

# The Book of Hebrews

## LESSON ONE

## THE BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE OF HEBREWS



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# The Book of Hebrews

## Lesson One

### The Background and Purpose of Hebrews

#### INTRODUCTION

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Followers of Christ have suffered persecution throughout history. Stolen property, beatings, imprisonment and martyrdom have been the fate of countless Christians. And by some reports, Christ's followers are being persecuted more than ever in our own day.

For those of us who aren't suffering in these ways, it's hard to imagine the temptations that persecution brings. Christians who live in peace and safety often compromise their faith even without threats. But can you imagine how tempting it would be to compromise what you believe to protect yourself, your spouse, your children and closest friends from serious harm? How could we possibly encourage fellow believers in these conditions?

This was the challenge that faced the author of the book of Hebrews. He wrote to a group of Christians who had suffered in the past and were now threatened with even more suffering. They'd done well years ago, but the author of Hebrews feared that they might now turn away from Christ to avoid further persecution.

This is the first lesson in our series *The Book of Hebrews* and we've entitled it, "The Background and Purpose of Hebrews." In this lesson, we'll introduce a number of perspectives that should guide our interpretation of this complex book.

As our title suggests, we'll look at the background and purpose of Hebrews in two ways. First, we'll consider the book's background. And second, we'll summarize the overarching purpose for which Hebrews was written. Let's begin with a sketch of some important background issues related to the book of Hebrews.

#### BACKGROUND

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We'll explore the background of Hebrews by considering three interrelated topics. We'll look first at its authorship. Then we'll investigate the original audience. Lastly, we'll examine the date when the book of Hebrews was written. Let's look first at Hebrews' authorship.

#### AUTHORSHIP

From the earliest times, there have been a variety of positions on the authorship of Hebrews. For our purposes, we'll touch on two issues. First, we'll discuss the identity of the author. And second, we'll construct a profile for the author by focusing on some features of his book. Let's begin by examining the author's identity.

## Identity

Identifying the author of Hebrews is not as simple as it is with many other New Testament books because the author never identified himself. As early as the patristic period, Clement of Alexandria, who lived from approximately A.D. 150 to 215, and Origen of Alexandria, who lived from around A.D. 185 to 254, acknowledged that there was a variety of opinions on the authorship of Hebrews in their day. Early on, the apostle Paul was the candidate named most frequently, but scholars also suggested Barnabas, Luke, Apollos, and even Clement of Rome.

Around A.D. 325 the church historian Eusebius in his *History of the Church* referred to Origen's outlook on the authorship of Hebrews in book 6, chapter 25, section 14. As we read there:

**But as to who wrote the epistle [of Hebrews], God knows the truth of the matter.**

Origen's comment reflects how uncertain he and many others were in his day. And most biblical scholars today concur. Only God knows for certain who wrote this book.

Unfortunately, questions about authorship and the ways some heretical groups misused the book of Hebrews, led some people during the patristic period to doubt if Hebrews should be included in the New Testament Canon. Of course, notable scholars like Clement of Rome, who died sometime around A.D. 99, treated Hebrews as equal to other New Testament books. And Justin Martyr, who lived from A.D. 100 to 165, did the same. But Hebrews was omitted from both the Marcionite Canon, written around A.D. 144, and the Muratorian Canon, written around A.D. 170. By the end of the patristic period, however, the majority of influential interpreters in the eastern and western church came to recognize Hebrews as part of the Canon. And they generally agreed that the apostle Paul was the author.

Throughout the medieval period, most leading scholars continued to believe that Paul wrote Hebrews. But during the Reformation, Protestant Reformers questioned many ecclesiastical traditions, including the traditional view of Pauline authorship. Martin Luther suggested that Apollos was the author. John Calvin didn't suggest an alternative, but he insisted that the book could not have come from Paul.

Today, the majority of interpreters reject Pauline authorship. We'll touch on three reasons for this stance. First, as we've already mentioned, this book is anonymous, and it was Paul's practice to name himself in his epistles. In fact, as 2 Thessalonians 2:2 makes clear, Paul was deeply concerned that forgeries had spread under his name. So, it seems unlikely that he would have failed to identify himself had he written Hebrews.

Second, the book of Hebrews emphasizes subjects that don't receive much, if any, attention in Paul's letters. For instance, the author of Hebrews mentioned Melchizedek three times. He drew attention to the Old Testament tabernacle. And he dealt at length with Christ as the high priest. Taken together, these themes distinguish the book of Hebrews from books that we know were written by Paul.

Third, the strongest reason for doubting Pauline authorship is the way the writer of Hebrews distanced himself from the first generation of Jesus' followers. Listen to the words of Hebrews 2:3:

**This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him (Hebrews 2:3).**

Notice here that the author of Hebrews mentioned how salvation was “first announced by the Lord” — in other words, by Jesus himself — and “was confirmed to us by those who heard him.” That is, the author and his audience had the gospel verified for them by people who had heard Jesus directly. The author's admission that he received his Christian faith secondarily contrasts with passages like Galatians 1:1, 11 and 12, and 1 Corinthians 11:23 where Paul insisted that he received the gospel directly from Jesus.

**The short answer to the question, “Who wrote the book of Hebrews?” is, we don't know. We have some clues as to who he was. Down throughout church history there have been numerous answers as to that question. So, for many years the church thought Paul had written it. I think probably Paul didn't write it because there are differences between Hebrews and Paul's letters. For instance, Paul often... will always identify himself and then speak to the addressees of the letter. Hebrews doesn't do that. There are themes in Hebrews like Christ as the High Priest that just don't feature very much in Paul's letters. So, Paul's probably not the writer. Other suggestions have been Barnabas or Apollos, — Martin Luther thought maybe it was Apollos — Priscilla. And yet, we just don't know. I think the most we can say is that the writer of Hebrews was a second-generation believer. In chapter 2 he refers to those who heard from Christ and then handed on what they had heard from Christ, so he seems to be putting himself in that second generation.**

**— Dr. Stephen E. Witmer**

We've explored the authorship of the book of Hebrews and seen that the author's identity remains unknown. But we can still construct something of a profile for the author.

## **Profile**

For the sake of time, we'll point out just two rather obvious features of the author's life.

***Hellenistic Jew.*** In the first place, the author of Hebrews was a Hellenistic Jew. Most scholars today agree that Paul did not write Hebrews. In the end, though, it's best to

conclude with Origen that only God really knows. Hebrews' authorship has been debated throughout the years, but this shouldn't prevent us from learning as much as we can about the author and his character from clues found in the text.

We can see from the text that both Jewish and Hellenistic influences shaped the author and his book. The author's strong Jewish heritage is evident in his knowledge of the Old Testament. In fact, he quoted the Old Testament at least 31 times in his 13 chapters.

It would also appear that the author had a strong Hellenistic upbringing. In the past, interpreters pointed to the author's use of the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, as evidence that he was a Hellenistic Jew. In the second half of the last century, however, research into the Dead Sea Scrolls has revealed that quotations initially assumed to be directly from the Septuagint, could have come from non-traditional Hebrew texts. For this reason, we can't be certain that the author of Hebrews used the Septuagint.

But despite this discovery, we can still be confident that the author of Hebrews was Hellenistic. His sophisticated Greek offers strong evidence of a Hellenistic upbringing. And his vocabulary and style give evidence of a mastery of the language that even surpasses the writings of Luke.

***Passionate Intellectual.*** Not only was the author of Hebrews a Hellenistic Jew, but we can also add to our profile that he was a passionate intellectual. Interpreters widely acknowledge that the author of Hebrews was an intellectual. The theological arguments in Hebrews are more complex than many of those found in the rest of the New Testament. In fact, the author himself noted the priority of sophisticated theological reflection in passages like Hebrews 5:13-14 where he indicated that to distinguish good from evil, followers of Christ must become doctrinally mature.

**From the contents of the letter of Hebrews, there are a number of things we can say about the author. One is that he was brilliant. He knew the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, backward and forward. He knew how to link texts in ways that were very persuasive to traditional Jewish audiences. Probably he was a Hellenistic Jewish author, probably writing to a Hellenistic Jewish audience. When I say "Hellenistic Jewish," I mean Greek-speaking and probably in the diaspora, but very committed to their Jewish traditions and very knowledgeable in Scripture.**

— Dr. Craig S. Keener

Even though the author of Hebrews should be considered an intellectual, he was not a cold, detached academic. He was deeply passionate about the Christian faith. His devotion and passion for his fellow Christians is evident in his writing.

Listen to the way he empathized with his audience in Hebrews 10:33-34:

**Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You**

**sympathized with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions (Hebrews 10:33-34).**

In a similar way, in 12:1-2 he showed his passion for Christ when he said:

**Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God (Hebrews 12:1-2).**

It's difficult to read these and similar passages without realizing that this author was hardly an impersonal scholar. He was passionate about his audience and Christ. If we miss this passion, we miss one of the book's most prominent features.

**What we also learn about the author is that he was really concerned about the people he was preaching to and writing for. He was concerned about their spiritual apathy, and so he comes back again and again to the danger of becoming weak or tired, or even apostasized. And so, he was certainly a superb theologian and interpreter of Scripture, but at the same time he was a person who knew his audience very well, evidently personally very well. He really cared about them and was marshaling everything that he could in terms of theology, interpretation of Scripture and application to help them in their spiritual pilgrimage.**

— Dr. Eckhard Schnabel

So far in our discussion of the background of the book of Hebrews we've focused on the book's authorship. Now we should turn to our second issue: Hebrews' original audience.

## **ORIGINAL AUDIENCE**

The book of Hebrews doesn't clearly identify its audience by name, city or region. Still, in general terms, we can be confident that the author wrote to a specific audience with whom he was personally familiar. In 13:19-24, the author assured his audience of his intent to visit them again. He spoke of Timothy, whom he called "our brother," and he also mentioned a group of people from Italy that his audience apparently knew.

We'll look at five important factors about this original audience that we should consider as we study the book of Hebrews.



## Jewish

First, there's reason to think that at least a good portion of the original audience was Jewish. Hebrews 1:1 makes this clear:

**In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways (Hebrews 1:1).**

Here, the author referred to how God had revealed himself to Israel in the Old Testament. But notice how he called Old Testament Israelites "our forefathers" — the ancestors of the author and his audience.

It's no wonder, that from as early as the time of Tertullian, who lived from about A.D. 155 to 230, the traditional title attached to this book has been "*Pros Hebraious*," "For the Hebrews."

## Hellenistic

Second, it's also likely that the audience was in large part Hellenistic. The content of Hebrews indicates that the audience was familiar with theological teachings that were more common among Jews living outside of Palestine than among more traditional Jewish circles within Palestine.

A number of interpreters have tried to determine where the audience may have lived outside of Palestine. The fact that the first epistle of Clement of Rome referred to the book as early as A.D. 95 has led some to suggest that the audience was in Rome. Hebrews 13:24 has been used to support this point of view because it mentions "those from Italy." These suggestions are interesting, but the most we can say, with any degree of confidence, is that the original audience consisted in large part of Hellenistic Jews who lived outside of Palestine.

## Immature

Third, the original audience of Hebrews was immature. Listen to the way the author described them in Hebrews 5:12:

**Though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again (Hebrews 5:12).**

Notice that the audience had been believers long enough for the author to say "by this time you ought to be teachers." They should have made great doctrinal progress. But as the author noted, they needed to be taught "the elementary truths of God's word all over again."

Interestingly enough, even though the audience was theologically immature, the book of Hebrews contains some of the most advanced, sophisticated theological teachings in the entire New Testament. How do these features of the book fit with the immaturity of the audience? The best way to make sense of this situation is to keep in mind that early Christians adopted a common practice used in first century synagogues.

We learn from passages like Luke 4:16, Acts 13:15, and 1 Timothy 4:13 that leaders of synagogues and Christian churches supervised the reading and explanation of Scriptures to their congregations. So, the author of Hebrews wrote some of the most theologically sophisticated New Testament writings because he expected church leaders to teach his book to their congregants. Now, in Hebrews 5:11, the writer of Hebrews reprimanded his audience for being “slow to learn.” So, it’s quite possible that the larger portion of the original audience remained theologically immature because they didn’t properly respect their leaders.

This suggestion is confirmed by Hebrews 13:17 where the author told his audience:

**Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you (Hebrews 13:17).**

## Persecuted

Fourth, the original audience of Hebrews was persecuted. There were two well-known times of persecution for Christians during the first century A.D. that may have impacted Hebrews’ original audience, at least indirectly. In A.D. 49, the Roman Emperor Claudius expelled Jews from the city of Rome. And around A.D. 64, Emperor Nero persecuted Christians in the vicinity of Rome.

As we read through the book of Hebrews, it becomes evident that the original audience had already faced persecution in the past, some of them were suffering in the present, and the author’s expectation was that more of them would suffer, perhaps even more severely, in the future.

In 10:32-35, the author drew attention to the suffering that at least some in the audience had experienced in the past:

**Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you stood your ground in a great contest in the face of suffering... So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded (Hebrews 10:32-35).**

Here we see that the author praised his audience for their strength when they were persecuted in “those earlier days after [they] had [first] received the light.” But he also encouraged them not to “throw away [their] confidence.” The Greek term translated “confidence” here is *parrēsia*, which in many contexts means “courage,” “boldness,” or

“fearlessness” in the presence of dignitaries. This word choice suggests that the audience was facing public or official persecution of some sort, and they were tempted to lose their boldness.

In 13:3 the author also referred directly to present persecutions when he said:

**Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering (Hebrews 13:3).**

We can see from this verse that the author exhorted his audience to “remember those in prison as if [they] were their fellow prisoners.” And to remember those “mistreated as if [they themselves] were suffering.” It’s clear that not all of his audience’s persecution was in the past.

In addition to persecution in the past and in the present, the author of Hebrews acknowledged in 12:3-4 that his audience was facing the threat of more persecution in the future. Listen to this exhortation:

**Consider Christ who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood (Hebrews 12:3-4).**

As this passage indicates, the author expected more persecutions to come against his audience, and he was deeply concerned with this feature of their experience.

**The original audience of Hebrews faced a number of issues... as the author mentions in chapter 10, they had faced various forms of suffering; some of them had lost property, some of them had been imprisoned, they’d been subjected to public ridicule of some sort. And he still is urging the readers at this point, as he writes, to be willing to bear the reproach of Christ to face exclusion from the camp, which he’s describing in Old Testament terms but probably means to be excluded from the synagogue, and if they were to go to Jerusalem, to be excluded from the temple, which I believe was still standing as he wrote. So there are those forms of persecution they were facing. He says in chapter 12 that their sufferings had not escalated to the point of shedding blood, and yet he seems to be aware of their need to be assured that they have been set free from the fear of death, as he says in chapter 2, by the victory of Jesus Christ. So, it may be that even a more intense, violent persecution is on the horizon.**

— Dr. Dennis E. Johnson

## Near Apostasy

Fifth, as the audience of Hebrews faced persecution, at least some of them were near apostasy. Rather than simply being discouraged or weakened by sufferings, they were in danger of turning away from Christ entirely. For instance, in Hebrews 10:26-27 we read this warning:

**If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God (Hebrews 10:26-27).**

We need to be clear here that the author of Hebrews was not concerned about peccadillos or small sins. He warned his audience severely because for those who utterly turn away from Christ, “no sacrifice for sins is left.” When people reject the Christian faith, like some in the original audience of Hebrews were tempted to do, they prove that they never had faith that saves. And for this reason, they can only have “a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire” reserved for “the enemies of God.”

As we’ll explain in our next lesson, this and similar passages don’t imply that true believers can lose their salvation. Rather, this verse refers to those who profess faith and experience many of its blessings, but without regeneration and justification. In all events, it’s evident that some in the original audience of Hebrews were sorely tempted to leave the faith.

