

Course Outline

The Superiority of Christ, Part 1

Hebrews 1:1–6:12

Introduction

I. Genre

- a. Despite its traditional title as an epistle, only the ending of this book resembles a letter. Its author describes it as “a word of exhortation” (13:22), and the only other New Testament use of this expression comes in Acts 13:15 to refer to a sermon of Paul’s. So it is best to think of Hebrews as the written form of (or substitute for) a preached message.

II. Recipients

- a. The recipients have traditionally been identified as Jewish Christians, and the contents largely fit this identification. The book is replete with Old Testament quotations and imagery and is designed to demonstrate the superiority of Christ to every key Jewish figure and institution. Some modern scholars believe, however, that the “letter” was written more to Gentile Christians, because of the elegant Greek style, the regular use of the LXX in the Old Testament quotes, and a method of reasoning that seems more akin to Plato or Philo (e.g., in the comparison of earthly and heavenly tabernacles in 8:1-6). Since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, though, the pendulum has swung back to reading Hebrews in light of Jewish backgrounds, with some scholars even seeing distinctive similarities with these Essene writings: (1) The Essenes at Qumran looked for a priestly, as well as kingly, Messiah; Hebrews is the only New Testament document to develop the theme of Christ as high priest. (2) One document (11Q Melchizedek) equates this priestly Messiah with Melchizedek (cf. the parallels in Hebrews 7); elsewhere among the DSS, Melchizedek is also exalted, for example, as the archangel Michael. (3) The plural reference to “baptisms” in 6:2 could tie in with the daily ablutions practiced at Qumran. Probably the most balanced conclusion is to see a mixed Hellenistic congregation with largely Jewish-Christian elements,

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some perhaps from a sectarian background such as Essenism.¹³⁸

III. Author

- a. The author of this letter is unknown. Traditionally, Roman Catholicism has equated him with Paul, largely to maintain apostolic authority. This identification is almost certainly wrong, because (1) no other letter of Paul is anonymous (and II Thessalonians 3:17 suggests that Paul signed all his letters), (2) the style and form of argument is entirely different from all of Paul's other letters (even greater than the differences that set off the Pastoral Epistles), and (3) 2:3 shows that the author learned the gospel second-hand rather than via a direct encounter with the risen Lord. The earliest years of church history showed a great diversity of opinion about authorship. The main suggestions, in addition to Paul, included Luke (based on stylistic parallels with his writings), Barnabas (a "Levite" and "son of exhortation"—recall 13:22), and Clement of Rome (based on similarities with his later letter known as I Clement). The most common modern proposal, first popularized by Martin Luther, was Apollos (based on his reputation for eloquence and thorough knowledge of the Old Testament [Acts 18:24-28] and his Alexandrian origin, with its school of exegetical interpretation similar to that of this letter).
- b. Others have suggested Silas, Philip, and even Priscilla (to account for the anonymity, since a woman would lack credibility publishing in her own name). Origen (ca. AD 200) said it best, however, that God only knows. But all the suggestions, ancient and modern, preserve a link with Paul, since there are some very Pauline touches here and there, and this is adequate to establish apostolic authority (along the lines of a Mark or Luke who were connected to apostles while not being ones themselves).

IV. Date

- a. The strongest external evidence supports Rome as the destination for Hebrews, and 13:24 fits well with this. "Those from Italy" would naturally send greetings back to Italy (i.e., Rome) from wherever the author was writing. References to Hebrews in I Clement (written perhaps as early as

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the 90s) and to Timothy in Hebrews 13:23 demand a first-century date for this letter. Debates as to whether it predates or postdates AD 70 usually center on the lack of any reference to the temple's destruction and to the use of present tenses with reference to the sacrificial system. More decisive, however, is 12:4. If the audience was Roman, then they would have shed blood after Nero's persecution there beginning in AD 64. The reference to the prior confiscation of their property in 10:32-34 would also fit well with Claudius' temporary banishment of Jews from Rome in 49. Lane puts all this data together and makes a persuasive case for the author writing to one or more Jewish-Christian house-churches in Rome (not the entire church in the city) just prior to AD 64.¹³⁹

V. Structure

- a. Unlike Paul, who tends to group all his theology together and then move to an extended section of exhortation, Hebrews intersperses doctrine and ethics throughout.¹⁴⁰ The letter's main theme highlights the supremacy of Christ over all things Jewish—presumably to discourage these professing Jewish-Christians from reverting to a form of Judaism less distinctively Christian so as to exempt themselves from the onset of Neronian persecution.

