THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS

INTRODUCTION TO HEBREWS

A. Author
1. Introductory comments
   a. There is no consensus concerning the writer of Hebrews and the text makes no direct reference to the writer nor much in the way of inference.
   b. The writer must have been a Jew or very familiar with Old Testament Scriptures and practices of 1st century Jews.
   c. Thomas Constable, *The early Christians originally accepted all the New Testament books as inspired by God because they contained apostolic teaching. For this reason the writer was probably either an apostle or a close associate of at least one of the apostles...*
   d. William Lane, *All that can be said with certainty is that Hebrews was composed by a creative theologian who was well trained in the exposition of the Greek Scriptures.*
   e. Origen (185-254 A.D.) made a definitive statement as to the authorship of Hebrews, *Who the author of the epistle is, God only knows*.

2. Most frequently suggested writers of Hebrews
   a Apollos
      1) He was gifted in explaining Old Testament Scriptures.
      2) He was closely associated with Timothy (1 Corinthians 16:10–12) as was the author of Hebrews as noted in Hebrews 13:23, *You should know that our brother Timothy has been released, with whom I shall see you if he comes soon.*
      3) There was no early support in the church for Apollos being the author of Hebrews.
      4) Herbert Bateman, *Martin Luther was the first to suggest Apollos as the author of Hebrews in a sermon on Hebrews 1:1–4 published in 1522.*

   b. Barnabas
      1) Barnabas was a Levite (Acts 4:36) and closely related to the Old Testament system of worship.
      2) Some of the Pauline concepts and phrases could be explained on the basis of Barnabas' close association with Paul in ministry.
      3) Tertullian (150-220 A.D.) thought that Barnabas must have been the author.
      4) The Western church accepted Barnabas as the author of Hebrews.
      5) Zane Hodges, *There is reason to think that in the ancient catalog of canonical books found in the Western manuscript called Codex Claremontanus, the Book of Hebrews went under the name of the Epistle of Barnabas...If Hebrews were actually authored by Barnabas, then it can claim apostolic origin since Barnabas was called an apostle (Acts 14:4, 14).*
      6) Herbert Bateman, *Barnabas was among those who had "heard the message" from the apostles Peter and John (Acts 4:4, 36–7), part of the Hellenistic faction in Jerusalem, and witnessed signs and wonders of the Holy Spirit (Heb 2:3–4).*

   c. Luke
      1) Luke is not generally believed to be a Jew but some now believe he was.
      2) If not, he was intimately acquainted with Hebrew thought because of his close association with Paul.
      3) Hebert Bateman, *Luke/Acts and Hebrews alone have a classical Greek style—namely, remarkable literary and rhetorical skill—which supports Lukan authorship (cp. Acts 7 with Heb 11).*

   d. Paul
      1) In favor
         a) Pantaenus (ca. 190 A.D.) was the teacher of Clement of Alexandria and held that the epistle was possibly Pauline.
         b) Clement of Alexandria (155-215 A.D.) and Eusebius (265-339 A.D.) believed Paul was the author but that Luke translated the book into Greek.
         c) The Eastern church accepted Pauline authorship (Athanasius, Cyril of Jerusalem, Cyril of Alexandria.
         e) Jerome and Augustine were the first to popularize Pauline authorship in the West.
         f) The writer was associated with Timothy (Hebrews 13:23).
         g) Habakkuk 2:4 is quoted 3 times in the New Testament, Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11; and Hebrews 10:38; strong emphasis on faith, and the person and work of Christ.

2) Against
   a) The writer never uses his name which goes against Paul's writings.
   b) The writer seems to put himself outside the circle of New Testament Apostles (Hebrews 2:2-4) but Paul insisted that he had seen the Lord (1 Corinthians 9:1) and that he received his message by direct revelation (Galatians 1:12).
   c) H. D. M. Spence, *The writer never mentions his own name or intimates who he is. Hence the questions of authorship and of canonicity may, in this case, be kept distinct. This could not be in the case of any of St. Paul's undoubted Epistles, in all of which he gives his own name and designation, and often alludes in detail to his circumstances at the time of writing and his relations to the persons addressed.*
   d) The stress on the priesthood of Jesus is not found in other Pauline material.
   e) William Lane, *The language of Hebrews constitutes the finest Greek in the NT, far superior to the Pauline standard both in vocabulary and sentence-building.*

e. Others mentioned as the author of Hebrews
   1) Philip the Evangelist proposed by William Ramsay (1899).
   2) Priscilla (dominant) and Aquila proposed by Adolf von Harnack (1900).
   3) Mary (mother of Jesus), assisted by Luke and John.