Now that we’ve investigated the background of Hebrews by considering the book’s authorship and the original audience, we should turn to our third issue: the date when the book of Hebrews was written.

## DATE

Although the exact date for Hebrews remains uncertain, the earliest and latest dates for this book can be established rather firmly. We’ll look first at the earliest possible date for the book, or *terminus a quo*, and then at the latest possible date, or *terminus ad quem*. Both of these dates can be determined with some degree of confidence using scriptural and historical evidence.

On the one side, Hebrews 13:23 helps confirm the earliest possible date for the book. In this verse the author wrote:

**I want you to know that our brother Timothy has been released. If he arrives soon, I will come with him to see you (Hebrews 13:23).**

Here we see that “Timothy [had] been released” recently from prison. We don’t hear of Timothy’s imprisonment anywhere else in the New Testament. In fact, in the book of 2 Timothy, Paul’s last letter written shortly before his death, Timothy was free to travel and bring Paul supplies. Yet, this verse tells us that by the time Hebrews was

written Timothy had been imprisoned and released. For this reason, the book of Hebrews must have been written after Paul's death, which took place sometime around A.D. 65.

On the other side, the latest likely date for the book would be around A.D. 95 shortly before Clement of Rome referred to the book of Hebrews in his letter, 1 Clement.

In addition, many commentators have observed that, in passages like Hebrews 5:1-3, the author used the present tense to describe the sacrificial duties of the high priest. This is important because in the rest of his book the author consistently used the Greek past tense when referring to past events. So, it's likely that these priestly activities were still going on when Hebrews was written.

Also, in 8:13 the author encouraged his audience not to turn back to the "obsolete" sacrificial practices established by God's covenant with Moses. He explained that in light of the new covenant, these practices would "soon disappear." We know that the high priest's activities, and the Levitical sacrificial system as a whole, came to an end in A.D. 70 when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and its temple. So, these evidences suggest a date for Hebrews sometime after Paul's death around A.D. 65 and before the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70.

In our lesson on the background and purpose of Hebrews, we've looked at several features of the background of the book of Hebrews. Now, we're in a position to address the overarching purpose of the book. Why was Hebrews written?

## PURPOSE

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It's fair to say that any book as long and complex as the book of Hebrews is written with many different purposes in mind. But for this lesson, we're primarily interested in summarizing the overarching purpose of the book. Each part of this book has its own emphases, and we'll explore these emphases in our next lesson. At this point, we want to see how the book as a whole was designed to impact the concepts, behaviors and emotions of the original audience.

Interpreters have summarized the overarching purpose of the book of Hebrews in a variety of ways. But for this study, we'll describe the original purpose of Hebrews in this way:

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

This description of the author's purpose helps orient us to the main ideas found in the book of Hebrews.

As we've just suggested, the author of Hebrews wrote to exhort his audience. Listen to the way the author himself characterized his book in 13:22:

**Brothers, I urge you to bear with my word of exhortation (Hebrews 13:22).**

Notice here that the writer “urge[d]” his audience to receive his book as a “word of exhortation.” The words “I urge” derive from the Greek verb *parakaleō*, the verbal form of the Greek noun translated “exhortation” in the same sentence.

The terminology of exhortation implies “to summon to the speaker’s side” or “to call for someone to take the speaker’s point of view.” The same expression is used to describe John the Baptist’s urgent, persuasive call for repentance in Luke 3:18.

Interestingly, the phrase “word of exhortation” also appears in Acts 13:15 where the men of the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch invited Paul and his companions to give “a message of encouragement” after the reading of Scripture. It’s quite possible that the expression “word” — or message — “of exhortation” was a first-century technical designation for what we call a sermon today.

**Well, the author identifies his work as a word of exhortation — this is in 13:22 — and what this means is that Hebrews is an exhortation; it’s like a sermon. And so the use of rhetoric is basically a tool for persuading the audience to be faithful in their commitment to Jesus as the Son of God and as their Lord and Savior. So, the rhetoric in the letter of Hebrews, or the homily of Hebrews, allows the author to elaborate on themes, to exegete Jewish Scriptures — that is, interpret Jewish Scriptures in a way that is meaningful — and then present it in a very forceful way so that the audience understand clearly what the author wants him to do, wants them to do. He wants them to adhere to the salvation that Christ has offered to them, that God has offered in Christ.**

**— Dr. Fredrick Long**

Every epistle or letter in the New Testament contains exhortations to its audience. But the book of Hebrews stands apart from other New Testament epistles due to the intensity of its exhortations.

To explore the author’s purpose, let’s look more closely at the intensity of the exhortations that are so prominent in the book. And then, we’ll examine the goal of these exhortations, how the author hoped his audience would respond. Let’s look first at the intensity of the author’s exhortations to his audience.

## **INTENSITY OF EXHORTATIONS**

To look further at what we mean by the intensity of the author’s exhortations, we’ll look at two issues: first, the frequency of exhortations in the book, and second, the author’s rhetorical style associated with his exhortations. Let’s begin by examining the frequency of exhortations.

## Frequency

The frequency of the author's exhortations helps us understand the urgency of his message. These exhortations are implicit at times, but at least 30 times they appear explicitly. On many occasions, the author used what Greek grammarians call the "hortatory subjunctive." These verbal forms urge or implore and are often translated "let us" do this or that. For instance, in 4:14, 16 we read two such exhortations:

**Let us hold firmly to the faith we profess... Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence (Hebrews 4:14, 16).**

The author also exhorted his audience by using imperatives, which we often translate as direct orders. For example, in 12:12-16 we read this series of exhortations:

**Strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. Make level paths for your feet ... Make every effort to live in peace with all men ... be holy ... See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up ... See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau (Hebrews 12:12-16).**

One of the reasons it's important to keep in mind how often the author directly exhorted his audience is that the book's complex theological reflections often obscure the author's purpose for writing. He didn't simply want to inform his audience of theological doctrines. He informed them doctrinally in order to persuade them to adopt different attitudes and actions. This is what he meant when he called his book a "word of exhortation." If we don't keep this urgency in mind, we'll miss a crucial dimension of the book of Hebrews.

We've seen how the intensity of the author's exhortations is reflected in the frequency with which he exhorted his audience. Now, let's consider how the author's rhetorical style also reveals his desire to exhort his audience.

## Rhetorical Style

The book of Hebrews has often been characterized as highly rhetorical. By this we mean that it employs many literary devices that were associated with persuasive oratory or urgent debate in the first century. Many of these rhetorical devices appear now and then in other New Testament books, but we find them far more often in Hebrews.

**Hebrews is probably the best example in the New Testament of an author who has strong literary and rhetorical skills, and those rhetorical skills really help to accomplish the author's purpose. He's trying to demonstrate the superiority of Christ and the new covenant over the old covenant, and he does so in part with a very convincing strong literary argument. And he uses lots of different structural**

**features to accomplish that... So, beautifully structured, using rhetoric to draw his readers in, and then to convince them of the argument that he's making.**

**— Dr. Mark L. Strauss**

One rhetorical device, called *synkrisis* in Greek, is a detailed comparison between two or more things designed to convince audiences to affirm the speaker's point of view. For example, *synkrisis* appears in the book of Hebrews in 7:11-28. There, the author argued that Jesus was a royal priest like Melchizedek, a priest and king mentioned in the book of Genesis. But rather than simply asserting his belief, the author of Hebrews gave his audience a compelling, eight-point comparison between Melchizedek and Christ: their parentage, genealogy, birth, death, office, actions, status and achievements. These detailed comparisons were designed to settle all doubts about the claim that Jesus is the great, royal High Priest.

Another rhetorical device in the book of Hebrews is known as *exempla*. *Exempla* are lists of illustrations or examples that follow one after the other to build a persuasive argument for a particular point of view. This oratorical technique appears in the familiar list of the faithful in Hebrews 11. There the author listed by name: Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, the Israelites, Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets. This long list was designed to persuade the audience that servants of God should remain faithful throughout their persecution.

A third rhetorical device used by the author of Hebrews is known by the Hebrew expression *qol wahomer*. This expression is well known from both Greco-Roman and rabbinical traditions and may be translated "light to heavy," "less to great," or "simple to complex." This type of argumentation begins with a simple premise that isn't disputed by the audience. It then builds to a more complex conclusion that the audience initially doubts, but can now more easily accept. Simply put, this argument says that because the simple premise is true, then surely the more difficult conclusion must also be true. Listen to the way this rhetorical device appears in Hebrews 10:28-29:

**Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot? (Hebrews 10:28-29).**

Here the author began with a premise that the audience understood: the punishment for those who rejected the law of Moses was death. Then he pressed his audience further by arguing "how much more" punishment should come to those who "trampled ... under foot" one greater than Moses — "the Son of God."

These examples help us see the urgency of the author's intentions. He was convinced that his audience faced a very serious situation and that it was time for them to make some very difficult decisions. So, he did all he could to urge and persuade them to make the right choices.



Now that we've seen how the author's purpose was strengthened by the intensity of his exhortations, we should turn to a second feature of the book: the goal of these exhortations.

## GOAL OF EXHORTATIONS

We saw earlier that the overarching purpose of the book of Hebrews can be defined in this way:

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

As this definition affirms, the goal of the author's exhortations was twofold. He wanted his audience to reject local Jewish teachings and he wanted them also to remain faithful to Jesus as the Messiah. Let's consider how the author urged his audience to reject local Jewish teachings.

## Reject Local Teachings

We've noted that the audience of Hebrews had suffered persecution and that this persecution was tempting them toward apostasy. But this temptation was not what we might first imagine. It seems that at the time Hebrews was written, Christians could find safety from persecution if they rejected their distinctively Christian beliefs and identified more closely with their local Jewish community.

In the first century, Jews often had to pay special taxes, and they suffered persecution from time to time. But often, Jewish communities in the Roman Empire were free to observe their faith. Early on, the same was true for Christians because they were closely identified with Judaism. But as time passed, Christian identification as a Jewish sect began to disappear. In fact, the book of Acts reports that even in the days of Paul, Jewish synagogues rejected followers of Christ and encouraged local authorities to mistreat them. In all likelihood, this was the kind of situation facing the original audience of Hebrews. And their prolonged sufferings tempted them to accept teachings in their local Jewish community that were contrary to the Christian faith.

Interestingly, the author of Hebrews didn't address the sorts of issues normally associated with Jewish hypocrisy and legalism. As crucial as these matters were, they're not a major concern in the book of Hebrews. Rather, the author dealt primarily with erroneous beliefs and practices, specifically those that developed in Jewish communities outside the mainstream of Palestinian Judaism. Listen to what the author of Hebrews wrote in Hebrews 13:9:

**Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings. It is good for our hearts to be strengthened by grace, not by ceremonial foods, which are of no value to those who eat them (Hebrews 13:9).**

In this verse, the author contrasted being “strengthened by grace” with being strengthened “by ceremonial foods.” This specific focus sounds familiar enough. But notice also that this was just one example of what he called “all kinds of strange teachings.” In other words, unusual or strange teachings taught by local Jewish communities. So, what were these “strange teachings” that the audience was tempted to follow?

In the second half of the last century, a number of helpful insights into this question came to light with the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran. This long-lost collection of documents included Old Testament texts, but also extra-biblical writings that represented the distinctive teachings of a disenfranchised Jewish community living near the Dead Sea. It contained books like *The Rule of the Community*, *The Damascus Covenant*, the *War Scroll*, *The Midrash on Melchizedek*, as well as sections of *1 Enoch* called “The Book of the Watchers” and “The Book of Dreams”. These books have a number of teachings that closely parallel the theological issues addressed in Hebrews.

Now, it’s important to note that these teachings were not exclusive to this community. Other Jewish groups in the Mediterranean world held to similar views. In fact, the books of Ephesians and Colossians deal with comparable issues in their locations. Yet, it will help us understand many of Hebrews’ exhortations against local Jewish beliefs if we note some of the similar subjects found in both Hebrews and the books found at Qumran.

**The Dead Sea Scrolls are fascinating documents found, of course, in the desert in Qumran, and they are the works of a radical Jewish sect who defined themselves over and against the Jewish mainstream, particularly the temple complex. And so, somewhat analogously to the book of Hebrews, the sectarians at Qumran seem to have regarded themselves as a new temple under a new covenant. Now, there are just as many dissimilarities particularly because some of the more ritual aspects of the old covenant, the Qumran group really wanted to revitalize those rather than let them obsolesce in the way that the writer of Hebrews suggests.**

— Dr. Sean McDonough

For this lesson, we’ll briefly mention just four topics found in both the book of Hebrews and the documents at Qumran.

***Ceremonial Foods.*** In the first place, we’ve already noted that in Hebrews 13:9, the author spoke against a particular example of eating ceremonial foods.

Many practices at Qumran are described in the book entitled *The Rule of the Community*. Among many other things, the community at Qumran regularly held sacred communal meals in which they ate specially consecrated food.

**Basic Teachings.** In the second place, an assortment of basic teachings addressed in the book of Hebrews also appears in texts at Qumran.

For instance, in Hebrews 6:1-2, the author mentioned repentance, faith, cleansing rites (or baptisms), laying on of hands, resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment. Interestingly enough, *The Rule of the Community* and the *War Scroll* at Qumran give a great deal of attention to these and similar matters in ways that differed from the mainstream of Palestinian Judaism.

**Angels.** In the third place, the literature at Qumran helps us understand the focus on angels in the book of Hebrews. The book of Hebrews addressed beliefs about angels in a number of passages. This focus was in response to the kinds of beliefs that were similar to teachings in books like *The Rule of the Community*, *The Damascus Covenant*, and the *War Scroll*, as well as the sections of *1 Enoch* called “The Book of the Watchers” and “The Book of Dreams.” These books extolled the powers of good and evil angels, their roles as messengers of divine revelation, and the influence they had on inferior human beings. Apparently, the original audience of Hebrews had become attracted to these kinds of teachings.

**Melchizedek.** In the fourth place, the documents at Qumran help us understand the unusual interest that the author of Hebrews had in the Old Testament character Melchizedek.

For the longest time, interpreters had difficulty explaining why the comparisons between Melchizedek and Jesus were so important to the author of Hebrews. But one text found at Qumran, often called *11QMelchizedek* or *The Midrash on Melchizedek*, falsely taught that Melchizedek was a heavenly figure who was going to appear in the last days to proclaim the Day of Atonement and make final atonement for God’s people. From all appearances, the original audience of Hebrews was tempted to hold these or similar false beliefs.

Identifying the kinds of false teachings that circulated within Jewish communities helps us to understand why the author of Hebrews exhorted his audience to resist these teachings and remain faithful to Jesus.

There’s a number of interesting parallels between the teaching of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the teaching in Hebrews. The most significant would be perhaps that both communities recognized that they were, or believed they were, living in the end times, that God’s final salvation was about to take place. Of course, the difference is in Hebrews we see that God’s salvation has arrived, whereas at Qumran — or the Dead Sea Scrolls — they’re expecting it to happen at any time. But perhaps the most interesting comparison between the two is the role of the figure of Melchizedek. Melchizedek, of course, in Hebrews, the author develops this theology of Melchizedek as Jesus’ high priesthood is not according to the order of Aaron, not the traditional Old Testament one, but according to the order of Melchizedek, because we see Melchizedek was a legitimate high priest who met Abraham in the book of Genesis — and so, this Melchizedek

**comparison. Well, in the Dead Sea Scrolls, there is one of the Dead Sea Scrolls — known as 11Q Melchizedek because it was discovered in cave 11 of the Dead Sea Scrolls — portrays a figure, this Melchizedek, as a mighty heavenly, glorious, Messiah-like figure who brings salvation. So, it's an interesting comparison since, of course, Melchizedek is a type of Christ in the book of Hebrews, that in the Dead Sea Scrolls he becomes a messianic figure. And so scholars puzzle over this relationship between the Melchizedek figure in Hebrews and Melchizedek as he appears in the Dead Sea Scrolls. Interesting comparison.**

**— Dr. Mark L. Strauss**

The goal of Hebrews' exhortations was not only to urge the audience to reject the local Jewish teachings. Even more, the author wanted them to remain faithful to Jesus as the Messiah.