Analysis

I. Prologue (1:1-4)

- a. Hebrews begins with one of the loftiest paragraphs of Christology in the New Testament. Christ is God's ultimate Word (vv. 1-2)—the days of diverse prophetic communications are past; and God's exact image (vv. 3-4)—both in creating and sustaining the universe and in providing redemption for humanity.

II. The Central Thesis: The Supremacy of Christ (1:5–12:29)

- a. Over angels (1:5–2:18)
 - i. Comparison: Superiority in sovereignty (1:5-14)—defended by

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threefold hermeneutic in quoting the Old Testament

1. Christ is superior to that order of beings which in Jewish thought were next only to God—the angels. He is superior, first, with respect to His sovereignty (1:5-14). Hebrews argues this claim by means of seven Old Testament quotations, six taken to refer to Christ and one to the angels. When one looks up these passages, it is not always easy to see how they were taken as Messianic. In some cases, certain (but not all) Jewish perspectives already took them as referring to the coming Christ (Psalms 2:7 in Hebrews 1:5a; II Samuel 7:14 in Hebrews 1:5b and Psalms 45:6-7 in Hebrews 1:8-9). In at least one case, the writer apparently attributes God's distinctive action in creation and redemption to Jesus (Deuteronomy 32:43 LXX in Hebrews 1:6). The precedent for taking Psalms 110:1 in Hebrews 1:13 as Messianic comes from Jesus himself (Mark 12:35-37 pars.), and a similar logic may be at work in the use of Psalms 102:25-27 in Hebrews 1:10-12. The introductory formulas in each case also stress that the Scripture is God's inspired Word.
- ii. Implication: Follow Him closely (2:1-4)
 1. Chapter 2:1-4 is the first of five major warning passages in Hebrews that form the heart of this letter's exhortation. Because Christ is more sovereign than the angels, we had better pay more attention to the message He brought. But what message came through angels (2:2-3)? Hebrews has in mind the Law, drawing on the same Jewish tradition that God mediated the Torah to Moses through angels that is reflected in Acts 7:53 and Galatians 3:19. Later, Hebrews will warn against outright apostasy; here he reminds his readers that rejecting the gospel can come through a slow process of neglect (cf. *pararreō*—"to drift away" in 2:1).
- iii. Comparison: Superiority in suffering (2:5-13)
 1. But, paradoxically, Christ is also superior to the angels in suffering (2:5-13). Jesus alone fulfilled humanity's responsibility to place all creation in rightful subjection to Himself (Psalms 8:4-6, cited in Hebrews 2:6-8). He accomplished this through

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- the suffering of His death (v. 9), which is described as a process of perfecting (a fulfillment, completion or consecration) in v. 10. Jesus, as the man for others, may be called a brother to His disciples (vv. 11-13).
- iv. Implication: Freedom from sin (2:14-18)
 - 1. Verses 14-18 spell out the implications of Christ's death: freedom for His followers from sin and death. Fear of death was widespread in ancient religions; Christ conquered this by vanquishing the devil who is the ultimate cause of that fear (vv. 14-15). By being fully human and temptable, His atonement could also be substitutionary (vv. 16-17).
 - b. Over Moses (3:1-4:13)
 - i. Next, Christ is superior to the great Lawgiver of Israel, Moses,
 - 1. Comparison: The servant vs. the son (3:1-6)
 - A. Chapter 3:1-6 likens their differences to a servant vs. a son. Both were faithful to their missions, leading their followers or "households" (vv. 1-2). But Moses was faithful *within* his house, whereas Christ was the builder of the house, i.e., the Creator (vv. 3-6).
 - 2. Implication: Don't rebel as in the wilderness; enter God's rest (3:7-4:13)
 - A. Chapter 3:7-4:13 proceeds with the second and longest warning against unbelief. The key to understanding this somewhat complex passage is to trace the development of the concept of rest in Old Testament times. First God provided a Sabbath-rest based on the seventh day of creation. But he also spoke of the Israelites entering the promised land as a time of rest. Yet in David's day, the Psalmist saw the promise of rest as not yet fully fulfilled. So he could exhort his contemporaries to enter that rest by calling it "today" (Psalms 95:7-8, quoted in 3:7-8, 15; 4:7). The author of Hebrews believes that his day is still "today"—a day of possible salvation and "rest," and that such opportunity will extend until Christ returns. So he

