

Hebrews - Introduction & Background

Introductory Matters

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I. Authorship

The author of Hebrews is anonymous. Many NT characters have been nominated as possible authors, but there are three that have probably been nominated the most: Apollos, Barnabas, and Paul.

People nominate Apollos due to Acts 18:24, which says that Apollos was "mighty in the Scriptures." People nominate Barnabas as the author because of Acts 4:36, which says that Barnabas was a Levite, which was the tribe of the priesthood, and whoever wrote Hebrews demonstrates a lot of knowledge about the priesthood.

Probably the most popular view is that Paul wrote the book because of Heb 13:23, where the author calls Timothy "our brother." So whoever wrote it was connected with Timothy, which obviously Paul was beginning in Acts 16 on his second missionary journey. They also point to v24 of that chapter which says "Those from Italy greet you." Paul wanted to get to Rome to spread the gospel, and eventually did.

Another reason is that a lot of the subjects covered in this book were also covered by Paul in his epistles: faith, references to the OT, references to Christ's finished work, and that it fits Paul's style of providing doctrine at the beginning, then pivoting with "therefore" to begin discussing practice/application. In Hebrews, the practical section begins in 10:19. So by far, Paul is thought by most to be the author of Hebrews, but that view has problems as well:

- In every other epistle (13), he gives his name. He doesn't hide who the author is.
- Hebrews also has a ton of OT quotations, all of them from the LXX. But Paul doesn't quote the LXX exclusively in his other epistles.
- Most scholars would say that the writing style is different than what Paul used in his other epistles.

- Paul was the apostle to the Gentiles, Peter was the apostle to the Jews (Gal 2:7-8), so why would Paul write an epistle to the Jews?

So on the question of authorship of Hebrews, we really don't know.

II. Audience

Far more important than authorship is the audience it was written to. This is the most important thing to understand in order to understand and properly interpret Hebrews. So who was the audience for Hebrews?

- Believers (1:2-3)
- 2nd generation (2:2-3)
- Jews
- Living in the Land of Israel
- Believers

Heb 1:2-3:

2 in these last days has spoken to **us** in *His* Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom He also made the world.

- "...us" - whatever is true of the author is also true of his audience; if the author was saved (obviously) then the audience is saved as well.

3 And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power. When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high,

- From v3 you get the idea that the audience's sins have been forgiven, which is only true of a saved person.

Heb 2:3: how will **we** escape if **we** neglect so great a **salvation**? After it was at first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard,

- "...we" [2x] - the author again groups himself together with his audience

- "...salvation" - if you don't have salvation (are not saved), you don't have a salvation to neglect.

Heb 3:1: Therefore, **holy brothers and sisters**, partakers of a heavenly calling, consider the Apostle and High Priest of **our confession**: Jesus;

- "...holy brothers *and sisters*" - sounds like the author knows his audience is saved...they are "holy" and they are the author's "brothers *and sisters*"

— "brothers" - *adelphos*, used 10x in Hebrews, sometimes it refers to Christ's human brothers, other times to humanity in general, but 6 out of the 10 times it refers to fellow believers (saved people) (Cf. 2:11; 3:1,12; 10:19; 13:23,24)

Heb 4:1: Therefore, we must fear if, while a promise remains of entering His **rest**, any one of you may seem to have come short *of it*.

- The problem with the audience is not that they needed salvation; they had salvation, they needed to "rest" on the promises of God

Heb 4:3: For **we who have believed** enter *that* rest, just as He has said, "AS I SWORE IN MY ANGER, THEY CERTAINLY SHALL NOT ENTER MY REST," although His works were finished from the foundation of the world.

- "...we who have believed" - clearly talking about himself and his audience, who have believed

Heb 4:14: Therefore, since **we have a great high priest** who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, **let's hold firmly to our confession**.

- "...we have a great high priest" - Jesus is not your high priest unless you are saved; "we" includes both author and audience

- "...let's hold firmly to our confession" - "let us" hold firmly to "our" confession...clearly talking to saved people

Heb 4:16: Therefore **let's approach the throne of grace** with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace for help at the time of *our* need.

- "...let's approach the throne of grace" - "let us" approach the throne of grace. Certainly unsaved can approach the throne of grace to confess their belief, but the author is not imploring his audience toward salvation...he's imploring them to "receive mercy and grace" when they are in difficult times.