## **Remain Faithful to Jesus**

To accomplish the goal of calling his audience to faithful service to Jesus, the author of Hebrews organized his exhortations into five major divisions. We'll look in some detail at each of these divisions in our next lesson. But at this point it will help to summarize the central issues in each.

In Hebrews 1:1–2:18, the author of Hebrews called on his audience to affirm the supremacy of Christ over angelic revelations.

We mentioned earlier in this lesson that the book of Hebrews spoke against false beliefs about angels. A number of Jewish writings often exalted angels as powerful, glorious creatures who brought divine revelations to inferior human beings. This honor for angels raised a serious challenge against those who followed Christ. Jesus was flesh and blood. How then could anyone follow what he said instead of the revelations of angels? The author of Hebrews responded to this local Jewish teaching by demonstrating from the Old Testament, and from Jesus' life, death, resurrection, ascension, and return in glory, that he is actually superior to the angels.

The second major division of Hebrews, in 3:1–4:13, demonstrates that Jesus is to be held above Moses' authority.

It was obvious to everyone that followers of Jesus were not observing the sacrificial services God had ordained through Moses. The local Jewish community called for Christians to return to Moses and his ways. The author of Hebrews responded by affirming that Moses was God's faithful servant. But Jesus was even greater because he was God's royal Son.

After dealing with angels and Moses, the author of Hebrews turned to Melchizedek's priesthood in 4:14–7:28.

In this division, the author argued that Jesus was the supreme Royal Priest after the order of Melchizedek. Apparently, the local Jewish community wanted the original

audience to reject Jesus as the Messiah because of their beliefs about the appearance of Melchizedek as the great royal high priest in the last days. In response, the author of Hebrews demonstrated that Jesus was the true Royal Priest who appeared in the last days to provide eternal atonement for sin.

In 8:1–11:40, the author of Hebrews explained the supremacy of the new covenant in Jesus.

The teachings of the local Jewish community raised doubts about the Christian claim that Jesus had come to mediate the new covenant promised by Jeremiah. But the author of Hebrews pointed out that Jesus is, in fact, the mediator of the new covenant.

In the last major division, in 12:1–13:25, the book of Hebrews elaborates on a number of ways that the audience needed to exercise practical perseverance.

This division consists of a long series of exhortations, as well as explanations for these exhortations. In light of so many challenges to their faith from the local Jewish community and elsewhere, the author wrote to inspire and energize his audience. He exhorted them to remain faithful to Jesus as the Messiah by reminding them of God's promises and blessings in Jesus.

**By his many exhortations, the writer to the Hebrews, to put it positively, is encouraging his readers to persevere. And some of his language is very gentle, entreating, encouraging, but some of it is, quite frankly, blisteringly frightening. That starts as early as Hebrews 2 — "If Old Testament saints fell away, how much more dangerous is it if we, who are the heirs of the new covenant, who do know the Lord Jesus, ignore the great salvation that has been provided to us?" And that sort of a fortiori argument, "If this, then how much more that," keeps showing up again and again in the book. And then there are two passages that are often referred to as "apostasy passages" in Hebrews 6 and Hebrews 10 that warn against the danger of those who have professed profound faith in Christ — and apparently followed for some time — falling away. And so, even in reading the Old Testament narrative, as in the end of Hebrews 3, the author says, don't be like the Old Testament saints who were rescued from Egypt and escaped slavery but never did get into the Promised Land precisely because they didn't persevere. They fell away in the desert. A whole generation was wiped out more or less. And, those are the sorts of pastoral parallels that show that his incentive to encouragement is not merely soft or cuddly, that there is warmth and encouragement and holding up the glories of Christ so as to be drawn to him. But there is also threat and warning that this is serious business and you don't want to play around with it.**

— Dr. D. A. Carson

## CONCLUSION

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In this lesson on the background and purpose of Hebrews, we've looked at the background of the book of Hebrews, including the author, the audience and the date of composition. We've also focused on the original purpose of Hebrews by examining how the author wrote his book to exhort his audience to turn from local Jewish teachings and to reaffirm their loyalty to Jesus as the Messiah.

The book of Hebrews is one of the most challenging books of the New Testament. It offers so much that we may never uncover more than a small portion of what it teaches. Yet, we can benefit in many ways from these complex teachings. As modern followers of Christ, we also face temptations to avoid troubles in this life by compromising our commitments to Jesus. But if we'll open our hearts to hear how the author of Hebrews urgently exhorted his original audience, we'll see how crucial it is that we stand strong in our faith, no matter what opposition we may face.

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# The Book of Hebrews

LESSON  
ONE

The Background and  
Purpose of Hebrews  
Faculty Forum



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# **The Book of Hebrews**

## **Lesson One: The Background and Purpose of Hebrews**

### **Faculty Forum**

With

Dr. Constantine Campbell  
Dr. D.A. Carson  
Rev. Michael J. Glodo  
Dr. Mark A. Jennings  
Dr. Dennis E. Johnson  
Dr. Barry Joslin  
Dr. Edward M. Keazirian

Dr. Craig S. Keener  
Dr. Dan Lacich  
Dr. Fredrick Long  
Dr. Sean McDonough  
Dr. Alvin Padilla  
Rev. Ric Rodeheaver  
Dr. Eckhard Schnabel

Dr. James D. Smith III  
Dr. Aida Besançon Spencer  
Dr. Mark L. Strauss  
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 a 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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# The Book of Hebrews

LESSON  
TWO

## CONTENT AND STRUCTURE



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# The Book of Hebrews

## Lesson Two

### Content and Structure

#### INTRODUCTION

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We often find ourselves in situations where we want to persuade people to agree with us. There are many ways to do this, but one of the most effective ways is to build as much as possible on beliefs that we already hold in common. Then, on the basis of that common ground, we can try to convince them of other matters. In many respects, this is what the author of the book of Hebrews did. He wrote to a church that was tempted to seek safety from persecution by returning to teachings held by their local Jewish community. So, to persuade them to remain faithful to Christ, he built a case as much as he could on the basis of beliefs that he and his audience held in common.

This is the second lesson in our series *The Book of Hebrews* and we've entitled it "Content and Structure." In this lesson, we'll see how the author of Hebrews followed this persuasive strategy as he exhorted his audience to renew their commitment to Christ. Our lesson on the content and structure of Hebrews will be divided into two parts. First, we'll see the recurring content that appears in every major division of the book. Second, we'll explore Hebrews' rhetorical structure, how the author wove these recurring elements into persuasive presentations. Let's look first at the recurring content of Hebrews.

#### RECURRING CONTENT

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In our preceding lesson, we summarized the overarching purpose of the book of Hebrews in this way:

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

At this point in our lesson, we want to see how the author accomplished his purpose by using similar elements over and over.

A closer look at the recurring content of Hebrews reveals that the author fulfilled his overarching purpose by repeating three main elements. First, he called attention to the fact that history had reached its last days in Jesus. Second, he presented Old Testament support for this belief. And third, he offered his audience a number of exhortations to persevere in their Christian faith. Let's begin with the author's belief that the last days had come in Jesus.

## LAST DAYS IN JESUS

For the most part, when followers of Christ hear the expression “last days,” their minds go directly to events surrounding Christ’s return in glory. Many of us spend a lot of time and effort trying to understand events like the great tribulation, the rapture, and the millennium. But when we speak of the “last days” in the book of Hebrews, we have in mind something that is much broader than events closely related to the second advent of Christ.

Christian theologians often refer to the Bible’s teaching on the last days as “eschatology.” This technical term derives from the Greek word *eschatos* (ἔσχατος) which means “last” or “final.” Interestingly, this New Testament terminology appears in the Old Testament as early as the mention of “the latter days” in Deuteronomy 4:30. There, Moses warned that Israel would go into exile if they rebelled against God. But he assured them that “in the latter days,” if they repented, they would return from exile to incomparable blessings from God. And Old Testament prophets also spoke of events associated with Israel’s return from exile as happening “in the last days.”

It isn’t difficult to see from Hebrews 1:1-2 that the author of Hebrews had eschatology on his mind as he wrote his book. Listen to the very first thing he wrote:

**In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son (Hebrews 1:1-2).**

Notice how these opening verses refer to what God had done in Christ as happening “in these last” — or eschatological — “days.” What did the author of Hebrews mean by this? Why was eschatology so important to him?

**Right out of the gate, in the first verse of the book of Hebrews, he wants them to know that Jesus is the fulfillment of all the words of prophecy that came before him. He says, “Long ago at many times and in various ways God spoke to our fathers through the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us through his Son” — “or by his Son,” and that means Jesus is the fulfillment of everything that came before him. He is the coming of the Lord, the coming of the Day of the Lord, the entrance of the kingdom, the final word in human history that God wants to say; that’s found in Jesus.**

— Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

To understand eschatology in Hebrews, we have to wind our way through some twists and turns of Israel’s history near the end of the Old Testament and into the time between the Old and New Testaments. During the monarchical period, Israel fell deeper and deeper into rebellion against God. God eventually sent the Assyrian army to drive the majority of Northern Israelites into exile. Later on, God sent the Babylonian armies to do the same to Judah. Now, around 538 B.C. a remnant of Israel and Judah returned to the

Promised Land with the hope that God would pour out the judgments and blessings of the last days. But large-scale repentance never took place. And as a result, Israel was doomed to suffer for five centuries under the tyranny of the Medes and Persians, the Greeks, and finally under the Roman Empire.

During the time between the Old and New Testaments, most Jewish communities steadfastly held to the hope that God's final judgments and blessings of the last days would come. This hope was so important to them that they divided all of history into two great ages. They spoke of the time in which they lived as "this age," the age of sin that resulted in Israel's failure and exile. And they also spoke of "the age to come," the time when God would pour out his final judgments on his enemies and his final, glorious blessings on his faithful people. And based on Old Testament prophecies, they knew that God would send the great son of David, the Messiah, to bring about the transition from this age to the age to come.

By focusing on eschatology, the author of Hebrews built on a belief he held in common with his audience and with the broader Jewish community. But at the same time, he pointed out time and again where those who believed in Jesus and those who did not parted ways. Unbelieving Jews held that the Messiah would bring a dramatic, catastrophic transition between this age and the age to come. But followers of Christ learned that Jesus was bringing the last days in three stages: the inauguration of his messianic kingdom in his first coming, the continuation of his messianic kingdom throughout church history, and the consummation of his messianic kingdom when he returned in glory. New Testament authors described all three of these stages as "the last days" in passages like Acts 2:17 and 2 Peter 3:3.

We can get a sense of the importance of this theme when we note that the author of Hebrews used familiar language for "the last days" on no less than six occasions. In Hebrews 2:5, he wrote of "the world to come" when Christ would return in glory. In 6:5, he referred to "the powers of the coming age" that many in his audience had experienced. In 9:11, he wrote of Christ as the priest of "the good things that are already here." In 9:26, he referred to the time of Jesus' earthly ministry as "the end of the ages." In 10:1, he spoke of the blessings resulting from Christ's sacrifice as "the good things that are coming." And in 13:14, he described the final hope of Christ's followers as "the city that is to come." The frequency of these well-known ways of referring to the last days gives us a glimpse into how significant this theme was to the author's purpose.

Now that we've seen how the recurring content in Hebrews includes a focus on the last days in Jesus, we should turn to a second repeated element in the book: the author's Old Testament support for his theological views.

## OLD TESTAMENT SUPPORT

By most calculations, the book of Hebrews quotes, refers to, or alludes to the Old Testament nearly 100 times. These interactions with the Old Testament Scriptures were so crucial to the author's purpose that they appear in every major division of his book. And of course, it isn't difficult to understand why. To challenge the teachings of the local

Jewish community, the author of Hebrews appealed to a common document they all held sacred: the Old Testament.

## **Factual Backgrounds**

For the purposes of this lesson it's helpful to see five main ways that the author of Hebrews repeatedly treated quotations from the Old Testament. In the first place, he drew attention to factual backgrounds from the Old Testament.

Simply put, the author recalled some historical detail from the Hebrew Scriptures and quoted a few words. He then incorporated the facts into his presentation of the Christian faith. For instance, in Hebrews 7:2 he explained that the name "Melchizedek, king of Salem," from Genesis 14:18, means "king of righteousness" and "king of peace." This factual background then enhanced his comparison between Jesus and Melchizedek.

As another example, in Hebrews 12:20 and 21, the author noted Israel's fear at Mount Sinai reported in Exodus 19:12,13 and Deuteronomy 9:19. He then contrasted Israel's fear with the joy of the heavenly Jerusalem for Christ's followers.

## **Theological Outlooks**

In the second place, the author also noted abiding theological outlooks established in the Old Testament that were still true in his own day.

In these cases, rather than noting simple historical facts, the author focused on theological beliefs affirmed by the Hebrew Scriptures — beliefs about God himself and other matters in close relation to God.

For instance, in Hebrews 1:5, the author referenced 2 Samuel 7:14 — or its parallel in 1 Chronicles 17:13. Here, God declared that every king in David's dynasty would be called God's "son" from David's time forward.

In Hebrews 1:7, the author quoted Psalm 104:4 where angels were described as serving spirits.

In Hebrews 2:6-8, he cited Psalm 8:4-6. He argued that God had ordained human beings to be lower than angels only until the end when mankind, not angels, will rule with Christ over all of creation.

Hebrews 2:13 refers to Isaiah 8:17,18. These verses demonstrate that the blessings of God's vindication will be shared among members of Abraham's human family, and not among angels.

In Hebrews 6:13,14, the author cited God's oath to Abraham from Genesis 22:17. Here God established that his promise to Abraham was permanent, extending even to New Testament times.

In Hebrews 12:29, the author quoted Deuteronomy 4:24 describing God as a consuming fire. He did this to strengthen his teaching that God is still a consuming fire in Christ.

Similar examples appear in Hebrews 4:4-7, 8:5, 9:20, 10:30-31, 10:38, and 13:5. In all of these passages, the author of Hebrews insisted that certain theological outlooks established in the Old Testament continued to be true in New Testament times.

**For all that the writer to the Hebrews insists that Jesus is superior to the Old Testament, yet at no point does the writer to the Hebrews downplay the Old Testament or insist that it is passé or might easily be skipped over; we don't need to read it anymore; we have Jesus. There's not a hint of that anywhere. Everywhere the writer to the Hebrews treats the Old Testament with immaculate respect; he understands that it is the word of God. And more importantly yet, it's the Old Testament that establishes all the categories that make sense of who Jesus is. Jesus is a high priest. What's a high priest? That's established in the Old Testament. He offers a certain sacrifice. What does blood mean? What does the most holy place of the tabernacle mean? Yes, now in Hebrews it's the heavenly tabernacle, but that's already been established as a category by the earthly tabernacle and then the Solomonic temple. So many of the categories, even at the level of personal behavior, are established by the Old Testament hallmark of faith, for example, in Hebrews 11, or the bad example of those who fell away in the desert at the end of Hebrews 3. All of that is drawn from the Old Testament.**

— Dr. D. A. Carson

## **Moral Obligations**

In the third place, the author of Hebrews also noted abiding moral obligations. In these cases, the author pointed out that God had placed certain moral requirements on his people in Old Testament times. And these obligations were to remain as standards for God's people in New Testament times.

