I. Introduction

We have now completed our survey of the epistles attributed to Paul in the New Testament and proceed in this lesson to the epistle to the Hebrews. As we mentioned in our opening survey of the contents of the New Testament, from Hebrews on through the remaining epistles we do not find precisely the same literary form as in the epistles of Paul. The model of the five-part outline of a Greco-Roman letter does not appear to be followed as closely, and in some instances not very closely at all. It would appear that in these non-Pauline epistles of the New Testament various other literary and rhetorical devices combined with the mere sending of a conventional letter.

A. Form

If we look at the epistle to the Hebrews, we see nothing at the beginning to suggest a letter form at all. There are no greetings. There is no announcement of who the author of the letter is; in fact, no such announcement appears anywhere in the epistle. There is no thanksgiving or prayer. But when one turns to the end of this book, one does see the typical greetings that a Greco-Roman letter would have ended with. So it appears that we have some kind of hybrid form. A clue to what the writer of this book, traditionally called an epistle, was doing appears in the closing verses of the epistle in Hebrews 13:22, where a writer refers to what he has just penned as the “word of exhortation.” The only other place that this phrase appears in the New Testament is in Acts 13:15, when Paul refers back to the sermon that he is giving in Pisidian Antioch. That, too, is referred to as a word of exhortation. It may well be, therefore, that we are to understand the writer to the Hebrews as composing a sermon, or a homily of some kind, in written form. And, of course, because it was sent as a piece of mail, we can think...
B. People Addressed

Like all of the titles that we find to books of the New Testament, the original autographs or manuscripts did not include them; but the earliest existing copies that we are aware of, the earliest traditions about this letter, are that it was addressed to a group of people known simply as the Hebrews. Almost certainly this refers to Jewish Christians rather than non-Christian Jews, but there is no doubt that the book is replete with references to the Old Testament—prophecies and other passages that are believed to be fulfilled in one form or another in Christ—and allusions to the major themes and characters and institutions of Judaism, right throughout the entire letter.

There are also various hints, language, theme, styles that are used, such as comparing the things of this world to heavenly archetypes or using rather obscure Jewish characters, such as the high priest Melchizedek—himself originally not even a Jew, although prominent in Genesis when Abraham pays him a tithe as priest of Salem, the city that later would become Jerusalem. These somewhat more obscure references have suggested to many writers that perhaps the Jews who became Christians, to whom this writer is addressing himself, came out of various sectarian backgrounds. The Hellenistic Jew, Philo, who tried to combine Greek philosophy with Jewish thought, has a number of parallels to the thought world and worldviews of the book of Hebrews. And the Essenes, that we know now so well from the Qumran literature, the Dead Sea scrolls, made a lot of Melchizedek while he otherwise did not figure prominently in Jewish writing. So it may be that at least some of the Jews come from one of these more Hellenistic or more sectarian Jewish backgrounds.

C. Authorship

The author of the letter, as we have just mentioned, is anonymous. There is no claim anywhere in one of the verses of the epistle as to who was its writer. In the early centuries of church history, Roman Catholics often equated the writer with Paul, particularly because the apostolic authorship, and therefore canonicity of the book,
could easily, then, be justified. On the other hand, there are no other letters that tradition has ever attributed to Paul which he did not personally sign and did not include a reference to his name in the opening verses.

And there are passages, 2:3 in particular, that make it rather clear that the author of this epistle is a second-generation Christian, someone who is getting his information secondhand rather than directly from having spent time with Jesus or having encountered the risen Lord, as Paul so adamantly stresses elsewhere was his experience. In the early church, then, particularly in the Eastern Orthodox wing, there were numerous other suggestions that were made about the author of this letter. Such suggestions included Luke, Barnabas, and Clement of Rome.

In more recent centuries, Martin Luther made famous the suggestion that perhaps Apollos was the author of this letter. He, too, was a Hellenistic Jew turned Christian, known for his wisdom and philosophy, and the combination of concepts found in this epistle might well be accounted for by understanding Apollos to have been the author. Others in more recent years have suggested still other companions of Paul such as Silas, Philip, and even Priscilla, if in fact the anonymity of the letter might be accounted for if the author were a woman but wishing to disguise that information lest the letter seem less credible or authoritative in a patriarchal world.