Heb 9:14: how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, **cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?**

— An unsaved person does not need to cleanse their conscience from dead works...they need to first believe on Jesus Christ by faith, then cleanse their conscience. You only tell a believer to "cleanse their conscience."

Heb 10:10: By this will, **we have been sanctified** through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all time.

- "...we have been sanctified" - "we" (author and audience) have been sanctified (positionally); you can only be positionally sanctified if you are already justified.

Heb 10:15: And the Holy Spirit also testifies to **us**; for after saying,

- "us" (author and audience) - the Holy Spirit does not testify to unbelievers; He convicts them of their sin of unbelief

Heb 10:22: let's approach God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

- You can't say this about an unsaved person. The unsaved do not need their hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience, they need to first place their faith/trust in Jesus Christ and receive the indwelling Holy Spirit.

Heb 10:36-39:

36 For **you have need of endurance**, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised.

37 FOR YET IN A VERY LITTLE WHILE, HE WHO IS COMING WILL COME, AND WILL NOT DELAY.

38 BUT MY RIGHTEOUS ONE WILL LIVE BY FAITH; AND IF HE SHRINKS BACK, MY SOUL HAS NO PLEASURE IN HIM.

39 But we are not among those who shrink back to destruction, but of those who have faith for the safekeeping of the soul.

- These believers do not need salvation, then need endurance

Heb 12:7: It is for discipline that you endure; **God deals with you as with sons**; for what son is there whom *his* father does not discipline?

- "...God deals with you as with sons" - God does not deal with unbelievers as "sons" because they have not yet become children of God until they are saved

— The reason the audience was going through discipline is because they were children of God. God doesn't discipline those who are not His.

Heb 12:28: Therefore, since **we receive a kingdom** which cannot be shaken, let's show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe;

- "...we receive a kingdom" - unbelievers do not receive a kingdom; the audience are citizens of the coming kingdom. "We" means "what is true of me is also true of you."

There are 38 exhortations to Christians in Hebrews, and not a single one of them exhorts the readers to be saved or put their faith in Christ.

- 2nd generation (2:3)

The book was written to the 2nd generation after the apostolic (1st) generation. This is why they were somewhat weak in their faith and were tempted to go into the sacrificial OT system.

Heb 2:3: how will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? After it was at first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard,

- "It" (salvation) was "first spoken through the Lord" to the apostles, then "it was confirmed to us" (the second generation) "by those who heard" (the first/apostolic generation).
- As it (salvation) was confirmed to us (the second generation), it was done so by "signs and wonders" and by "various miracles and gifts by the Holy Spirit" (v4).

- Jews

We get this obviously from the name of the book, "Hebrews," which we can trace back all the way to 180 AD. The person who wrote the book, as well as the audience it was written to, obviously had a lot of knowledge of Jewish history, the OT sacrificial system, and OT rituals.

You don't find in this book the typical conflict that we see elsewhere in the NT between saved Gentiles and saved Jews.

Hebrews is one of six epistles in the NT written specifically to Jewish Christians (Matthew, 1&2 Peter, James, Jude, and Hebrews).

- Living in the Land of Israel

Jewish Christians were heavily persecuted in the land in the first century, and many of them got out of town in order to avoid it (Acts 8:3-4). Saul was the instigator of most of this persecution until his encounter with Christ on the Damascus Road (Acts 9).

But not every believing Jew left Jerusalem, some stuck around. Hebrews was written to these believers, who still lived in Jerusalem in spite of the persecution. We know this because the Jews that Hebrews addresses have a desire to go back to the temple rituals, and the temple was located in Jerusalem. So the audience for Hebrews lived in and around Jerusalem, in the Land of Israel.

III. Date

- Must have been written **before 95 AD** because Clement of Rome quoted from it in 95 AD
- Must have been written **before 70 AD** because the temple was still standing and functional (Cf. Heb 8:4,13; 9:6; 10:1-2; 13:10)

Heb 10:1: For the Law, since it has *only* a shadow of the good things to come *and* not the form of those things itself, can never, by the **same sacrifices which they offer continually every year**, make those who approach perfect.