For example, in Hebrews 3:7-15, he indicated that Psalm 95:7-11 taught Israel not to rebel against God.

Hebrews 12:5,6 showed that Proverbs 3:11,12 urged Israel not to be discouraged when God disciplined them.

Hebrews 12:13 instructed his audience to follow Proverbs 4:26 and adhere to the path of righteousness.

And in Hebrews 13:6, by quoting Psalm 118:6-7, the author urged his audience to confess confidence in God.

All of these references pointed out that Old Testament moral obligations continued to be in force for followers of Christ.



## Eschatological Predictions

In the fourth place, the author quoted a number of eschatological predictions from the Old Testament.

In many passages, Old Testament authors made predictions about the “last days.” They wrote about what God would do when Israel’s exile came to an end and God’s victorious kingdom spread throughout the world. The author of Hebrews used several Old Testament eschatological predictions to show that God’s final judgments and blessings are fulfilled in Christ.

For instance, Hebrews 1:6 noted Deuteronomy 32:43 as it was translated in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament. This verse says that angels will bow in humble worship when God has his final victory over all his enemies.

In a similar way, in Hebrews 1:10-12, the author quoted Psalm 102:25-27. This passage predicts that the current arrangement of creation, in which angels are greatly honored, will be destroyed at the end of history.

Hebrews 1:13 quotes Psalm 110:1 to show that David’s prediction of universal sovereignty for his great Son exalts the Messiah over angels.

In Hebrews 5:6 and 7:17, the author referred to Psalm 110:4. He emphasized the prediction that David’s great Son will not seize his royal priesthood for himself but will receive it from God.

In Hebrews 8:8-12, the author referred to Jeremiah 31:31-34. These verses predicted that, after Israel’s exile, the new covenant would overcome the problem of human failure in God’s covenant with Moses.

Hebrews 10:16,17 refer again to Jeremiah 31 to show how the new covenant in Christ eliminates the need for further sacrifices.

The author of Hebrews appealed to similar predictions about the last days, or the eschatological age, in Hebrews 7:21, 10:37, and 12:26.

## Dynastic Ideals

In the fifth place, the author referred to a number of dynastic ideals that were established for David’s lineage in the Psalms.

These passages express standards of faithfulness and service to God for everyone in David’s dynasty. But, at best, David’s Old Testament descendants only reached these standards imperfectly. The author of Hebrews insisted that Jesus is the supreme, perfect fulfillment of the ideals for David’s royal house.

For example, in Hebrews 1:5, the author quoted Psalm 2:7 and 2 Samuel 7:14. These verses indicate that God adopted a descendant of David as his royal son to rule over vassal nations.

Hebrews 1:8,9 quotes Psalm 45:6,7. This royal wedding Psalm extols God’s reign over all by honoring a king in David’s dynasty who loves righteousness and hates wickedness.

In Hebrews 2:11-12, the author referred to Psalm 22:22. In this verse, David pledged to share the joy of his vindication in the assembly of other Israelites. The author



used this verse to show that Jesus perfectly fulfills this dynastic ideal by sharing his vindication with the children of Abraham.

In Hebrews 10:5-7, the author referred to Psalm 40:6-8. In these verses, David pledged to devote his whole body to God in the place of animal sacrifices. The author applied this to Jesus whose bodily sacrifice on the cross was the supreme, eschatological fulfillment of this ideal.

So far we've looked at the recurring content in Hebrews involving the last days in Jesus and the Old Testament support for the author's theological views. Now we're in a position to look briefly at a third repeated element: the author's exhortations to persevere.

## EXHORTATIONS TO PERSEVERE

**The author of the letter to the Hebrews motivates his hearers to persevere in the faith in a number of ways. There are lots of quotations from the Old Testament, all of which are anticipating that God has continued to work out his purposes, and primarily in these last days, through the sending of his Son. The examples of those who faithfully have endured persecution, particularly in Hebrews 11, are given as a great model of perseverance. And particularly, of course, Christ himself, “who for the [glory] that was set before him endured the cross,” despising its shame, in order that he may anticipate heaven — that's given as a model for Christians to follow today too.**

— Dr. Simon Vibert

In our previous lesson, we mentioned that, in Hebrews 13:22, the author of Hebrews described his entire book as “my word of exhortation.” And depending on how you count them, Hebrews includes around 30 explicit exhortations. As we'll see, each exhortation touched on a specific matter, but they were all designed to call the original audience to persevere in their loyalty to Christ.

At this point in our lesson, we want to look at two crucial features of the author's exhortations to persevere. First, we'll make a few comments on the responses the author hoped to elicit from his audience. And second, we'll note how he provided motivations for his audience to persevere. Let's look first at the range of responses the author wanted to evoke.

## Responses

One of the remarkable features of the book of Hebrews is the breadth of responses the author encouraged from his audience. Now, when we deal with an ancient language like New Testament Greek, it's often impossible to identify nuances of meaning for particular expressions. So, we'll limit ourselves to just a few relatively clear examples. In general, the author's exhortations encouraged his audience to apply his book emotionally,

conceptually, and behaviorally. For the original audience to persevere, it was crucial that they pay attention to this entire range of responses.

First, the author of Hebrews often exhorted his audience in the emotional dimensions of their faith. In Hebrews 3:8,15 he said, “do not harden your hearts.” In verse 13 of the same chapter we read, “encourage one another daily ... so that none of you may be hardened.” Along these same lines, in 4:1 he said, “let us be careful” or more literally — and better in this context — “let us fear not entering God’s rest.” He encouraged his audience in 4:16 to “have confidence,” or boldness, as they approached God’s throne of grace for help. He called on them in 10:22 to “draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith.” And in 10:35 he exhorted them, “do not throw away your confidence” or courage.

As important as these emotional emphases were to the author of Hebrews, he also exhorted his audience to apply his text on a conceptual level. He wanted his inspired words to influence their theological doctrines and beliefs. For instance, in Hebrews 2:1 he called for his audience to “pay more careful attention” to what they had heard. In 3:1 the author urged them to “fix [their] thoughts on Jesus.” And he encouraged them in 6:1 to “leave the elementary teachings about Christ” and grow in their knowledge and understanding.

Interestingly, the author of Hebrews didn’t stress specific behavioral elements early on. To be sure, his exhortations usually had behavioral implications, but most of his explicit behavioral exhortations appear toward the end of his book. In Hebrews 12:16 he exhorted his audience to “see that no one is sexually immoral.” And in 13:1-19 he addressed areas like hospitality, marriage, professing Christ’s name, and doing good.

This range of exhortations illustrates a variety of ways that the author of Hebrews wanted his audience to respond to his book. Clearly, they needed to be aware of their emotions, concepts, and behaviors if they were to persevere in faithful service to Christ.

We’ve seen that the author of Hebrews’ exhortations to persevere evoked a range of responses. Now let’s note how the author presented both positive and negative motivations to encourage perseverance.

## Motivations

On the one side, the author closely associated many of his exhortations with positive motivations. For instance, in Hebrews 4:13-16 he referred to receiving grace and help from Christ. And in 13:16 he sought to motivate his audience with the knowledge that certain actions please God. Time and again the author of Hebrews held out eternal rewards as motivation for faithful living. In Hebrews 10:35, for instance, he said:

**Do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded  
(Hebrews 10:35).**

On the other side, however, the author of Hebrews often used negative motivations to exhort his audience. These exhortations were primarily threats and warnings of divine judgment. For example, in Hebrews 2:2-3, he noted that those who

disobeyed angels were punished. So, how could anyone who ignored the word of salvation in Christ expect to escape God's judgment? In 6:4-8 he cautioned that everyone who has fallen away "is in danger of being cursed." In 10:26-31 he warned of "a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God."

**One of the great themes of the book of Hebrews is the need to persevere. You cannot read the book of Hebrews with its warnings and its exhortation and not come away with the author saying to them, as he really preaches to them, that they need to persevere; they need to keep going; they need to not turn back, but they need to press on in the Christian life. Now, how does he do that? Well, I think what he does is beautifully balances both encouragements and warnings, and these are sort of the two sides of the same coin. Over and over again, in terms of encouragement, the book of Hebrews is famous for its contrasts between Christ and Old Testament figures, people, covenants. He is greater than Moses; he brings a greater rest; he is a greater priest; he has a better sacrifice ... The flip side, though, is also the warnings. The warnings function in the book of Hebrews to alert the Christian audience and the readers to say, "If I don't persevere, if I take my eyes off Christ, if I do not continue to walk with him and look to him, given who he is in all of his splendor and glory — that he is the Lord of Glory, the Great High Priest who has come — given all of that, then outside of him there is no salvation ... So, both of them together gives the positive incentive, as well as sort of the, sort of negative reinforcement to keep us running the race, to keep our eyes looking unto Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.**

**— Dr. Stephen J. Wellum**

The threats of judgment against the audience of Hebrews often trouble interpreters because they sound as if true believers can lose their salvation. For this reason, these portions of Hebrews have often been battlegrounds between Christians who hold one view or the other on this issue. Although time won't allow us to discuss this theological matter in much depth here, it will still help to comment on two important aspects of this issue.

First, we must keep in mind that the book of Hebrews is not a technical systematic theology. By this we mean that, often, the Scriptures use terminology, even terminology about salvation, with more variety than Christian theologians and theological traditions. In fact, every branch of the church tends to use certain theological terms more narrowly than the various ways they're used in Scripture. This practice is almost unavoidable if we hope to have theological systems that aren't confusing. Yet, this approach is also dangerous because it's easy to read our own narrow definitions of terms and expressions into a book like Hebrews. This danger is especially evident when it comes to understanding the way the author of Hebrews described those who become apostate, or those who fall away from Christ.

On the one side, it's helpful to note that the author of Hebrews never described apostates as having been "justified." In the New Testament, this term is consistently reserved for true believers. But on the other side, the author of Hebrews did use some terminology that Evangelicals often reserve only for true believers, even if the New Testament doesn't. For instance, in Hebrews 6:4-6, the author warned:

**Those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age... [can] fall away (Hebrews 6:4-6).**

The difficulty here is that many of us use these and similar expressions in our technical theological vocabulary to describe only true believers. Other examples include Hebrews 10:29 where apostates are described as having been "sanctified" by the blood of the covenant. Or 10:32 that says they "had received the light."

In reality, similar descriptions are used in the New Testament for those who participate in what theologians often call the "visible church." This is distinctly different from the "invisible church," or the body of true believers. People of the visible church are those who are part of the church outwardly but not necessarily inwardly. This distinction within the church is similar to the way Romans 2:28,29 distinguishes between those who were Jews only "outwardly" — *phaneros* (φανερός) in Greek — with outward, physical circumcision, and those who were Jews "inwardly" — *kruptos* (κρυπτός) in Greek — and circumcised in the heart.

Second, we should always remember that the threat of divine judgment for apostasy is not unique to Hebrews. For example, we find similar warnings in passages like 1 Corinthians 10:1-13 and 2 Peter 2:21,22. On the whole, the New Testament teaches that those who have saving faith in Christ will endure to the end. But those who utterly reject Christ demonstrate that their faith was not saving faith. Rather, their faith was only what theologians often call "temporary" or "hypocritical faith." As 1 John 2:19 explains about apostates:

**If they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us (1 John 2:19).**

Anytime anyone turns away from the Christian faith, they show that they did not actually belong to the invisible church.

**There are five warning passages in Hebrews ... Most of us argue and concluded that these five really have one point, and so we can address the warnings, plural, as really having one chief purpose. And pastorally, their purpose is quite simple. He wants everyone in his congregation to persevere and to follow after Christ. Now, there's a couple of points, really, that should be made. These are real warnings. They're not hypothetical. They're not made just as a scare tactic ... But a point that needs to be made is, he's addressing them as a pastor would address a congregation on Sunday morning. But he's not**

**omniscient. He doesn't know the eternal state of everyone in his congregation's soul. He knows that they are professing Christ, but really, in New Testament theology, time will tell. I mean, we see the example in 1 John 2:19, in fact, of those who left the faith, who left the community of faith and, by going out, demonstrating that they never were really one of us; John writes to the church of Asia Minor. And so, we see here in Hebrews that he's addressing those who profess Christ, but really, only time will tell if they know him.**

**— Dr. Barry Joslin**

In our lesson on the content and structure of Hebrews, we've seen three elements of the recurring content in the book. Now, let's turn to the second main topic of our lesson: the rhetorical structure of the book of Hebrews.

## **RHETORICAL STRUCTURE**

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As we saw in our previous lesson, the original audience of the book of Hebrews was facing persecution. The temptation to embrace the false teachings of the local Jewish community was widespread. And the author of Hebrews wrote to persuade his readers not to give up and not to be led away from Christ by these teachings. So, just how did the author of Hebrews weave the content of his book together to fulfill his purpose? What did this rhetorical structure look like?

We could view the rhetorical structure of Hebrews on many levels, but for our purposes, we'll look at five major divisions of the book. These divisions help us gain a sense of how the author attempted to persuade his audience to remain faithful to Christ:

- The first major division focuses on beliefs about angelic revelations in 1:1–2:18.
- The second major division discusses Moses' authority in 3:1–4:13.
- The third major division addresses Melchizedek's royal priesthood in 4:14–7:28.
- The fourth major division concentrates on the new covenant in 8:1–11:40.
- The fifth major division deals with practical perseverance in 12:1–13:25.

### **ANGELIC REVELATIONS (1:1–2:18)**

The author of Hebrews used each of these major sections to persuade his audience that they must remain faithful to Christ, even in the midst of suffering. Let's look first at how the book of Hebrews dealt with angelic revelations in 1:1–2:18.

As we mentioned in our preceding lesson, a number of Jewish writings from Qumran, as well as books like Ephesians and Colossians, indicate that Jewish communities in the first century often exalted angels as powerful, glorious creatures who brought divine revelations to inferior human beings.

The outlooks of the local Jewish community were rooted in biblical passages, but they gave excessive honor to angels. This exaggerated honor for angels raised a serious challenge to those who followed Christ. After all, everyone knew that Jesus was flesh and blood, a human being. How then could anyone follow what he said instead of the revelations of angels?

The author of Hebrews responded to this challenge in five steps. First, in Hebrews 1:1-4 he wrote that his audience should follow Jesus because Jesus is God's supreme source of divine revelation. The author acknowledged that God spoke through angels and other means throughout Old Testament history. But he insisted that, as the divinely appointed royal high priest of the last days, Jesus brought revelation that was far superior to any revelation given through angels.

In 1:5-14, the author of Hebrews explained that Jesus is greater than angels because he alone is God's messianic Son. He noted that Jesus fulfilled the ideals for David's house. And Jesus also fulfilled David's prediction of the victory of God's messianic Son over all of God's enemies. By contrast, he noted that angels are nothing more than spirits sent to serve those who inherit salvation in Christ.

In 2:1-4, the author exhorted his audience to pay careful attention to the great message of salvation first announced by Jesus. He reminded them that violating messages from angels in the past received just punishment from God. So, his readers should not think that it was possible to escape the judgment of God if they ignored the great salvation revealed by Christ, the one who is our salvation.

Hebrews 2:5-9 supports belief in the supremacy of Christ by explaining that Jesus is now ruler over the angels. And in the future all believers will reign over them with him. The author noted that God temporarily set humanity a little lower than the angels, but destined human beings to rule over all creation in the world to come. This final glory given to human beings is anticipated in Christ's current reign in heaven as God's royal high priest.