B. Date
1. The earliest possible date was around 60 A.D. since the original readers had been Christians for an extended period, Hebrews 5:12, *For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food,*
2. Zane Hodges, *The epistle can hardly be later than about A.D. 95 since it was known to Clement of Rome and quoted by him in 1 Clement. In addition it can scarcely be dated after A.D. 70, since there is no reference to the destruction of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem. Had this event already occurred, it would have given the author a definitive argument for the cessation of the Old Testament sacrificial system. Instead he seems to regard this system as still in operation (cf. 8:4, 13; 9:6–9; 10:1–3).*
3. The most probable date of writing was 68-69 A.D.

C. Recipients
1. Church tradition and most Bible commentators consider Hebrews to be written to Jewish Christians.
2. They are probably converted Jews who the author of Hebrews fears will fall away from God as did their ancestors (2:104; 3:12-14; 5:11-6:8; 10:26-31; 12:25-29).
3. Comparisons of Judaism to Hebrews
   a. The Jewish wilderness generation with the early church (3:7-4:11).
   b. The Levitical priesthood with the Melchizedekan priesthood of Jesus (4:14-5:10).
   c. The old with the new covenant (8:1-20).

4. Similarities of Judaism to the Epistle to the Hebrews
   a. Jewish traditions concerning angels (2:2-3).
   b. Food regulations (9:10; 13:9-10).
   c. Zane Hodges, *...the author's heavy stress on Jewish prototypes and his earnest polemic against the permanence of the Levitical system are best explained if the audience was largely Jewish and inclined to be swayed back to their old faith. The heavy and extensive appeal to the authority of the Old Testament Scriptures also was most suitable to readers who had been brought up on them.*

5. Probable things about the recipients.
   a. Donald Hagner *... the recipients of the letter formed a specific community with a specific history. We learn that although they had been Christians for some time, they remained immature in their understanding of the Christian faith (5:11–6:3)...We may further say of the readers that the author did not simply know them but was somehow related to them, perhaps as a former leader of the community (13:18f., 22ff.; cf. 13:7, 17).*
   b. Ray Stedman, *...they were largely second generation Christians; their first leaders had already passed away (13:7). They had professed Christ for some time (5:12) and had once shown great evidences of sturdy faith (10:32–34). But when the letter was written they had reached a state of discouragement and spiritual lethargy. Some had given up meeting with other believers (10:25);*

D. Destination
   1. Some believe it was written to a Jewish Christian group in Rome.
   2. Many who believe Hebrews was written by Apollos propose Colossae as the destination.
   3. Cyprus or Cyrene is proposed by those who consider Barnabas as the author of Hebrews.
   4. A Palestinian destination has been proposed based on the discovery of a sectarian form of Judaism found at Qumran.
   5. Zane Hodges, *In the final analysis, however, the exact destination of the epistle is of as little importance as the identity of its author. Regardless of who wrote it, or where it was first sent, the Christian church has rightly regarded it down through the ages as a powerfully relevant message from God, who has definitively spoken in His Son.*

E. Purpose
   1. John A. Martin, *Any purpose statement of Hebrews must take into account at least two elements which are major motifs to the author...The author encourages the recipients to go on to maturity in the faith...The author warns the recipients (or at least some of the recipients) against the dangers of lapsing back into Judaism which would in some way "nullify" their faith.*
   2. Robert L. Saucy, *...the purpose of the writer to the Hebrews is not to give us an interpretation of Old Testament prophecy. ...Using material not from the prophets but primarily from the Psalms, with other materials added to elaborate the argument, the writer's goal was to establish the superiority of the gospel in contrast to all that went before, particularly the levitical system. The primary evidence of the supremacy of Christianity is presented in its finality. Coming to Christ means final access to God without any barrier.*
   3. William L. Lane, *It is a sensitive pastoral response to the sagging faith of older and tired individuals who were in danger of relinquishing their Christian commitment. It seeks to strengthen them in the face of a new crisis so that they may stand firm in their faith.*
   4. Donald Hagner, *...it is the author's concern to warn Jewish-Christian readers against apostatizing to their former Judaism...if the readers are to be motivated to remain faithful, they must come to an understanding of the true significance of Christianity. Accordingly, the author sets forth the incomparable superiority, together with the utter finality and definitive nature, of God's work in Jesus Christ. Christianity rightly understood is thus absolute in character and universal in scope.*

F. Introductory Outline (to be finalized at completion of study)
   1. The Superiority of the person of Christ (1:1-4:13)
   2. The Superiority of the work of Christ (4:14-10:18)
   3. The Superiority of faith in Christ (10:19-13:25)
   4. Conclusion (20:18-25)