— The sacrificial system was still in place and functioning in the temple in Jerusalem (present tense verbs)

- Must have been written before 64 AD based on Heb 12:4

Heb 12:4: You have not yet **resisted to the point of shedding blood** in your striving against sin;

— Refers to martyrdom...they had not yet begun to be martyred for their faith in Christ. Martyrdom began in 64 AD under Nero, who brought in the first imperial persecution of Christians. Christians before 64 AD knew of and experienced persecution, but it was mainly within the church (believing Jews against believing Gentiles) or from unbelieving/pharisaic Jews against believing Jews & Gentiles).

But you can't push the writing too early because Hebrews was written to the second generation of Jewish believers, after the apostles. So a date of 62-64 AD seems to be the best fit. Early enough to still have the sacrificial system in place in the temple and avoid Roman imperial persecution/martyrdom, but late enough to ensure that it applies to the second generation of Jewish believers.

IV. Occasion

What are the circumstances that gave rise to the writing of Hebrews? Since the Bible is "crisis literature" what "crisis" is the book of Hebrews addressing?

- 70 AD

Israel was under divine discipline by God because of her national rejection of her Messiah. Daniel predicted this national discipline (Dan 9:26). Jesus wept during the Triumphal Entry because He knew that the nation was going to reject Him. Thus, at that time, He disclosed the ramifications of their rejection (Luke 19:41-44).

The consequences of their rejection of the Messiah goes all the way back to the Mosaic Covenant, in the blessings and curses section (Cf. Deut 28:49-50). This discipline on the nation had not yet been imposed on Israel, but it was coming like a freight train.

- Heb 3:1

Therefore, holy brothers *and sisters*, partakers of a heavenly calling, consider the Apostle and High Priest of **our confession**: Jesus;

- The audience of Hebrews had made a public confession of Christ. They had publicly confessed Christ as Lord in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation that had rejected Him as King and crucified Him.

How did they "confess" Christ? Through baptism. When a Jewish believer was water baptized, they were saying that Israel was wrong to reject Christ, and the Church and its message is right. Baptism was a public acknowledgement and stand on this unpopular belief.

In Acts 2:40, Peter tells the unbelieving Jews assembled for Pentecost to "Be saved from this perverse generation!" What he's saying is that everyone around you, the entire nation of Israel, is under the judgment that Jesus articulated at the Triumphal Entry (Luke 19:41-44), but you can come out from under that judgment through faith in Christ and then publicly acknowledging it through baptism.

- Unbelieving Jews placing audience under duress to return to Judaism

Once the Jews living in and around Jerusalem began to put their faith in Christ and publicly confession their separation from Israel through water baptism, the unbelieving (religious) Jews began to pressure them to return to Judaism.

- Audience being worn down

Through this perpetual and escalating persecution by the unbelieving (religious) Jews, the Jewish believers were becoming worn down. They were becoming tired of the constant

duress they were under, all day every day from these religious Jews.

So they began to consider, Geez, my life would be so much easier if I just went back to the temple, back to my former religion, back to the rituals and sacrifices. If I did that, these unbelieving/religious Jews would stop bothering and persecuting me and my life would be a whole lot easier.

Hebrews was written to tell them: DON'T DO IT!! Don't succumb to the persecution of these religious Jews and don't bow to their pressure to return to Judaism.

- Temple still standing

The temptation to go back into Judaism was real because the temple was still standing and operating in Jerusalem. This is why we get a 62-64 AD time of writing for Hebrews.

V. Purpose

The purpose for the author writing Hebrews is so that his readers would not lapse back into Judaism in order to avoid or minimize the persecution they were under from believing Jews. The author of Hebrews uses two tools to fulfill his purpose for writing: logic and warnings.

Logic

Encouragement to these Jewish Christians to not bow to the pressure and persecution to return/lapse back into Judaism in order to alleviate the persecution they were under.

The encouragement is that what these believers already have in Christ is superior to every vestige of Judaism (angels, Moses, and the Aaronic priesthood). If they lapsed back into Judaism, it would be a significant downgrade over what they had in Christ.

And there are warnings throughout Hebrews that if they did go back to Judaism, bad things would happen to them. They wouldn't lose their salvation, but there would be significant temporal penalties that they would experience if they went back into Judaism.