And finally, in Hebrews 2:10-18, the author demonstrated that Jesus is Abraham's descendant. And Jesus will share his glory with Abraham's descendants, not with angels. The author quoted David and Isaiah in this section to show Jesus' connection to Abraham's family tree. He also explained that Jesus, in his humanity, broke the power of the great fallen angel, the Devil. This was not to free angels, but to free Abraham's descendants from the fear of death. Christ's humanity made him a merciful and faithful high priest who atoned for the sins of his people.

### **MOSES' AUTHORITY (3:1–4:13)**

Having seen how the author of Hebrews dealt with Jewish teachings about angelic revelations, we should turn to the second major division of his book. In Hebrews 3:1–4:13, he responded to challenges about Moses' authority. No human being was as greatly honored in Israel as Moses.

Because of the honor given to Moses, we really shouldn't be surprised by these local Jewish teachings. They challenged the audience of Hebrews to obey all that God had revealed through Moses, but without regard to Christ. As we'll see in this division,

the author of Hebrews honored Moses as well. But even though Moses was God's faithful servant, Jesus was even greater because he was God's royal high priest of the last days.

This portion of the book divides into three main sections, each of which has at least one exhortation to hold Jesus' authority above the authority of Moses. The first section, in Hebrews 3:1-6, explicitly calls Hebrews' audience to honor Jesus above Moses. This section points out that Moses built God's house, the tabernacle. But as God's royal Son, Jesus rules over God's house, the church.

Listen to Hebrews 3:1-3 where the author exhorted his audience saying:

**Fix your thoughts on Jesus ... [who] has been found worthy of greater honor than Moses (Hebrews 3:1-3).**

The author insisted that Jesus was faithful to God, like Moses, but Jesus was "worthy of greater honor."

Following these verses, in 3:7-19, the author warned his audience to avoid hardness of heart and rebellion like the Israelites who rebelled against Moses. The author supported this exhortation by pointing out that most of those who followed Moses didn't enter the Promised Land because they rebelled against God. In much the same way, those who follow Christ will share in Christ only if they hold their original conviction firmly to the end. Unbelief kept Israelites out of the Promised Land; unbelief will do the same in Christ.

In Hebrews 4:1-13, the author elaborated on his comparison between following Christ and following Moses. He exhorted his audience to make every effort to enter God's rest. Using the Old Testament, he explained that entering God's rest was still in the future. So they should take to heart how God's word lays everything bare before him. It's God to whom they must give an account. And they should strive to enter his rest and not imitate Israel in the wilderness.

### **MELCHIZEDEK'S PRIESTHOOD (4:14–7:28)**

After dealing with angelic revelations and Moses' authority, the author of Hebrews challenged the local Jewish teachings about Melchizedek's royal priesthood in Hebrews 4:14–7:28.

In our preceding lesson, we mentioned a text called *11QMelchizedek* or *The Midrash on Melchizedek* discovered at Qumran. This text depicted Melchizedek as a heavenly figure who would appear in the last days to offer final atoning sacrifices and to usher in the kingdom of God. Apparently, some of the people in the original audience were confused by this kind of teaching. Why should they follow Jesus as God's royal high priest in the last days instead of expecting Melchizedek? So, the author of Hebrews demonstrated that Jesus was the true royal priest after the order of Melchizedek.

This division unfolds in four sections. The first and third sections exhort the audience to hold Christ above Melchizedek, and the second and fourth sections demonstrate the reasons why.

In Hebrews 4:14-16, the author introduced the subject of Melchizedek with an exhortation for his audience to hold firmly to the faith they professed. He encouraged them by stressing that Jesus is a fully human, sinless, great high priest who ascended into heaven and makes it possible for believers to receive mercy and grace to help them in their times of need.

In 5:1-10, the author of Hebrews explained how Jesus was qualified as God's royal high priest in the order of Melchizedek. Jesus met the qualifications for priesthood through his obedience and suffering. But he didn't promote himself to this position. By quoting Psalm 2:7 and Psalm 110:4, the author demonstrated that the hopes Israel placed in Melchizedek would actually be fulfilled by David's dynasty. So God himself designated Jesus to be the royal high priest in the order of Melchizedek. As such, Jesus became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.

Hebrews 5:11-6:12 is a lengthy exhortation to Hebrews' audience to move beyond elementary teachings to maturity. The author admitted that his audience was unable to grasp his discussion about Christ and Melchizedek. But he encouraged them to mature in their understanding so that they wouldn't fall into apostasy. He warned that if they turned from faith in the one true royal high priest, no sacrifice for sin would remain. The author had high hopes for his audience, but they had to turn from their laziness and imitate those who had faith and endurance to inherit what God had promised.

In Hebrews 6:13-7:28, the author continued his discussion of Jesus as the fulfillment of the royal priesthood of Melchizedek. Specifically, he explained that Jesus' royal priesthood superseded, or surpassed, the Levitical priesthood. When Hebrews was written, services continued at the temple in Jerusalem. This fact raised a serious challenge to the Christian claim that Jesus' death had ended the need for Levitical sacrifices at the temple. To answer this challenge, the author built on local Jewish beliefs that Melchizedek would end all sacrifices in the last days. But he concluded from God's sworn oath in Psalm 110:4 that Jesus, the great son of David, was the eternal royal priest after the order of Melchizedek. Therefore, Jesus had ended the Levitical sacrificial system.

To show Jesus' superiority to the Levitical priesthood, the author also noted that, in Genesis 14:20, Abraham paid a tithe showing that Melchizedek was his superior. Therefore, Levi, Abraham's descendant, did the same symbolically through Abraham. So, it was proper for Christ, as the royal high priest in the order of Melchizedek, to supersede the Levitical priesthood. Levitical sacrifices could never bring full atonement, but as the fulfillment of Melchizedek's royal priesthood, Christ had made atonement once and for all.

**For preachers and teachers, one of the favorite parts of Hebrews is the comparison of Jesus with Melchizedek, who is an almost unknown priest of the Old Testament. Before this comparison, the author makes a comparison with the Aaronic priesthood of the Levites. The Aaronic priesthood was hereditary; it was passed from father to son, and from the tribe of Levi. The priesthood of Jesus was not. He was not heir to the Levites because he came from the tribe of David, from Judah. Because Aaronic priests would perish, the priesthood of Aaron passed from father to son. In contrast to this, the priesthood of Jesus**



is eternal. His priesthood is forever; he is still the same priest ... Melchizedek has no human right to be a priest, but he enters history as a priest, chosen by God, and then disappears. Jesus does the same, and ascends to heaven at the end of his earthly ministry after his resurrection.

— Dr. Alvin Padilla, translation

There are two priesthoods mentioned in the letter of Hebrews. The one is the traditional priesthood that initiated from Aaron and was carried on by the tribe of Levi, the Levitical priesthood. And then there was the very unusual priesthood of Melchizedek who shows up early in the patriarchal history and was a priest of the Lord, a high priest of the Lord, in the time of Abraham. And Jesus is compared to both of those, in one sense to show the superiority to the Levitical priesthood, and in another sense to show the similarity of the uniqueness of Melchizedek as high priest ... His priesthood was an eternal appointment. And what we know about Melchizedek is that he had no parents; he comes onto the scene without any kind of genealogy behind him; he is more important than Abraham because Abraham paid tribute to him, he paid his tithe to him, and the lesser pays the tithe to the greater ... But that pattern of the high priest, who is superior in every regard and takes tribute from the very people who were the patriarchs that formed Judaism and Israel's history, and under whom eventually the Levitical priesthood took place, that image of Melchizedek endures. And Christ's priesthood, that new priesthood, is enacted on the model of Melchizedek.

— Dr. Edward M. Keazirian

### **NEW COVENANT (8:1–11:40)**

The fourth major division, in Hebrews 8:1–11:40, focuses on the new covenant. Here, the author of Hebrews further explained the supremacy of Christ as God's ordained royal high priest by discussing how the new covenant is superior to the old.

The terminology "new covenant" derives from Jeremiah 31:31. In this verse, the prophet predicted that God would grant a covenant of final renewal to Israel and Judah after Israel's exile in the last days. This same eschatological covenant was called a "covenant of peace" in Isaiah 54:10 and Ezekiel chapters 34 and 37. So, at this point, the author of Hebrews transitioned from his discussion of Melchizedek in the last days to a discussion of the new covenant.

This division of Hebrews consists of eight main sections. First, Hebrews 8:1-13 introduces the idea that Jesus mediates the new covenant as the royal high priest in heaven.

In verses 1 and 2, the author stated explicitly what he called “the point of what [he was] saying.” He explained that Christ, the royal high priest, is in heaven serving in “the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by man.”

In other words, the Levitical priesthood fulfilled that role on earth. But their priesthood was based in the law. In the Old Testament, the covenant with Moses established the earthly Levitical priesthood, but it failed because of Israel’s sins.

By contrast, the new covenant of Jeremiah 31 cannot fail because, as Hebrews 8:6 tells us:

**It is founded on better promises (Hebrews 8:6).**

These “better promises” offer the complete transformation of God’s people and the final eternal forgiveness of their sins.

In Hebrews 9:1-28, the author elaborated on the fact that Jesus’ heavenly royal priesthood is superior to the Levitical priesthood. He began this section by mentioning the arrangement of Moses’ earthly tabernacle, revealing features that resembled God’s heavenly sanctuary. Additionally, he described priestly activities commanded in Leviticus 16:34 regarding the annual Day of Atonement. This demonstrated that the sacrifices of the earthly tabernacle could not fully resolve the problem of sin but had to be repeated every year. These sacrifices were ordained until history reached its culmination in the last days — what he called, in Hebrews 9:10, “the time of the new order.” Then, in Hebrews 9:11 he added:

**Christ came as high priest of the good things that are already here (Hebrews 9:11).**

This statement emphasized that those who have faith in Christ have been freed from sin through his perfect priestly atonement and now have open access to the throne of grace in heaven.

**One of the contrasts that the author of the letter to the Hebrews makes about Jesus’ sacrifice for sin and sacrificial system in the Old Testament is that in the sacrificial system of the Old Testament the priest’s work was never fully done. The priest had to keep offering again and again sacrifices for sin. And the point that the author makes is, that work does not fully complete what is needed to deal with sin, but Jesus’ work fully completes it. In fact, Jesus is the Great High Priest who, once he has sacrificed himself for sin, sits down at God’s right hand, whereas the priests of old remained standing on their feet because there was work to be done yet. But Jesus sits down, and the author to the Hebrews interprets that as saying his work is complete, sin is fully dealt with, it’s done.**

**— Dr. Constantine Campbell**

The author also explained why Jesus' sacrifice was necessary. He used the example of a will. Ordinary wills are initiated by someone's death. Moses' covenant was initiated with death and blood. So, the author reasoned that the new covenant also had to be initiated with death and blood — with Christ's blood in the inner sanctuary of God's heavenly palace. But in this case, the inheritance of the "will" is forgiveness. Therefore, no forgiveness could be given until the people were cleansed by the blood of Jesus' sacrifice. In Hebrews 9:26 the author put it this way:

**Now he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself (Hebrews 9:26).**

Jesus did away with sin once for all because his blood is not sprinkled in a man-made sanctuary. He entered heaven by the sacrifice of himself. Just as God promised in Jeremiah 31:34:

**I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more (Jeremiah 31:34).**

Jesus died as a ransom to set his people free from judgment. The author ends this portion by stating that Christ will return, but not to bear sin again. When he returns, Jesus will bring the fullness of salvation to those who wait for him.

Hebrews 10:1-18 continues to compare and contrast the covenant of Moses with the new covenant. This time the author asserted that, in the new covenant, Jesus' high priesthood brought final forgiveness of sin. He repeated that the sacrifices of the Day of Atonement were an annual reminder of sins, but could not take away sins. And he acknowledged that animal sacrifices could never please God. He quoted David in Psalm 40 where David offered himself to God as an ideal. And he explained that Jesus fulfilled this ideal by his sacrifice on the cross. While Levitical sacrifices could not bring final forgiveness of sin, Jeremiah's prediction of a new covenant promised that God would forgive the sins of his people forever. Jesus accomplished that. So there is no longer any need for animal sacrifices.

Hebrews 10:19-23 is the first of four sections of exhortations. First, the author called his audience to draw near to God and hold onto their hope. He explained that Christ, through his blood, had opened the way into the Most Holy Place. Now, as verse 23 tells us, they could "hold unswervingly to the hope [they] profess[ed]" because God is faithful.

In 10:24-31, the author also exhorted his audience to encourage one another "toward love and good deeds." He mentioned that they must meet together, and all the more as they saw the day of judgment approaching. He then explained the severity of judgment that awaits those who "trample the Son of God underfoot," who treat the blood of the covenant as unholy, and who insult the Spirit of grace. As he noted, God will judge his own people.

In Hebrews 10:32-35, the author called his audience to remember the past and not throw away their confidence. He reminded them that they had willingly and joyfully suffered in the past because they knew they had better and lasting possessions in the world to come. If they continued in this way, they would be greatly rewarded.

And Hebrews 10:36-39 exhorted the audience to persevere in doing God's will. He supported this exhortation by reminding them that God is coming to bring final judgments and blessings. He warned them that God does not take pleasure in those who withdraw from living by faith. But in Hebrews 10:39 he added:

**We are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved (Hebrews 10:39).**

**Well, it's obvious that these Jewish believers are tired, they're weary, they're persecuted — so much relevance for Christians all over the world and throughout the history of the church — but they were tired and they were wavering in their faith. And so, they had had their homes ransacked. There had been no persecution to the point of martyrdom yet, but it seemed like it might be on the horizon, and so there was a lot of challenge to their faith, a lot of reason for them to throw in the towel and go back to their old ways. And the author writes to them, encouraging them to stay true to the new covenant that they've come to believe in in Jesus.**

**— Dr. K. Erik Thoennes**

Following this series of exhortations, in 11:1-40, the author focused his letter on faith that saves. We've mentioned before that the audience of Hebrews had endured persecution in the past and faced the possibility of even more. So, the author encouraged them to have faith that does not retreat in times of trouble.

He then illustrated what he meant by giving a long list of figures in Old Testament history who remained faithful as they endured hardship. During their lifetimes, these faithful ones didn't receive what had been promised because God's promise was for a future time. But, as the author of Hebrews explained, they would share with the author and his audience in being made perfect when Christ returns.

### **PRACTICAL PERSEVERANCE (12:1–13:25)**

The last major division, in Hebrews 12:1–13:25, brings the book of Hebrews to a close by elaborating on the theme of practical perseverance. This division consists of a long series of exhortations and explanations. For our purposes, we'll simply summarize these exhortations.

As the author of Hebrews moved toward closing his book, he rapidly listed many different exhortations about specific areas of life. In many respects, this is the most practical portion of his book because it touches, especially, on the kinds of behaviors he hoped his audience would pursue. But the author also took the opportunity to inspire and energize his audience with a vision of the great privileges they enjoyed as followers of Christ.

These exhortations can be divided into five general categories followed by a closing. In Hebrews 12:1-3, the author exhorted his audience to persevere, as if in a race. They could do this by throwing off sin and focusing on Christ, who did the same.

Hebrews 12:4-13, exhorted the audience to endure hardship as fatherly discipline from God. The author supported this outlook by quoting Proverbs 3:11,12. He explained that God's discipline "produces a harvest of righteousness and peace." So, he encouraged them to strengthen themselves and not be disabled by suffering.

In Hebrews 12:14-17, the author again exhorted his audience to encourage each other. He urged them to live in peace and be holy. They were to insure that no one falls short or becomes sexually immoral. He illustrated how important this was by referring to the example of Esau who could not reverse giving up his inheritance rights.