If we want to be completely honest, however, we would probably do best to follow the commentator in approximately the year 200, the Hellenistic Jewish Christian Origen, who said only God knows who the true author is. Nevertheless, all of the suggestions that have been made—ancient and modern—do place the author, if not Paul himself, as someone who was a close companion of Paul, thus fulfilling the criterion for canonicity of someone who emerged from the apostolic generation with a link to one of the apostles.

D. Destination and Date

The information that we do get at the very end of the letter does suggest that the author is writing to Jewish Christians in the city of Rome. In 13:24, he writes, “Those from Italy
send greetings”; and this naturally is explained if the writer is somewhere else with some Christian companions from the Roman church and these companions are sending their greetings back to their friends and Christian compatriots in Rome. There are two other hints in the closing chapters of the letter that reinforce this setting. In 12:4, the author speaks to his audience as those who have not yet shed blood as martyrs for the cause of Christ. This would suggest that the author recognizes that persecution is increasing, and they may yet have to become martyrs for their faith. This would fit a setting in Rome right at the very beginning of the Neronic persecution in approximately A.D. 64, or perhaps just prior to that date.

This would also make good sense, then, of the reference in 10:32-34 of a previous time when the Jewish Christians—on this interpretation, in Rome—experienced the confiscation of their property, and yet were able to respond with a measure of joy. Claudius’ expulsion, which we alluded to in our introduction to the letter of the Romans, in A.D. 49, would fit this reference very naturally. The Jews who had to leave Rome would not have been able to keep the titles to their property, but these were turned over to the state under Claudius’ reign. We suggest, therefore, that the best interpretation of the letter to the Hebrews is that an anonymous follower of Paul is writing to a Jewish Christian wing, perhaps even one specific house church, as part of the larger congregation of Roman Christians in or around the year A.D. 64.

E. Purpose

The main purpose for his writing is to prepare his audience for increasing persecution against the Christian believers there, and to call them to stand fast against the temptation that would have been very natural in the first century—namely, for Christians who came from a Jewish background to revert back to pure Judaism. You see, this was that period in early Christian history when, for the first time, Roman emperors clearly began to recognize that Christianity was becoming something much more than just a Jewish sect. Jews still enjoyed the freedom to worship God following their own laws and the exemption from having to honor the emperor with any kind of a sacrifice that would impinge on the Jewish belief in one God alone.
As soon as Nero, and other emperors following him, recognized that Christianity was becoming predominantly a Gentile religion and therefore much more than a Jewish sect, Christians were no longer exempt from these laws and no longer given the privileges that Jews had received. The whole outline or structure of the epistle to the Hebrews, therefore, is one of comparing Christ, and the revelation that He brought, to all the various institutions and figures prominent in Jewish history—to make the claim that Christ was supreme over everything else, short of God the Father Himself, that Jews might be tempted to exalt and therefore to fall back on in some kind of reversion away from clear confessing of Christianity to the Judaism of their origin.

II. Superiority of Christ’s Person (1:1-4:13)

The letter begins, in 1:1-4, with a lofty prologue emphasizing the full deity of Jesus Christ as clearly as any other portion of the New Testament. He is the exact representation of the Father—the mirror image, we might say.

A. Superior to the Angels

And then the body of the letter begins in 1:5 with a series of comparisons of Christ to many important Jewish figures and institutions. The first of these, that occupies the writer’s attention from 1:5-2:18, is Christ’s superiority even over the angels. Angels had become the focus of much interesting Jewish speculation, especially during the intertestamental period, and especially at Qumran among the Essenes. The first point that the writer makes about Christ’s supremacy over the angels is that He is more sovereign, He is more lofty, He has greater grandeur and majesty than even the angels.

This point he makes by stringing together a series of Old Testament quotations in 1:5-14. And here, as throughout the epistle, one has to understand many of the writer’s uses of the Old Testament, not as straightforward predictions with their later fulfillments but as various forms of typology, as we discussed in our introduction to the birth narratives of Jesus. Patterns of God’s redemptive action throughout history are repeated in striking ways in the events surrounding Jesus’ life and ministry that enable a
very Jewish writer to say the Old Testament passages have been “filled full,” another legitimate meaning in that age of the concept of fulfillment. Another distinctive of the letter to the Hebrews is that after each main theological affirmation the writer moves immediately into exhortation, rather than saving all of his commands for one connected section toward the end of the epistle.

