary devices that were associated with persuasive oratory or urgent debate in the first century:

- *synkrisis*, a detailed comparison between two or more things (Hebrews 7:11-28).
- *exempla*, lists of illustrations or examples that follow one after the other (Hebrews 11).
- *qol wahomer*, “light to heavy”: because the simple premise is true, then the more difficult must also be true (Hebrews 10:28-29).

B. Goal of Exhortations (38:39)**1. Reject Local Teachings (39:21)**

To avoid suffering, the audience of Hebrews was tempted to accept teachings that were contrary to the Christian faith.

The author of Hebrews dealt with erroneous beliefs and practices that developed outside of mainstream Judaism (Hebrews 13:9).

The Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran help us understand many of the exhortations in Hebrews against local Jewish teachings.

- Eating ceremonial foods (Hebrews 13:9).
- Assortment of basic teachings (Hebrews 6:1-2).
- Powers and roles of good and evil angels.
- False teaching about Melchizedek.

2. **Remain Faithful to Jesus (48:46)**

The author of Hebrews called his audience to remain faithful to Jesus by organizing his exhortations into five major divisions:

- The supremacy of Christ over angelic revelations (Hebrews 1:1-2:18)
- Jesus above Moses' authority (Hebrews 3:1-4:13)
- Jesus as the supreme Royal Priest after the order of Melchizedek (Hebrews 4:14-7:28)
- The supremacy of the new covenant in Jesus (Hebrews 8:1-11:40)
- The exercise of practical perseverance (Hebrews 12:1-13:25)

IV. **Conclusion (54:30)**

3. What are the possible dates for the composition of the book of Hebrews? Describe the scriptural and historical evidence surrounding these dates.

4. What literary devices or methods did the author of Hebrews use to express and reveal his exhortations to his audience?

5. The author of Hebrews had specific goals in mind for his exhortations to his audience. List and explain the author's goals and how he expected his audience to respond to his exhortations.

Application Questions

1. In regard to the authorship of Hebrews, Origen said, “But as to who wrote the epistle, God knows the truth of the matter.” Does the anonymity of the book affect your confidence in its content? Explain your answer.
2. According to Hebrews 5:12, the original audience of Hebrews was immature. What are some areas in your spiritual life that need doctrinal progress?
3. The original audience was persecuted for following Christ. Have you been persecuted for your faith in Christ? How does the author's message encourage you?
4. The author wrote to exhort struggling Christians to reject false doctrine and remain faithful to Jesus. What false teachings are you facing? What has been your strategy to remain faithful to Christ?
5. The author of Hebrews communicated his message with a sense of urgency. How can you communicate and live out the gospel with the same sense of urgency as found in Hebrews?
6. The book of Hebrews is highly rhetorical. How can you implement this technique when exhorting Christians with biblical truth?
7. Name some Christians you know who have persevered in the face of trials and did not fall away from Christ. What are some things they did that are worthy of imitating?
8. What ministries are you currently engaged in, and how are they encouraging and helping Christians to remain faithful to Jesus?
9. What is the most significant thing you learned in this lesson?

Glossary

11QMelchizedek – Text found at Qumran that falsely portrays Melchizedek as a heavenly figure who appears in the last days and makes final atonement for God’s people; also known as *The Midrash on Melchizedek*

A.D. 70 – Year that Jerusalem and the second temple were destroyed by the Romans

Apollos – Eloquent Jewish speaker and teacher who worked with the apostle Paul to grow the early church, especially in Ephesus and Corinth

apostasy – Rebellion against God after a profession of faith; total rejection of one's faith, religion or principles

Barnabas – Friend of the apostle Paul and cousin of John Mark (author of the second gospel) who accompanied Paul on his first missionary journey

canon – Authoritative standard; the exclusive collection of documents in the Judeo-Christian tradition recognized as Scripture

Claudius – Roman emperor from A.D. 41-54 who expelled the Jews from Rome in A.D. 49

Clement of Alexandria – (ca. A.D. 150-215) Early church father and writer from Alexandria

Clement of Rome – (A.D. 30-100) Early church father and Bishop of Rome who wrote 1 Clement, an influential letter to the Corinthian Christians in the first century

Day of Atonement – Also known as Yom Kippur; Jewish holy day occurring only once a year in which the high priest performed rituals and offered sacrifices to atone for the sins of the people

Dead Sea Scrolls – Collection of ancient scrolls, first discovered in caves at Qumran in 1947, that includes Old Testament texts and extra-biblical writings documenting the distinct teachings of an ancient Jewish community

Eusebius – (A.D. 263-340) Early Christian historian who wrote *Ecclesiastical History*

exempla – Literary device that uses lists of illustrations or examples to build a persuasive argument for a particular point of view

Hellenistic – Of or relating to Greek civilization, culture, or language, after the time of Alexander the Great

hortatory subjunctive – Greek verbal form that urges or implores; often translated “let us” do this or that

Luke – Author of the third gospel and the book of Acts; a Gentile convert to Christianity and one of Paul's co-workers; believed to have been a physician

Marcionite Canon – A shortened list of New Testament books, edited and compiled by the heretic Marcion, who claimed these books were the whole of Christian teaching; rejected and condemned by the second-century Apostolic Fathers

Martyr, Justin – (ca. A.D. 100-165) Early Christian apologist who converted to Christianity as an adult and was martyred for his beliefs

Melchizedek – King of Salem and high priest who blessed Abraham and received tithes from him

Messiah – Hebrew word meaning "anointed one"; the great King from David's royal line who would bring about the transition from this age to the age to come; translated "*Christos*" in Greek

Moses – Old Testament prophet and deliverer who led the Israelites out of Egypt; man with whom God made a national "covenant of law" and who administered the Ten Commandments and the Book of the Covenant to the Israelites; also appeared with Elijah at Jesus' transfiguration

Muratorian Canon – Also known as the Muratorian Fragment; Earliest known document listing the New Testament books that the church considered canonical, dated A.D. 170-180

Nero – Roman emperor from A.D. 54-68 who persecuted Christians; blamed the Christians for a fire in Rome in A.D. 64; executed Paul (according to tradition)

Origen – (ca. A.D. 185 - 254) Early Christian theologian from Alexandria; his works include: *On First Principles*, in which he defended the Scriptures as our final authority for Christian doctrine, and the Hexapla, a comparative study of various translations of the Old Testament

parakaleō – Greek term (transliteration) meaning “to urge,” “to exhort,” “to encourage,” “to call to,” “to summon”

parrēsia – Greek term (transliteration) meaning courage, boldness, or confidence in the presence of dignitaries

Patristic Period – Period during which the early church fathers wrote; generally from the end of the New Testament to the beginning of the Medieval period

qol wahomer – Hebrew expression meaning "light to heavy," "less to great," "simple to complex"; rhetorical device that argues if the simple premise is true, then the more difficult must also be true

Qumran – Archaeological site near the Dead Sea where the *Dead Sea Scrolls* were found in caves during the last half of the 20th century

rhetorical – A style of speaking or writing employed to have a persuasive effect

Septuagint – Greek translation of the Old Testament

synkrisis – Literary device that makes a detailed comparison of two or more things to affirm a particular point of view

terminis a quo – Latin term for starting point or earliest possible date

terminis ad quem – Latin term for ending point or latest possible date

Tertullian – (ca. A.D. 155-230) Early Christian writer and church father from Carthage who wrote *Against Marcion* and popularized the Latin terminology used to discuss the Trinity