In Hebrews 12:18-29, the author exhorted his audience to be thankful for their blessings in Christ. To lift his audience's spirits and to inspire them to perseverance, he described the immeasurable privileges and blessings they had received. Listen to Hebrews 12:22-24:

**You have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel (Hebrews 12:22-24).**

In Hebrews 12:22 and following, the writer of Hebrews says, "We have come to Zion." Now, you have to take that in relation to the previous chapter because what we call the faith "hall of fame" in chapter 11, all the Old Testament saints were told they died in faith without receiving the promise. But then, at the beginning of chapter 12, we're told that Christ has entered in, that Christ has finished the race; he has overcome. And so, what verse 22 and following is saying is that we have now come into a place that even the Old Testament saints did not enjoy in their earthly lives. And the writer of Hebrews goes on to say, "We have come to Mt. Zion, to the church of the firstborn, to the myriad of angels, to the general assembly which is in heaven," and what he's describing there is the throne of God, the presence of God in the heavenly realms. And one of the staggering implications of this is that everything that Mt. Zion and Jerusalem pointed to in the Old Testament has now come into reality for those who are in Christ so that we can rightly look at a psalm like Psalm 48, "Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised in the city of our God," and think about what that means as we gather together as the assembly of Christ on earth — that we stand at Mt. Zion in heaven, not the earthly replica, but the true heavenly Zion, the one that will be revealed in the new heavens and earth when the New Jerusalem

**descends, that we stand in the very presence of God himself in and through Christ who has overcome. And it has a remarkable difference in how we look upon the visible church in the world.**

**— Rev. Michael J. Glodo**

In Hebrews 13:1-19, the author briefly encouraged his audience to be faithful in daily life. He mentioned loving each other, remembering outsiders and prisoners, honoring marriage, being content, and remembering their leaders. He also reminded them to resist the strange teachings of their local Jewish community and to embrace the suffering of Christ in their own lives. He urged them to offer sacrifices of praise, to do good, and to share with each other. Then he closed this section by urging them to pray for him and his companions.

Finally, in Hebrews 13:20-25, the author closed his book. In verses 20 and 21, he offered a benediction, a prayer that God, who raised up Jesus, would work in them and receive glory. Then in verse 22, he called on his audience “to bear with [his word of exhortation,” or his sermon to them. And he ended the letter with several salutations.

## **CONCLUSION**

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In this lesson, we’ve looked at the content and structure of the book of Hebrews. We’ve noted the recurring content focusing on the last days in Christ, the Old Testament support for the author’s views, and his many exhortations to persevere. We’ve also examined the rhetorical structure of the book by noting how the author wove his recurring themes together to address challenges against the Christian faith that came from local Jewish teachings.

The book of Hebrews offers great treasures to followers of Christ. Its theological outlooks penetrate deeply into all that Christ has done for us. And it penetrates to the heart of what it means to follow Christ. The book of Hebrews calls us to turn to Scripture as our authority and to receive Christ as the fulfillment of all that God has promised. And it exhorts us to love and serve Christ with thankful hearts until that day when we receive the kingdom he is preparing for us, the only kingdom that will never be shaken.

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# The Book of Hebrews

LESSON  
TWO

## Content and Structure Faculty Forum



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# The Book of Hebrews

## Lesson Two: Content and Structure

### Faculty Forum

With

Dr. Constantine Campbell  
Dr. D.A. Carson  
Dr. Joel C. Hunter  
Dr. Mark A. Jennings  
Dr. Dennis E. Johnson  
Dr. Barry Joslin  
Dr. Carol Kaminski

Dr. Edward M. Keazirian  
Dr. Craig S. Keener  
Dr. Dan Lacich  
Dr. Fredrick Long  
Dr. Sean McDonough  
Dr. Jason Oakes  
Dr. Alvin Padilla

Rev. Ric Rodeheaver  
Dr. Mark L. Strauss  
Dr. David Talley  
Dr. K. Erik Thoennes  
Dr. Simon Vibert  
Dr. Peter Walker  
Dr. Stephen J. Wellum

### Question 1:

**In what ways did the author of Hebrews believe that history had reached the last days with the coming of Jesus Christ?**

#### **Dr. Barry Joslin**

The author of Hebrews believed that history had reached its apex, its last days, in the coming of Christ. Matter of fact, the first sentence of the book of Hebrews, the letter of Hebrews, better yet, the *sermon* to the Hebrews, starts out that way, doesn't it? That in, "Long ago, in many portions and in many different ways, God had spoken through the prophets and to the fathers, but now," and then here it is, "*in these last days* he has spoken in a Son," in *his* Son, the one who had inherited his own name, the divine name, and he rules and reigns at the right hand. And so, that's the first sentence of the book of Hebrews, really the first four verses, the prologue. And so, this familiar New Testament idea is that the last days had been inaugurated with the coming of Christ, the first advent of Christ and would be consummated at his return. And so, whereas the Old Testament looked towards that day of the Messiah, the age of the Messiah — we see that in something like Joel 2:28-32 — Hebrews says, that time is now here. These are the last days because God has now spoken the definitive and final word in his Son. What else does he need to say? What else does he need to do? The redemption that had been anticipated, the redemption that had been promised, has now found its fulfillment, or as Paul would say, it's "Yes and Amen" in Christ.

#### **Dr. D.A. Carson**

The epistle to the Hebrews begins with a contrast between earlier times and these last days. "In earlier times, God spoke to the fathers through the prophets in various ways and means, and so forth, but in these last days he has spoken to us" — the expression in the original is subtle — not just by his Son, as if the Son is one more prophet, but he has spoken unto us in the "Son revelation." The climax of all of this anterior revelation is the Lord Jesus himself. It's not that God spoke through the prophets, and now he speaks through Jesus as one more prophet, but Jesus himself is the Word.

That's not the vocabulary that Hebrews uses, but in this respect he's like John's gospel: "In the beginning was the Word" — God's self-expression — "and [this self-expression] was with God, and [this self-expression] was God." Well, in these last days, these climactic days, these consummating days, then God's final revelation has been disclosed, and this Son shows up as the exact radiance of his glory. That's almost saying, "the light of his light." How do you distinguish between radiance and glory? That's partly the point. He's the exact stamp of the very nature and being of God. And so the culminating revelation is in Jesus Christ, and that's what makes this the last days. So, what you have is the coming of the final revelation and there is no more revelation of that order to be given until all that has come because of him is fulfilled. So, that's why we live in the last time, the last hour, the last days, until the culmination comes when Jesus himself returns at the end of the age. ---

### **Dr. Fredrick Long**

The author of Hebrews mentions Jesus as one who is God's Son, and that God has spoken to us in his Son. This is a profound statement because it's contrasted, or set in comparison relationship to the many ways that God has spoken in the past. So, according to the author of Hebrews then, the fact that God has sent his Son means that he's spoken in a final way or in a more complete way, and here I think we need to understand that there is a progression of God's revelation to us and that there's a culmination point with the coming of Jesus in terms of God representing himself directly in his Son. And what this means is that there's going to be an end of a certain way of people relating to God, that is, through a cultic system with a temple. And there's a transformation that's taking place. And so, "last days" can be understood in the sense of a closing down of a certain system of relating to God, while God is also opening up a greater, larger, more expansive way that people can relate to God and experience his presence and his Word. And so, specifically, that Word has come in his Son. So God has spoken directly to us now in a Son, and we had better listen to what he has to say for us to continue in relationship with God and to experience the salvation he has to offer us.

### **Dr. Mark L. Strauss**

The argument of Hebrews is that Christ's life, death and resurrection is superior to the old covenant, and the author clearly argues that Jesus the arrival of Jesus inaugurates God's end time salvation. The very first line in the book says, "In the past God spoke through the prophets." The prophets pointed forward to the coming of the Messiah, to the coming of God's salvation. The next line says, "But in these latter days, in these last days, he has spoken to us through the Son." He clearly views the coming of Jesus as the consummation, as the climax of human history, as the arrival of God's salvation and the beginning of the end times. All the prophets, all the Old Testament sacrificial system, all the Old Testament covenants, the tabernacle, all of this was a model, a shadow pointing forward to God's ultimate fulfillment in Christ. With Christ, God's salvation has arrived. The shadow has become the reality. The end times have arrived.

## Question 2:

### How did the author of Hebrews affirm the continuing validity of the old covenant for his readers?

#### **Dr. Simon Vibert**

The author to the Hebrews affirms the continued validity of the old covenant in a number of ways. There are a lot of quotations from the Old Testament, all of which point forward, of course, beyond themselves, but in a sense to fulfill and to bring to complete fruition the promises that are made there. So, in particular in chapter 8, for example, the promise for the new covenant is given in a context in which there's an anticipation, a looking forward, that actually the things that had been hoped for are now fulfilled in the coming of Christ.

#### **Dr. Carol Kaminski**

The old covenant is important because, really, if you think of the Old Testament from about 1500 B.C. all the way through, the old covenant is the governing covenant. So, but, the writer to the Hebrews also speaks about the new covenant and, which is in contrast to the old, and you have the old, the first, and then the second. But if you think of the writer to the Hebrews, the older categories from the old covenant are used to actually explain about the new covenant and to explain who Jesus is. So, really, I think, first of all, I think you can't understand the new covenant unless you understand the old. Things like the sacrificial system, the tabernacle, the priesthood; all this is really made up of the old covenant. And so, the writer to the Hebrews is drawing a bridge from what people know, and really saying that the old covenant is a shadow; it's pointing forward to Jesus. So, I think it's valid in terms of it being the word of God and providing the context into which we're to understand who Jesus is as the fulfillment of all those old kind of sacrificial systems, priesthood and so on, and really seeing it climax in him. And so he appeals to the Old Testament and to the covenant as a way of showing who Jesus is.

#### **Dr. Dennis E. Johnson**

The author to the Hebrews affirmed the continuing validity of the old covenant for his new covenant readers in a number of different ways. It might surprise us, because he also emphasizes that the new covenant has come in to show that the old covenant is now obsolete, that the institutions of the old covenant are not nearly as superior as Jesus' sacrifice. And yet, he emphasized from the beginning that, for example, the same God who spoke the old covenant Scriptures has now spoken to us in his Son. He emphasizes, as he quotes from old covenant Scriptures, that God is speaking to us in the present as he addresses us, in the words of Psalm 95 or Psalm 110 or Psalm 40, that God is addressing the new covenant community... And that's connected to the whole theme that he makes, the whole point that he makes, that those Old Testament sacrifices and the sanctuary in which they were offered really are shadows of something better to come, something that has now arrived, shadows that derive their shape and, really, that derive their effectiveness as means of grace for old covenant people from the reality that Christ has now come to offer that final sacrifice and to

enter into the heavenly sanctuary to intercede on our behalf. So, he sees great contrast between old covenant and new, but also great continuity because the same God is working out his redemptive plan in the ancient times and now in these last days.

**Dr. Sean McDonough**

When we think of the book of Hebrews, we typically, and rightly emphasize the discontinuity between the New Testament and the Old Testament, the new covenant and the old covenant. And that surely is the weight of emphasis in Hebrews, because his people are tempted to go back to the old covenant. But that doesn't mean that the writer of Hebrews suddenly thought we should just jettison the entirety of the Old Testament. This is most evident in the "hall of faith," so called, in chapter 11, where Old Testament exemplars are held out as models for our behavior and, more importantly, models for our faith. So, in addition to all the other aspects of continuity — the exhortation to "love your neighbor," the prohibitions against idolatry, all of which the writer of Hebrews would have assumed — chapter 11 stands as pretty clear testimony to his high regard for the ongoing validity of the personages and the dynamics and the stories of the Old Testament.

**Question 3:**

**In what ways did the author of Hebrews motivate his readers to persevere in the faith?**

**Dr. Barry Joslin**

The author of Hebrews, as a pastor, motivated his people to persevere in a couple of different ways. We can think of it in terms of a positive way and a negative way. First of all, positively by arguing from the Old Testament and proving that this Jesus of Nazareth, the one who is fully man, he's also the divine eternal Son of God, is indeed the long awaited Messiah. He is the Son. He is the one through whom God has spoken and accomplished final and eternal redemption. He is the guarantor, the mediator of the promised and long awaited new covenant. It had been centuries since God had promised that a new covenant would come to Jeremiah and to the people of Israel, and generations of disobedient Israelites had gone through, and there always was a faithful remnant. We see some of them in chapter 11. So, there's a positive encouragement by showing them what's out in front of them, by whetting their appetite for what's to come, by encouraging them that there are many of those who have run this race before you... But there are so many that he says, time would fail if I told you all these, and this great cloud of witnesses, they surround you, do what they did, follow and obey the promises of God knowing that there is far more out in front of you. And so, there's a positive encouragement, a theological encouragement, an encouragement of witnesses, etc. But also, quite strongly, matter of fact more than anybody else in the New Testament, any other author, he warns with the strongest of language that if they do not they will be eternally damned. There's no other way to put it. So, delight in running the race, casting off all those things that so easily entangle. Run after Christ. You don't have to worry about what happens if you don't.

But then, let me warn you as your pastor what will happen, what *will* happen if you do not persevere until the end. But then, he also gives several areas of great confidence, several ways of arguing, demonstrating that there is great confidence that those who are a part of the new covenant people will not be lost.

**Dr. Dan Lacich**

In trying to get the readers of Hebrews motivated to persevere in their faith, the author does a couple of things that are, I think, smart psychologically. One is to make note of some of the great saints from the past, you know, what they went through, how they persevered, to use them as examples, specific examples, you know, going through chapter 11, this person and that person, this one, and you can't read that without feeling a sense of inspiration yourself that, "I can do that as well." But then, connected with all that is this phrase that we are "surrounded by ... a great cloud of witnesses." I love the athletic image of that. Almost as if the author is saying to the readers, you're in the game; you're on the field, and there's a whole stadium of people who are cheering you on, and they want you to win, and they want you to press ahead. You know, home field advantage is a pretty important thing in a lot of sports, and so I think he's trying to say we constantly have a home field advantage, we have a crowd cheering for us to motivate us on.