Chapter 2:1-4, therefore, move into the first of these exhortational sections, warning the audience of this letter that if the revelation that came by means of angels—a reference to the Mosaic law, following certain Jewish traditions—was so important, then the revelation that came through Christ, who is superior to the angels, must be followed that much more closely. After this brief exhortation, the writer continues his comparison of Christ to the angels; this time, however—somewhat more strikingly—speaking not of Christ’s superiority in sovereignty, but of His superiority in suffering. Christ, as one who became fully man (something that angels never did), was therefore qualified to be the one who died for the sins of the world, and therefore did what Adam and his descendants had never successfully done—namely, bore the image of God, as described in Psalm 8 (which figures prominently in this section), completely and completely perfectly exercising the dominion over humanity that was part of the charge given to Adam and Eve originally in Genesis 1. Christ’s superiority, therefore, in completing the atonement, means that we are free from sin and free from the fear of death, which verses 14-18 stress.

**B. Superior to Moses**

The second major comparison the letter to the Hebrews develops is between Christ and Moses—Moses, the one who gave the law at Sinai, and therefore clearly very prominent in Jewish history. Chapter 3:1-4:13 develops this comparison. Here the theological section, the expositional material, is quite brief, chapter 3:1-6. Moses was faithful within his house, but Christ was faithful as the builder of the house, as the creator of the universe. Clearly Christ is supreme, therefore, even over Moses.

The main portion of this comparison, however, is the exhortational material that proceeds, beginning in 3:17
and continuing all the way over to 4:13. Here the main point the writer makes is that we must not rebel like those who supposedly were following Moses, a majority of the Israelites who wound up wandering for forty years with Moses in the Sinai wilderness. Rather, we must do what the majority of the Israelites of Moses’ day were not successfully able to do, and that is enter into God’s rest.

In chapters 3 and 4, Hebrews develops a rather elaborate and intricate set of comparisons, all involving the Sabbath rest of the people of God. Beginning with the one day of the creation week on which God rested, which became the paradigm in the Mosaic Law for God’s people to rest one day every week, the writer to the Hebrews proceeds to discuss how the complete fulfillment of the concept of Sabbath rest has not yet occurred. At one level, Sabbath rest was figured and prefigured by the Israelites’ entrance into Canaan. But they were never able permanently to enjoy the blessings of the land in peace and prosperity and freedom and safety from their enemies because of their repeated disobedience. Jesus, therefore, in the Christian revelation, brings an even greater rest, but it still is not as perfect as the complete rest that will come in the life to come. There is still time to enter this rest, therefore; and picking up on the psalmist’s application of the Sabbath rest theme, the writer to the Hebrews more than once encourages his audience to be sure they have fully entered into the Sabbath rest of God. In other words, they must remain faithful Christians and persevere to the end, even under persecution.

III. Superiority of Christ’s Work (4:14-10:18)

A. Superior to the Priesthood

In 4:14 all the way through 7:28, the writer to the Hebrews develops his most elaborate comparison between Christ and a particularly prominent Jewish figure or institution: in this case, the Jewish priesthood. The introductory exhortation of this section occupies 4:14-16. Here the writer begins with exhortation even before developing his theological exposition, encouraging his audience to be sure that they have accepted and are continuing to accept God’s grace.
Chapter 4:16 includes that famous exhortation to come boldly before the throne of God’s grace because of the new intimacy of access that Christ’s sacrificial death has opened up for believers.

Throughout these chapters, one of the many central points that the writer develops is that where the Jewish priesthood kept people at a certain arm’s length from God, Christ’s complete and full priesthood, His complete sacrifice for sins, enables us to approach through Christ, without the benefit of any human intermediaries, and pray and hear directly from God, apparently in a more intimate and direct way than most Jews were used to thinking of things.

In 5:1-10 the writer develops a comparison with Aaron, the brother of Moses, through whom the priestly lineage followed, emphasizing primarily the parallel ways in which Christ, although He Himself was not a biological descendant of Aaron, nevertheless fulfilled the various functions of the Jewish priesthood. Chapter 5:11-6:20 turn again to another key section of exhortation, and include 6:4-8—one of the most famous and perhaps the strongest warnings in all of the New Testament against committing apostasy. Those who believe that it is possible for a true Christian to lose his or her salvation regularly turn to these verses—although there are ways to understand each of the statements predicated of these people as being references to people who have made some kind of superficial profession of faith, perhaps are part of the community of those who are claiming to worship God, perhaps even outwardly indistinguishable from those who have true faith.