What is important to understand is that Hebrews is not an attack on the institutions of Judaism. How could the author of Hebrews do that when God was the creator of the institutions of Judaism? So the problem is not that the institutions of Judaism were bad or wrong, it's that Jesus Christ is so much better. The word "better" is used 13x in Hebrews. So if these believing Jews (the audience for Hebrews) returns to Judaism to get out of persecution, they are retrogressing to an inferior (not a bad) revelation. So what the author starts to explain to them is that they have the strength to not retrogress because they have a High Priest who sits at the right hand of the Father, not after the order of Aaron, but after the order of Melchizedek, who can help you say no to this tremendous pressure that you are under.

The author of Hebrews uses beautiful logic to argue that it wouldn't be wise for these believers to go back to Judaism: major premise, minor premise, then conclusion. What the author argues is that what these believers had in Christ was higher, better, and superior to

everything the temple system had to offer which, by the way (and you don't know this yet), is about to be destroyed anyway.

The Jews revered angels, so Heb 1-2 argues how Jesus is far superior to the angels. The author's logic is that if he can show that Jesus is higher than the angels, then he can prove that Jesus is higher than any message found in Judaism. This doesn't make sense to a Gentile, but it makes perfect sense if you put yourself into the shoes of a Jew who has always revered angels.

In Heb 3-4, the author argues that Jesus is higher than Moses. If the Jews revered anyone, it was Moses. Moses was synonymous with the Law, so if the author could prove that Jesus was higher than Moses, it makes Jesus higher than the Law.

Midway through Heb 4 through Heb 10, the author argues that Jesus is higher than Aaron. If he can prove to his audience that Jesus is higher than Aaron, symbolic of the priesthood, then you can show that the priesthood that Jesus is currently orchestrating as our High Priest is better, superior, higher than the entire Aaronic priesthood system that goes all the way back to Leviticus. And by the way, the current priesthood of Christ will give you something that the Aaronic priesthood never gave anyone: rest.

The audience of Hebrews needed rest because they were under duress, pressure, persecution, to return to Judaism.

Warnings

The five warnings in Hebrews all basically say the same thing: if you go back to Judaism, bad things are going to happen to you. There are five times in Hebrews where the author will interrupt his train of thought and issue a warning to his readers. Then once the warning is over, he goes back to his previous train of thought:

- 2:1-4 - warning against drifting
- 3:7—4:13 - warning against disobedience
- 5:10—6:20 - warning against immaturity
- 10:26-29 - warning against despising the truth
- 12:25-29 - warning against denying the truth

The biggest interpretive challenge in Hebrews is that these warnings are so severe that many Christians believe that they could not be directed at saved people. This is why hardening your understanding and belief that Hebrews was written to saved people is so important, because if you think it was written to a combination of believers and unbelievers, and the warning passages are directed toward unbelievers, you will completely miss the benefit and application of this book.

There are four different approaches to the warning passages in Hebrews:

1. Hypothetical - the warning passages are so severe that many believe they present hypothetical situations (as opposed to reality). Even Charles Ryrie takes this view:

Others understand the passage to be a warning to genuine believers to urge them on in Christian growth and maturity. To 'fall away' is impossible (since, according to this view, true believers are eternally secure), but the phrase is placed in the sentence to strengthen the warning. It is similar to saying something like this to a class of students: 'It is impossible for a student, once enrolled in this course, if he turns the clock back [which cannot be done], to start the course over. Therefore, let all students go on to deeper knowledge.' In this view the phrases in v4-5 are understood to refer to the conversion experience. [Ryrie Study Bible, Heb 6:1-8]

2. Arminian - the Arminian view is actually closer to the truth than the other views because they at least acknowledge that Hebrews was written to a believing audience. But, their belief, obviously, is that if these believers retrogress back into Judaism, they lost their salvation.
3. Calvinist/Reformed - this view believes that these warnings are issued to unsaved people. They get that from their incorrect belief in the P of TULIP, the Perseverance of the Saints. If a person claims to be a Christian, but does not persevere in their faith until the very end, they were never "truly saved" to begin with. Their theology believes that nothing as severe as what is discussed in these warning passages could ever happen to a Christian because a Christian will automatically persevere in their faith until the day they die IF they are "truly saved" and a "genuine believer".
4. Loss of blessings - the consequences outlined in the five warning passages have nothing to do with a person's eternal destination, heaven or hell. It is something very serious that could happen to me in my life, unrelated to salvation. The prime example of this interpretation is Kadesh-Barnea, which the author uses as an illustration of what he is talking about. The Israelites were already a saved people, who came to the border of their inheritance/blessing, saw there were giants in the land, lost their faith, and didn't enter. By not entering, they forfeited a blessing in their life because they did not walk by faith in God, but rather by their own sight. They didn't, however, forfeit heaven because Moses was also in that group, and that entire group is found in the Hall of Faith in Heb 11. Bottom line: they forfeited a blessing that they could have had, it was given to them by God and there for the taking, because of their lack of faith. And none of this had anything to do with heaven or hell.