**Dr. Edward M. Keazirian**

The author of Hebrews was a child of his own time, and he used the same kind of motivational techniques that would have been common in that time period... I think that three probably stand out. The first is that he shows the superiority of Jesus Christ. He looks at conventions in the old covenant, compares them with Jesus, and in every regard, Jesus is superior. And because of that, Jesus is the appropriate one for hope and for faith. And there is this argument underlying this, from the lesser to the greater, and if the old covenant and all the elements of that had a purpose and a role, how much greater is Jesus Christ in the purpose and role of the new covenant? So, that argument from the lesser to the greater, to the superiority of Jesus Christ, is probably the central argument in the whole letter and the motivation for the readers to hold onto their faith. A second motivation comes more on a negative side, and this is to look at the consideration of the covenants themselves. The old covenant was insufficient by itself. It was a shadow of what was to come. The new covenant is the one that really had the power and the ability to bring salvation... There is judgment associated with the old covenant, and if they are not in a position of the new covenant, they will not survive that judgment, they will not inherit the promises. And so, the ineffectual nature of the old covenant is a primary motivation for embracing the new covenant and holding onto their faith. A third motive or strategy that the author uses is one that was very common in the ancient world and a major part of the educational system, major part of training for young men who were going into leadership positions, and that would have been exemplification and imitation. And so, young students would be encouraged to go back and look at the heroes of Greek and Roman history and to do biographies on them, to memorize their speeches, and to develop speeches of their own that would laud the characteristics and virtues of these ancient heroes. And then they were expected to embrace those virtues and try to bring

those virtues into their own lives. Well, this exemplification and imitation is evident at three levels in the letter. First of all, there is the example of Jesus Christ. Jesus was the hero of the faith. He was the author and perfecter of the faith. He was the one that is the leading architect and exemplar of the faith. He went through suffering, and yet he is our hero. He is the perfect example because he was able to see beyond the suffering. He was able to see the joy and the glory that lay beyond it. And that encouraged him and sustained him through the suffering so that he was able to persevere to the end and to inherit all that was to come from his work. So, Jesus Christ is the first example, the example *par excellence*, the one that we should imitate. The second level is the heroes of the faith in the patriarchs, prophets, the people that were noted in Hebrew Scripture for their role in sustaining the covenant, maintaining faith in all kinds of difficult circumstances. And among them is mentioned Abraham, and we're told that Abraham was looking for a city, that he never got to that city, never inherited it, saw it from afar, but persevered to death. And then there was talk about prophets and others who endured the suffering and still held on to their faith. And we are told that they held on to their faith, and they didn't inherit the promise because God had something better in mind for us. And so, for their sake and our own, they are the example for us to follow; they're the motive for us to persevere. And finally, there is the example of their own leaders, their own leaders in the church, the local church, the ones who watch out for them spiritually, the ones whose lives have proven their validity and their truthfulness over the years. And so, the people are enjoined to examine the lives of their leaders, to take a lesson from that and to live according to it, because their lives have had an outcome that proves the quality of their lives. And so, from Jesus Christ, the patriarchs of the faith and the covenants, and their own local leadership are all examples that the people are to imitate, and that is to be the third motivation in their perseverance.-

**Dr. Mark L. Strauss**

The whole book of Hebrews is the author calling his readers to persevere, to persevere in the face of persecution, of social ostracization, separation; calling them to not go back to their old way, not go back to Judaism unfulfilled, to stick with Judaism fulfilled. And he does so, really, in two ways. In one sense he warns them. There's these five strong warning passages. He warns them that if you depart from Christ, no sacrifice for sins remains. There's no way to be saved apart from Jesus Christ. So, there's these strong and stern warnings of the danger of departing from the faith. That's the negative side of his encouragement to persevere. The positive side is the superiority of Christ in the new covenant. The old covenant was partial. The old covenant never, the sacrifices never took away sins; they only pointed forward to the ultimate sacrifice of Christ on the cross. And so, Christ is the fulfillment. The supremacy of Christ, the preeminence of Christ is the central theological theme throughout Hebrews. Because salvation has arrived, don't go back to the *promise* of salvation when you've received the *actual* salvation in Christ.



### Question 4:

### How should we understand the warnings against apostasy in Hebrews?

#### Dr. Craig S. Keener

There are a number of warnings against apostasy in Hebrews: You have it in chapter 2 where there's a warning about, if they were judged for rejecting the law of Moses, how much more will we be judged if we neglect so great a salvation; chapter 4, where they turn back, they didn't enter the Promised Land, they fell short of his rest, and it's a warning that we not do the same; chapter 6, those who have experienced life in Christ and they've turned back, it's like crucifying the Son of God afresh; chapter 10 and chapter 12, again, all these warnings against apostasy. So it's a big issue in Hebrews... Now, a couple questions arise: One is, why does the writer of Hebrews keep addressing this, even though he says in chapter 6, "I'm persuaded better things of you." But with each of these, there are exhortations attached. He's saying don't become like this, but rather, persevere. He calls them to persevere in a number of ways. He uses all of the examples in Hebrew 11 and then comes to the ultimate example of the faith in Hebrews 12, Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, and says, "You haven't even yet resisted to the shedding of your blood." So, he uses these to call people to persevere. Another question, though, is the theological question of how we take this. And it's taken different ways by different schools of theology. For example, a Calvinist who would say, well, the elect, those who will be saved, will persevere. And so, if they don't persevere, they were never a part of God's elect. The Arminian would say, well, these people experienced salvation but they fell away, they lost it. And I think one is speaking from the standpoint of God, and one is speaking from the standpoint of human experience. And I think we have texts that address both kinds of perspectives; I think they're both in Scripture. But I think it's a warning to those who hold kind of a cheap version of like, well, I prayed a prayer fifty years ago and, you know, I live however I want to, but now it's my ticket to heaven. That's not what Scripture teaches. Scripture teaches that we need to persevere.

#### Dr. Barry Joslin

The warnings in the book of Hebrews have been understood in many different ways... So many interpretations of these verses assume that these passages are *descriptive*, that they're describing something that is taking place or that has already happened. But let me ask you, if any of you have children, do you warn your child about something that's already happened or something that is happening? No, a warning, by its very nature, is to *prevent* something. And so, by nature they're not descriptive, they are proscriptive. They're trying to prevent something in the future from occurring ... Warnings are a gift from God. Listen, just think about this question; let me ask you a question. What is worse than receiving a warning about impending danger and impending judgment? The answer, of course, is *not* receiving a warning. So, as an act of kindness, as an act of pastoral love, this writer of Hebrews inspired by the Spirit, warns his community of faith, professing believers, what will happen if they do not cast aside the sin, the things that so easily entangle them, if they do not run with endurance the race that is set before them. If they continue in their

immaturity, in their dullness of heart, if they continue on this path, what will happen? If they fail to persevere, they will be judged; they will face the terrifying judgment of God. “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” And so, I would urge you to consider, I think, a better interpretation is that these are real warnings to real believers ... If I reject Christ, if I pursue Judaism and do not follow after Jesus as the Messiah, fulfillment of the Old Testament and all these old covenant promises, then I will die. Moses is not the way to salvation. Moses and the Levitical priesthood pointed to Jesus, and to disassociate with Jesus means not to have a salvation promised in the new covenant to all those who are of faith accomplished in a redemption that has been eternally accomplished by Christ. And so, all five of these warnings serve as a *means*, a means of mercy to those who are dull of hearing, to awaken them to the dangers that lie ahead if they continue on this track.

### **Rev. Ric Rodeheaver**

Every book has one or two of those passages that everyone kind of zeroes in on, and it becomes the thing they want to talk about in that book. In the book of Hebrews, it's probably chapter 6 where the author is actually warning about someone tasting of the things of the Spirit and falling away... What does all that mean? I think the main point that we need to take away is that it can happen. Now, I wish I could tell you who's going to be apostate and who's not, who's going to fall away and who's going to remain faithful. I can't. The author of Hebrews himself says, as a matter of fact, in verse 9, he says, “But I have better things to speak of to you in this regard,” that he's confident of their salvation. I think the apostasy passages in Hebrews goes along with the general theme of the book in some sense of, don't neglect, don't drift away, don't let your heart get hardened, ultimately, don't become apostate. Continue to look to Jesus. These things can happen. We're not all assured that those who are within a church are actually of the church. But rather than focus on, kind of, the interpretive gymnastics of those texts, I think we've got to walk away saying, well, what is the author actually getting at here? A: It can happen. B: We need to be focused on the confidence we have in Christ and staying there, continue to looking to Jesus. So I think those passages are real; they're worth examining. They have to be thought through, but I think we sometimes lose the forest for the trees.

## **Question 5:**

### **How did the author of Hebrews compare and contrast Jesus with the priesthods of Aaron and Melchizedek?**

### **Dr. Stephen J. Wellum**

One of the most important contributions of the book of Hebrews is to give us how Christ is the Great High Priest. This theme is found in other places throughout the New Testament, but not to the great extent and detail that the author of Hebrews gives to us. In fact, most of the book, other than isolated portions, from chapter 5 through 10 really give in detail how Christ fulfills the Levitical — Aaron's — role, and the whole Levites, as well as transcends that role by coming in a new order, the order of

Melchizedek. The author does this, I think, in a couple of ways, and both of these ways are rooted in what we call “typology.” Typology speaks of various persons, patterns that ultimately point forward to Christ, so that when you think of the Levitical priest, that office, that person, and particularly the high priest, becomes a typological pattern that is given in the old covenant that points beyond itself to Christ as the Great High Priest who fulfills that role. In 5:1-10 and then particularly it’s picked up a little bit in chapter 8 and then 9 and 10, you have an extended treatment of kind of comparison-contrasting of Levitical priests with Christ so that everything that the Levitical high priest represented, Christ did. So there’s a similarity, but he does it in a greater way. So, that the Levitical high priest was chosen by God, Christ now is chosen and so a number of passages refer to that. The high priest in the Old Testament identified with the people, so Christ identifies with the people in his incarnation, his life, and all of his living ... The author of Hebrews presents Christ as the one who fulfills the Levitical role in every way. Yet, it’s also an important biblical theological point to be made that Christ, because he is not a Levite — he comes from the tribe of Judah — that he also transcends the entire Levitical order. The author goes back to Genesis 14 and Psalm 110 which lays out the foundation for this from the Old Testament itself, where God alongside all of the presentation of the Levites, the giving of the old covenant, God is also anticipating that there will come a priest of a different order, an order that ultimately transcends Levitical order, that is fulfilled in Christ who brings now with him a greater priesthood, a greater covenant, and ultimately eternal and complete salvation.

### **Dr. Carol Kaminski**

Well, it’s so interesting because the writer to the Hebrews is addressing the question, “Is Jesus defined as the high priest?” But the problem is he’s not from the priestly tribe. Well, what’s the background for this? The background is that Jesus is from the tribe of Judah. And if you think of way back in the book of Genesis, Genesis 48 and 49, we have Jacob and his twelve sons, and you have Reuben, Simeon, Levi and then Judah. So, Judah is the royal line and, of course, where we get our famous King David and all the Davidic kings. But Levi... So there are two separate genealogical lines, and promises are given to both of them. And so, the writer to the Hebrews is saying, “Well, how is it that Jesus, who’s from the tribe of Judah, can be a priest even though he’s not from the priestly tribe?” So, he goes back to Melchizedek in Genesis 14, and Melchizedek is just introduced without a genealogical background, which is unusual in Genesis, and he is said to be both a priest, and he’s the king. And so, in that particular story Abraham gives him a tithe. And so, the writer to the Hebrews goes back to that and says that Jesus is like the order of Melchizedek. And Melchizedek is also mentioned in one of the Psalms where it talks about him being a priest forever. So, how does he make the connection then? This is what’s important. He then says that Abraham, when he was giving tithes, that Levi was in his loins. So, it’s as though... So, thinking about genealogical, because he was his descendent, that he was “in his loins” giving a tithe to Melchizedek, and a tithe, giving a tithe, therefore it is Levi who is subordinating himself to Melchizedek. And so, therefore, the writer to the Hebrews says Melchizedek is a greater order of priesthood, and so, Levi was already kind of submitting. So, an interesting way to do it, but it does

underscore that Jesus is both the high priest and the king. And this is picked up in other passages as well. For example, in the prophecies of Zechariah, he sees a priest and king, the two offices coming together, Zerubbabel and Joshua. So, it's a wonderful way of really saying how Jesus is the superior Great High Priest.

### **Question 6:**

### **How was Jesus' sacrifice for sin superior to the sacrifices offered in the Old Testament?**

#### **Dr. Dan Lacich**

When we compare the sacrifice of Jesus to the sacrifices in the Old Testament, I think the first thing that stands out is the finality of it all. In the Old Testament it was sacrifice after sacrifice after sacrifice for generations, and it gave, in a sense, a temporary covering, if you will, for the sins of people. When you get to Jesus, the author of Hebrews is very clear, it is the ultimate and final sacrifice. It completes everything; it supersedes everything. There is no need for anything else on a sacrificial level. It, again, gets to the supremacy of Christ, you know, that he is the ultimate, and when it comes to sacrifices, that's the case as well. There is no need to repeat anything else.

#### **Dr. Joel C. Hunter**

Jesus' sacrifice for sins was superior to those sacrifices of the Old Testament in several very important ways, but let me just name a couple. First of all, in the Old Testament, there was a design of God that would prepare us ultimately for *the* sacrifice that would take away the sins of the world. We were prepared over and over again with the shedding of blood so that there could be the forgiveness of sins, with the substitutionary sacrifice that was a part of our recognition, our confession, that we had not lived up to Almighty God's demands and expectations in our part of the relationship. And so, therefore, there needed to be an event at which we publically and personally proclaimed that and did something to repair the damaged part of the relationship... You know, always before, it was man's sacrifice to God. Now, in Jesus, it's God's sacrifice on behalf of man. And so, therefore, if it's God's sacrifice, it's perfect. It pays the whole thing. And repetition is not needed because God has satisfied his own mercy and his own holiness. And so, it's a wonderful fulfillment of what he taught us to do for all of those years, but it's his action, and his action is perfect and complete. But the second way of its superiority was that it was done out of sacrificial love. You know, the Bible says that "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son," and then we follow Jesus all through the New Testament, and we see his self-sacrificing love that lays down his life, that empties himself, taking on the form of a servant, and ultimately that obedience is unto death... And so, we can't ever miss that, we can't miss the personal side of this and just think of it as a mechanical recompense, you know. We've got to understand that this is about a relationship, and it was about a person who loved us that much.

**Dr. Carol Kaminski**

If we think of the sacrificial system in the Old Testament, the sacrifices are outlined in Leviticus 1–7, and it goes through a series of sacrifices. It's important to bear in mind, if we want to compare the sacrifices in the old covenant and Jesus' sacrifice, we need to first of all think about what were the sacrifices given for... But you can also think about the quality of the sacrifice that's made. So, the writer to the Hebrews emphasizes about the blood of bulls and goats and it's inadequacy to take away sin, in contrast to Jesus' own blood and his sacrifice that takes away sin. So, there's the quality of the sacrifice. The other interesting thing that comes up is the writer to the Hebrews points out and underscores Jesus' obedience. So, you think about those sacrifices, the animals when they're given, they cannot bring obedience because they like digging in their heels as they go to the altar. And what the writer to the Hebrews says is actually what God always wants is not simply sacrifices but he wants the devotion of the heart of the one who offers the sacrifice. And this is why there's a couple of passages, and one example would be Saul in 1 Samuel 15, where Saul wants to save some of the flock to sacrifice to God but he doesn't obey God, actually. He's meant to totally destroy these people. He keeps the flock. And then Samuel comes to him and says, you know, basically, do you think God wants sacrifices? Is that what he really wants? And he says that it's better to obey than sacrifice. There's also another Psalm that kind of picks up this image as well, and so the writer to the Hebrews says, what does Jesus do? He says, "Sacrifices God does not desire, but," he says, "I have come to do your will." And so, it's really pointing to what the sacrificial system was about, was that it was meant to show the worshiper's devotion to God. So Jesus brings that together, and he actually embodies the devotion to God in his obedience, as well as offer up in his own life as a sacrifice. So, in that sense, there's just this contrast that the writer to the Hebrews is going to say that this is so much better sacrifice. And then the last thing I think I would mention is that the writer to the Hebrews emphasizes that the sacrifices are offered repeatedly. And we might think, well, that's a good thing because atonement's being made. But he says it actually is a reminder of sin, that sin hasn't been completely forgiven. But then he talks about Jesus and his once-for-all sacrifice, that we no longer need to sacrifice today because his once-for-all sacrifice has accomplished what the old covenant could never do.

**Dr. David Talley**

In order to understand the book of Hebrews, you have to understand what's going on in the Old Testament. And one matter of particular importance is the comparison of Jesus' sacrifice with those sacrifices in the old covenant. And the first point, I think, to be made is that the sacrifices in the old covenant were amazing; the access they provided to God, the fellowship that they maintained, the fact that sins could be forgiven, this was amazing what was going on in the Old Testament. But that's what makes Christ more amazing still. When you compare these two sacrifices, you realize in the old covenant that these sacrifices had to be made daily. They had to be made by a priest who was just like the people for whom he was offering the sacrifice. So there are so many things that contrast with Christ. Christ offered himself once for all. He was done, and then he took that blood, not to the altar, he didn't sprinkle it in various

places around the tabernacle, he took it straight to the throne room of God and he applied it there. And so when you consider the two, there is no comparison. As amazing as these sacrifices were in the old covenant, Jesus is more amazing still. He offers that permanent sacrifice where sins are remembered no more.