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- encourages his readers to accept that salvation and not turn their backs on it.¹⁴¹
- B. A number of theological corollaries follow from this discussion. (1) The writer is not looking forward to a literal return of Jews to the land, but sees these Old Testament promises fulfilled, spiritually, when men and women turn to Christ.¹⁴² (2) Sabbath-keeping is no longer equated with ceasing from work one day in seven but with resting in Christ throughout one's Christian life (cf. Matthew 11:28-30).¹⁴³ (3) There is continuity as well as discontinuity between Old and New Testaments. Hebrews can speak of the Israelites in the wilderness as also having had "the gospel" preached to them (4:2a), though not thereby implying they knew all the details his audience did. (4) The unbelief of the Israelites gives us clues as to the nature of the apostasy the author of Hebrews fears some in his church may be in danger of committing. Chapter 4:2b describes this: "the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith." This suggests (but does not prove) that the writer would have claimed that those who rejected their professions of faith had never truly believed in the first place.
- C. The closing verses of this section (4:12-13) remind us that any would-be masqueraders will be exposed by God's powerful Word. Verse 12 is not a statement of anthropology—two, three, or six divisions of the human person—but rather a powerful affirmation of the impossibility of hiding anything from God.¹⁴⁴
- c. Over other priests (4:14–7:28)
- i. Central exhortation (4:14-16)
1. Hebrews' most extensive comparison demonstrates Christ's superiority over the entire Old Testament priestly system. Chapter 4, 14-16 sets out the *fundamental exhortation*: continue accepting God's grace available through Jesus' high priestly

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ministry. Here the author stresses Jesus' ability to sympathize with us and give us help. He was tempted in every way like us but never sinned (v. 15). Much of Christian theology has often denied one or the other half of this statement. Conservatives are prone to say Jesus, even in His human nature, could never have sinned, in which case His temptations were unlike ours. Liberals often deny Christ's sinlessness, in which case His death could not have been substitutionary.¹⁴⁵ When we accept Him, however, as one who *could have but never sinned*, we can then have a confidence through Him to approach God with our concerns that the average person in Old Testament times did not have (v. 16).

- ii. Comparison: The priesthoods of Levi/Aaron and Jesus—similarities (5:1-10)
 - 1. Chapter 5, 1-10 provides the first of two sections *contrasting Jesus' priesthood with the standard Old Testament priesthood* administered by the descendants of Levi through Aaron. Verses 1-4 mention three requirements of those priests. They were (1) representatives offering atoning sacrifices (v. 1); (2) dealing gently with fellow sinners due to similar subjection to weakness (w. 2-3); and (3) not self-appointed (v. 4). Hebrews describes Christ fulfilling these same three criteria in reverse order in w. 5-10: (1) Jesus did not appoint Himself (w. 5-6), He was subjected to the weakness of being human even to the point of having to learn (by experience) what it meant to be obedient (w. 7-8),¹⁴⁶ and (3) His sacrifice provided salvation for all who obey Him (w. 9-10).
- iii. Central warning: Against apostasy (5:11–6:12)
 - 1. Chapter 5:11–6:12 offers the *third and central* warning passage in this epistle.
 - A. The immaturity of the letter's recipients is lamented (5:11-6:3)
 - I. Chapter 5:11-6:3 laments the readers' moral and doctrinal immaturity; they should have progressed further along.

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- B. The impossibility of repentance after apostasy is stressed (6:4-12)
 - I. Four possible interpretations
 - 1. Chapter 6:4-12 then stresses the impossibility of repentance after one commits full-fledged apostasy. Perhaps no other passage in Scripture has provided more support for those who believe true Christians can lose their salvation.¹⁴⁷ Others have seen this as a merely hypothetical warning, but the tone seems too severe for that. Still, others have taken this as loss of reward rather than loss of salvation, but the imagery of vv. 7-8 suggests hell as the ultimate danger. Part of the difficulty doubtless stems from the fact that this is a Jewish-Christian community in a time and place in which the boundaries between non-Christian and Christian Judaism were far more blurred than they have been throughout most of church history. It is not inconceivable that the writer of Hebrews feared that at least some in his congregation had never sufficiently committed themselves to Christ so as to guarantee their perseverance during unprecedented persecution. Chapters 2:3, 3:19, 4:2, 10:39 and 12:25 all hint at the possibility that this author would have argued that those who flagrantly and unrepentantly renounce their professions of faith in Christ never truly were saved.¹⁴⁸

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