VI. Message

The superiority of the full revelation of Christ in comparison to OT Judaism is shown through Christ's superiority to every major vestige of Judaism, and the author wrote Hebrews so that his audience would not lapse back into Judaism in order to avoid further persecution.

VII. Outline

I. Doctrinal section (1:1—10:18)

- (1) Christ's attributes (1:1-3)
- (2) Christ is superior to the angels (1:4—2:18)
- (3) Christ is superior to Moses (3:1—4:13)
- (D) Christ is superior to Aaron (4:14—10:18)

II. Practical section (10:19—13:25)

- (1) Exhortations and pastoral reminders (10:19-39; 12; 13:1-19)
- (2) Hall of Faith (11:1-40)
- (3) Benediction (13:20-25)

Author

The Book of Hebrews is an anonymous letter. Thus, numerous suggestions have been given as to who wrote the book. Almost every character in the Book of Acts (except Dorcas) has been suggested as a possible author. Many characters found throughout the NT as a whole have been suggested. One prominent suggestion is that the book was written by Apollos (Acts 18:24). It is possible to harmonize the book's detailed understanding of the OT system with Apollos since he was a man "mighty in the Scriptures" (Acts 18:24b). It is also argued that Apollos is an appropriate candidate given the fact that he was an Alexandrian Greek (Acts 18:24). It is suggested that Hebrews follows the logical style and rhetorical pattern of the Alexandrian Greeks. Another worthy suggestion as to authorship is Barnabas. The factors favoring Barnabas include his status as a Levite (Acts 4:36), his close ties to Paul, and the fact that Barnabas and Timothy presumably knew one another. Timothy had been converted in the vicinity of the first missionary journey (Acts 16:1-3) that Barnabas had accompanied Paul on. The fact that Barnabas was a Levite may explain the Jewishness of the letter. The connection between Barnabas and Timothy would explain the writer's connection to Timothy (13:23).

The most popular suggestion for authorship of Hebrews, however, is the apostle Paul. Clement of Alexandria first made this suggestion in 180 AD. This suggestion has several pieces of evidence in its favor. First, just as Paul and Timothy are associated throughout the NT, the author of Hebrews is associated with Timothy (13:23). Second, the writer draws illustrations from Israel's past failures (4:11) just as Paul does (1 Cor 10). Third, the writer places great emphasis upon the New Covenant just as Paul does (2 Cor 3:6). Fourth, Hebrews was probably written from Rome (13:24) just as Paul's prison letters were written from Rome.

Fifth, Pauline authorship of Hebrews was accepted in the Eastern Church from the end of the second century onward. Through the influence of Jerome and Augustine, Pauline authorship also became the dominant view in the Western Church.

Sixth, similarities of doctrine and style can also be detected upon comparing Hebrews to Paul's writings. For example, both exhibit a high esteem for the OT in general and the Law in particular. Both Hebrews and Paul couch the relationship between the Law and New Covenant in terms of good versus better (8:6; Rom 7:12). Also, both Hebrews and Paul seem to promote faith over attempts of the flesh to keep the Law. Moreover, both Hebrews and Paul place a high priority on the person and work of Christ. Furthermore, both focus upon Christ's final propitiatory sacrifice. In addition, both make extensive use of OT citations. Also, both exhibit a pattern of basing exhortations upon previously expounded doctrinal truth (Rom 1–11; 12–16; Heb 1:1–10:18; 10:19–13:25). Finally, a similarity in phraseology is found when comparing Hebrews to Paul's letters.