**Dr. Mark A. Jennings**

When we think about the epistle to the Hebrews, one of the constant themes you have is the superiority of Christ in comparison with the elements of the old covenant. Specifically, one of the aspects is the sacrificial system, and the author of Hebrews provides for us a lot of information on this. And he talks about it in chapter 7, he talks about it in chapter 10, but chapter 9, especially verses 6 and following ... This passage really captures how Christ's sacrifice is superior: One, it didn't take place at an earthly tabernacle, it took place at the heavenly tabernacle... Two, Christ didn't offer the blood of heifers or goats. He offered *his* blood. And in this contrast we see that what took a multiplicity of times in the old covenant was established in the singular unique offering of Christ and his blood, so that it wasn't just, as the Hebrews tells us, the external that was purified, but the conscience, or rather the internal, or the heart, if you will, and that that is what makes possible for those who are dead, as Hebrews will tell us, to now worship the living God.

**Question 7:**

**What is the significance of Jesus being both the priest who offers the sacrifice and the sacrificial lamb?**

**Dr. K. Erik Thoennes**

When Jesus died on the cross, it was the first time in human history that the priest and the lamb that was sacrificed were the same. The one offering the sacrifice, the priest, was Jesus. And the one offered as the sacrifice was Jesus. They came together on the cross in a profound way. And the radical difference between that priest and that lamb is that that priest needed no sacrifice for his own sin, and that lamb was perfect and blameless, unlike all the other lambs and priests that had come before.

**Dr. Simon Vibert**

In chapter 10 of Hebrews, there's a long section on the Old Testament sacrifices, and the emphasis is on the priest having to repeat the sacrifices again and again because they do not finally take away sin. But the perfect sacrifice of Christ is also extolled and held up for us to ponder and to consider. For example, here in chapter 10 the contrast is made:

**Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God (Hebrews 10:11-12).**

The great emphasis there is on the finished work of Christ providing full atonement for sin through his saving death on the cross, and therefore his sacrifice never needs to be repeated.

**Dr. Jason Oakes**

The sacrifice of Jesus ... was the fully-God, fully-man sacrifice that ended all other sacrifices. So the other sacrifices were a way for God to remove sin for a short time, but there was nothing done about the real root of the problem, which is the heart of man. And so that as long as externally we could remove that sin, but yet our hearts still were inclined toward sin, and still we're committing more sins and still desiring more sins, and so what we really needed was a new regenerated heart, which that was only completed by the sacrifice of Jesus... The book of Hebrews tells us Jesus is actually sitting at the right hand of God. And it's actually, I think, an important thing to say from the author of Hebrews, because priests stood while they worked, because there was work to do. In fact, you could say that the work never ended for the priest. But for Jesus, his high priestly ministry is completed, and he's sitting at the right hand of God because that work is now no longer necessary.

**Question 8:**

**What did the author of Hebrews mean in chapter 12 when he said that we have already come to Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem?**

**Dr. Dennis E. Johnson**

In Hebrews 12:22 and following, the author to the Hebrews says that we have already come to Mt. Zion, not to Mt. Sinai, which he had described in the verses just before, that terrifying mountain that Moses, even Moses who was invited up to the mountain was fearful about ascending. But we've come to Mt. Zion, a place of joy and celebration. That's a striking thing, because earlier in Hebrews the author has pointed out that we are still a pilgrim people, similar in situation to Israel in the wilderness, freed on the one hand from slavery but not yet fully having entered into all that God has promised to his people. And yet here he says we *have* come to Mt. Zion. He's talking about Christian worship. He's talking about this amazing reality that, as we gather in the name of Jesus, we participate in the worship of just men made perfect, those who he's described in chapter 11 as Old Testament believers, and the celebration of the angels in the presence of God. We don't see it with our physical eyes, but by the presence of the Holy Spirit, we are entering into worship now, and we can do that, as he says in that climax of his description, because we are approaching through Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant. And through his blood, which unlike Abel's blood, cried out for vengeance against Abel's murderer, Cain, Jesus' blood cries out for our forgiveness. That's what we do when we gather in worship. That's why it is so important that as we are called to draw near to God's throne of grace, we're called to draw near together and not to neglect our gathering together, because we have a foretaste of heaven on earth in the midst of the people of God as we gather to worship the King.



**Dr. K. Erik Thoennes**

Jesus brings in the kingdom of God, the reality of the realm of God's rule in the world, and this Zion imagery is this Jerusalem, city of God place where God is worshipped and his presence dwells, and his kingdom realities are present and active. And so, in Christ, that is the realm we enter. By faith in him we enter into the realities of God's kingdom through the King, who came in Christ.

**Dr. Sean McDonough**

The question of what's meant by the heavenly Jerusalem or Mt. Zion, clearly not in the desert but up in heaven, raises the interesting question of how Platonic the book of Hebrews is, and my answer to that is, it's not Platonic, but it might be Platon-ish, that there is this distinction throughout Hebrews between the heavenly enduring realities and the earthly transient ones, but it's still rooted in early Jewish and Christian eschatology. So, the writer of Hebrews does believe in the resurrection, and therefore he does believe in the world to come made visible, the kingdom of God on earth. But he also wants to leverage some of these traditional dichotomies to stress that, already, in the Spirit, they are encountering God's ultimate purposes for the world, that it's not simply a matter of washings and rituals, which is clearly his focus. It's not merely a matter of washings and rituals. It's genuine embrace in the presence of God and the believer experiences that already in the Spirit, even as they will experience that in its fullness in the new heavens and new earth.

**Question 9:**

**What did the author of Hebrews mean when he said that the old covenant was made obsolete by the coming of Christ?**

**Dr. Constantine Campbell**

When the author of Hebrews talks about the fact that the old covenant is made obsolete through the coming of Christ, what he means is in Christ a new covenant is established in fulfillment of Jeremiah 31: "I will write a new covenant on your hearts." And Jesus has fulfilled all that the old covenant was pointing to. The old covenant, I think, in the way that the author to the Hebrews speaks about it and the way that, say, the apostle Paul speaks about it in Galatians, is that it was for a time and served a purpose until the coming of Christ. And it points towards Christ. And indeed there are elements of continuity between the old and new covenant as well, but the new covenant is completely new, and Jesus has done away with sin once and for all. He is the only priest that we need, and his law is the law that binds the new covenant because every covenant comes with a law. And the law is the law of Christ, which is the law of love.

**Dr. Stephen J. Wellum**

When you read the book of Hebrews, there is an incredible statement that people wrestle with, and they have wrestled with over the years, is that in the coming of



Christ and the dawning of the new covenant era, the old covenant has been made obsolete. Now, what does this exactly mean? I think, you know, to give a full answer to that you'd have to spend time sort of unpacking all the biblical covenants and so on, but I think the short answer is, is that the old covenant as a covenant, given as it was to the nation of Israel in its place in redemptive history, has now reached its end or its fulfillment in Jesus Christ, to that to which ultimately it pointed forward to. So, as you go back to the Old Testament and the Old Testament covenants, they point beyond themselves to the coming of Christ. So, in Christ's coming — and what I mean by his coming is in his entire not only conception but his life, his work on the cross, his resurrection, his ascension, pouring out of the Spirit at Pentecost — he has brought the old covenant, in terms of what it pointed to, to its end, so that we now, as the people of God, do not live under the old covenant as a covenant. We live under the new covenant, yet we — and we'll come back to just in a moment here in the sense of the old covenant still is instructive for us; it still is Scripture for us, yet it's not a covenant — we're not under that covenant obligation the same way Israel was. That's why the food laws, for instance, and that's why a lot of the sacrifices, all of those have reached their goal, their end, their fulfillment in Jesus Christ who is the final sacrifice, who brings to food laws to their end, and so on. So, in that way, as a covenant, it is obsolete in that that to which it pointed, namely Christ and the new covenant, has now come, and we now as the people of God, as Jews and Gentile, as the new community, the new man, the church, is now living under the new covenant.

### **Question 10:**

**Does the book of Hebrews present the new covenant as a covenant renewal or something completely new?**

#### **Dr. Sean McDonough**

Virtually any time we are pressed theologically to give an either/or answer, it's a sign that we're probably dealing with a complex reality, which is going to have something of both. So, when we come to the question, "Is this a renewed covenant or an entirely new covenant," my inclination, based on my theological predilections, as well as the evidence of Hebrews and the rest of the New Testament, is it's going to be aspects of both, that the very designation "new covenant" shows that there's something new about this, that Jesus is superior to and different from the perpetual animal sacrifices in the temple, that he's got a better priesthood, that the gift of the Spirit — not looming large in Hebrews but throughout the rest of the New Testament — that the gift of the Spirit is a unique blessing of the new covenant. Even if we go back to the writer of Hebrews' prime source text for the new covenant, Jeremiah 31, there is clearly a sense in which that's a renewal of the old covenant. And surely God's purposes and God's wisdom were not lacking in the old covenant, so it would be absurd to think that he'd just want to chuck the entire thing aside. So, when we think, is it new or renewed, as in so many other instances, we need to think that it's going to have aspects of both.

**Dr. Alvin Padilla, translation**

In Hebrews 8, the author finally introduces the term “covenant,” the covenant ensured by the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus. Notice that what he says is that Jesus has done a great ministry, because now he is the mediator of a better covenant, which means that the covenant itself is better. This can be understood as a discontinuation of the previous covenant and, therefore, understood as a completely new covenant. But others believe it is a *continuation*, a fulfillment of the Old Testament covenant. The author talks in chapter 8, and following, about the covenant that Jeremiah the prophet mentioned in chapter 31. He says that there will be a time when the Lord establishes a new covenant. Let me make it clear that, for Jeremiah, the new covenant would take place in the future. So, here we are looking at a contrast: Is it a continuation or something completely new? There's the dilemma. As Christians, we think differently about this issue. My personal opinion is that the new covenant is a continuation because, as I see it, the Lord has *always* worked in his people — in his Jewish people and later in his Gentile people — throughout the history of mankind. Salvation has always been by grace. The difference is that in the Old Testament, Jesus had not made his sacrifice yet, so the people of the Old Testament could not look back at it like we can. We have a better covenant now because salvation is already accomplished, and we should not be afraid to fail, because Jesus has already achieved forgiveness for our every sin. Therefore, the covenant is better, but it is also new in the sense that now there are no barriers or limitations imposed by the Law. We don't need the same sacrifices; we don't need the same laws about food; we don't need to have the same celebrations, etcetera. Now everything is through faith, trusting in Jesus. So, at the end of chapter 8, the author says that the new covenant has made the last covenant obsolete, and that that which is obsolete and aging will soon disappear. Therefore, the old covenant is over and the new covenant is its continuation.

**Dr. Peter Walker**

There's always quite a bit of controversy as one looks at the Bible to discover, is it one big covenant or is it divided up into two halves, or perhaps even more covenants? And, especially this language of the new covenant, which we find first used in Jeremiah, picked up in Matthew's gospel when Jesus talks about the blood of the new covenant, and also especially here in Hebrews 8, when it talks about the new covenant. Is that a brand new covenant, such that everything that happens in the New Testament is something which is completely new, fresh, and in one sense in opposition to the Old? Or is it a renewal of the original covenant? I think it holds the Bible much more closer together if we see it as the renewal of the original covenant. And what's that original covenant with Abraham and with God's people? It is that God is going to remove sin from his people and from his creation. And therefore Jesus comes not to do something entirely new, but to fulfill the original purpose of the covenant. He does that when he dies on the cross, his blood is the blood of the new covenant, and the writer of Hebrews is then showing the benefits of that renewed covenant. Yes, it does mean certain things from the old are to be removed, and he says that in Hebrews 8, that aspects of the old covenant are close to destruction, he says, but the deep underlying theme is one of unity and continuity, a renewal of the covenant.

**Question 11:****In Hebrews chapter 13, how does the author describe the final destination of God's people?****Dr. Dan Lacich**

When we get to the end of Hebrews, in chapter 13, the author gives a hint of what the final destination is for God's people, and there's this one verse, in verse 14, where he says that we have a temporary city here, but we are looking forward to a permanent one. So, wrapped up in all of that is, I think, the idea of the stability that is to come, the permanence of it all, the security that comes in that city, that city of God, the communion and fellowship that will be part of that. So, just in one little verse, I think the author is saying to that audience, this life is temporary, the bit that we can hold onto for security in this life, we will have perfection of that in the world to come, that permanent city of peace and of restoration and of fellowship with God.

**Dr. K. Erik Thoennes**

In Hebrews 13, the author is trying to frame our lives now in Christ in light of our lives to come in Christ when we get home to glory. This side of that, we'll go outside the camp like Jesus did, and suffer persecution like Jesus did, but that's heading to a time of *shalom*, of peace, of final restoration when the persecution, the tears, the suffering will be no more, and we'll finally rest in that heavenly city.

**Rev. Ric Rodeheaver**

Hebrews 13 ends in a great way. It talks about, in 13:14, depending on what translation you read, but they all communicate the same kind of concept. Some translations say "a lasting city," some translations say "a permanent city." My favorite is the one that says an unshakable city. I love the images that all those broadcast. You think about the original recipients of Hebrews, life was anything but solid and secure, just like today. I mean, things are shaking up all the time, whether it's the economy, whether it's our individual lives, or whether it's actually the ground beneath us, things are giving, things are uncertain. And the author of Hebrews writes, at the end of the day, what we are inheriting, what we are getting, is something that's permanent. It's not temporal like our lives that just go away. It's something that is lasting. And that's the cry of the human heart, isn't it? I want to mean something; I want to have mattered. Where we're going to go, it's a lasting city and it's unshakeable. People aren't going to come in and pillage; people can't take it away from you. It is an unshakeable city that you will inherit. I love the confidence that that gives, the permanency, and the anchor of hope that that vision at the end of Hebrews gives to God's people. I think it's something we've always got to keep in mind. And especially for the people of the book of Hebrews, just like many of us, when life is uncertain, we have to be able to keep our eye on something that's not going to move, and that's the unshakeable city that God promises to his people.

**Dr. Dennis E. Johnson**

In Hebrews 13 the writer to the Hebrews announces that our final destination is a city that is to come. In fact, what he says is, “Here in this creation we have no enduring city, but we are looking for the one to come.” So, it’s future, but it’s also lasting. And that really ties in with what he’s been saying from the beginning of the book. In chapter 1, he quoted from Psalm 102, and he talked about the fact that the present heaven and earth created by God would eventually wear out, be rolled up like a garment, and in a sense, thrown away. And he talks later on in chapter 12 about an unshakeable kingdom given to us even, that will last beyond that last voice of God that will shake heaven and earth. In chapter 11, he speaks of the patriarchs who, he says, were not looking for an earthly country, really. If they’d looked for that, they could have gone back home to Mesopotamia. But they were looking for a heavenly country and, in fact, God promised to Abraham a city with foundations whose builder and maker is God. It’s a new creation. It’s a new heavens. It’s a new earth and a new city. We could add from Revelation and other places, it’s a city in which all sorrow is eliminated, every tear wiped away from our eyes. But Hebrews gives us that hint that the hope of the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, is the same hope that we have for a heavenly country, a new creation that will survive all the judgment that will fall on this present sin-stained universe and, instead, will be a place of complete joy and security.

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