Whichever approach one takes to these and other warning passages in the epistle to the Hebrews, the point of agreement across this interpretive debate should not be lost sight of. Both Calvinists, as those who stress eternal security, and Arminians, as those who believe one can lose their salvation, agree upon, Hebrews is referring to people who have made some kind of outward profession of faith who then repudiate that profession under difficult circumstances, particularly persecution of Christians, never make any attempt to repent of that repudiation, and therefore die in a state of eternal separation from God. It’s an important theological debate whether these people really ever were true Christians or not, but we must not lose
sight of the point that both sides agree on. Such people are lost, and therefore it is incumbent for Christian witnesses and Christian ministers in every context, but particularly those of apparent Christians suffering hardship, to warn against apostasy in no uncertain terms.

Chapter 7:1-28 continues the comparison between Jesus and the priesthood, this time by focusing on Levi, the one of the twelve sons of Jacob through whom the priestly lineage was named, and this time focusing on the differences between Jesus and the conventional Levitical priests. This leads the writer to think of a different priest from the Old Testament—namely, Melchizedek, the priest of Salem, all the way back in the time of Abraham in the narrative of Genesis. Here was one, outside of explicit faith in the God of Israel, who apparently still somehow knew of the one true, Almighty God over all of the universe; and Abraham acknowledged Melchizedek in some way as his superior by offering a tithe to him. Jesus is said to be “a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek,” which means that he is superior to the Levitical priests who were descended later from Abraham; and therefore the spiritual descendants of Abraham by faith, Christians, can acknowledge Jesus as a greater high priest than even the priests of Judaism.

**B. Superior to the Old Covenant**

Chapter 8:1-10:39 then develop the supremacy of Jesus over the old covenant. Chapter 8 includes the longest quotation of any Old Testament passage in the New Testament, and also the strongest statement of the virtual obsolescence of that old covenant, although the writer does stop short of making that exact claim. Chapter 9 develops the comparison with covenants by noting the play on words, in both the Hebrew and Greek languages, of a covenant to a testament. A testament, like what we would call today a will, requires the death of the one who made it before its terms can come into play. And Christ’s death, therefore, inaugurates the New Testament or the new covenant. Chapter 10 develops the typology or the comparison between earthly shadows of a heavenly reality or substance, and leads to the final warning passage in 10:19-39, around which the same debates attach that we have noted under 6:4-8.

With chapter 11, the writer of Hebrews proceeds to the concluding part of his epistle: a final set of comparisons—this time with a roll call, as it were, of the heroes of the faith throughout Old Testament times. The main point of this chapter is no matter who one picks as a great hero of Judaism prior to Christ’s day, none of them ever received all that God had promised, and therefore they had to live by faith. Why not? The chapter concludes by pointing out that God had determined that it would not be without believers of the new covenant era that they should be completed or perfected. The final exhortational passage, therefore, in chapter 12 encourages us to focus our eyes on Jesus and nothing about all of His Jewish predecessors—the one who is the author and the perfecter of our faith—and also those who have preceded us in death and in martyrdom who surround us like a great cloud of witnesses in a stadium, cheering us on to finish the race no matter how difficult it may be. Chapter 13 then concludes the epistle with miscellaneous exhortations and greetings.

V. Conclusion

Hebrews is unique among New Testament writings, not only in the length to which it goes to develop the theme of the full deity and humanity of Christ; it is the only New Testament epistle that develops, and it develops it at length, the theme of the priesthood of Jesus Christ. And it is also, and perhaps most significantly, the strongest and clearest call to Christians facing situations of hardship or persecution not to renounce their faith. Because apart from Christ, there is no other way. Particularly today for Christians who have lived in more affluent and more democratic countries and who have not experienced the intense persecution, to say nothing of martyrdom, for their faith that people in other parts of the world today are experiencing and have in centuries past, the book of the Hebrews may be one of the more neglected parts of the New Testament, to which we should turn again and again. It may be the case that apart from severe trials or testing we can never be entirely sure about the reality of others’ or perhaps even our own faith, and therefore should be careful about falling into the danger of glibly assuming we know who is saved in God’s eyes.