Despite the potency of the arguments favoring Pauline authorship, numerous counter arguments can be cited. However, upon closer inspection, many of these counter arguments do not seem unassailable. First, in Hebrews the name of the author is not stated. However, in Paul's other letters he attaches his name (2 Thess 3:17). However, Paul may not have given his name for good reason. The believing Jews may have already held him in high esteem. Thus it was not necessary for him to sign his name. Also, he may not have signed his name on account of the fact that the Hebrews would have overtly rejected the book without even considering its message because it came from someone who was not an original apostle or from someone who was a member of the Sanhedrin. Second, the author of Hebrews cites the OT exclusively from the LXX version while Paul cites from the MT as well as the LXX in his other letters. Third, differences in language and style can be found upon comparing Hebrews with Paul's other writings. However, perhaps these two objections can be explained in terms of someone other than Paul writing the letter yet still writing it under his supervision. The use of an amanuensis was common in the NT world (1 Peter 5:12). Mark seems to have written his gospel under the supervision of Peter (1 Peter 5:13). Also, the differences of language and style are more understandable if Tertullian's suggestion is accurate that Paul wrote the letter in Hebrew and Luke translated it into Greek. Fourth, Paul could not be the writer of this letter since it was written to Jews and Paul was the apostle to the Gentiles. If Paul had written to the Jews he would have stepped upon Peter's jurisdiction since Peter was the apostle to the Jews and Paul was the apostle to the Gentiles (Gal 2:7–8). However, according to Acts 9:15, part of Paul's ministry was to the Jews as well. Also, Paul touched upon Jewish issues in his other writings (Gal 3–4; Col 2:16–17).

Although Paul may have indeed been the author, it is best to not be dogmatic on the matter. No clear scholarly consensus has emerged concerning who the writer was. Perhaps

the best suggestion was articulated by Origen when he wrote, "As to who actually wrote the epistle, God knows the truth of the matter." Because the writer desired anonymity, it seems best to let his wishes stand. While debates about authorship can be interesting, who wrote the book has little bearing upon interpretive issues within the book. Nor does the issue of authorship affect the book's authority, canonicity, and trustworthiness.

Date

The Book of Hebrews must have been written before 95 AD since Clement of Rome quoted from it. Moreover, the book must have been written prior to 70 AD since it makes numerous references to the temple system as still being in operation (8:4,13; 9:6; 10:1-2; 13:10). If the temple had not been standing at the time the letter was written, there would have been no temptation on the part of the audience to seek refuge in the temple system. Because Titus destroyed the temple in 70 AD, Hebrews must have been written prior to that time. Another reason that Hebrews was written prior to 70 AD is that the writer tells his audience that they had not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood (12:4). Because much Jewish blood was shed in the events of 70 AD, the letter must have been written prior to that time. If the approaching day mentioned in 10:25 is a reference to the events of 70 AD, then Hebrews must have been written just before these events transpired.

Furthermore, the book was most probably written prior to 64 AD, which marks the beginning of the Neronian persecutions. Since there is no reference to any of these persecutions in the letter, it must have been written before they took place. However, it is inappropriate to place the date of the book earlier than 62 AD. The recipients of the letter were second-generation believers (2:3). Thus, there must be adequate time for the apostolic generation to be replaced by the second generation. Thus, a date of 62-64 AD for the composition of the book would not be far from wrong.

Audience

Believing Status

A far more significant matter regarding how the book is to be interpreted is the issue of the spiritual status of those who received the letter. The believing status of the audience has a direct bearing upon how the warning passages are to be understood. If the audience was already regenerated, then neither the Calvinist nor Arminian views of the warning passages can be sustained. If the audience was already justified, then the warning passages cannot be addressed to unbelievers or an audience comprised of believers and unbelievers. Nor can these warning passages deal with loss of salvation since too many other passages teach eternal security (John 6:39; 10:28; Rom 8:29-39; Eph 1:12-14; 4:30; Phil 1:6; 1 Peter 1:3-5). Rather, the warning passages are warning against a loss of blessings that flow from justification and have nothing to do with initial justification itself. This view allows for a theology that says while all those blessed are believers, not all believers are blessed.

It is clear from the book as a whole that the addressees were genuine believers. The author routinely uses “us” when describing his audience thus equating his own spiritual status with that of his audience (1:2). He also refers to his audience as those who had their sins purged (1:3) and those who were on the verge of neglecting rather than rejecting their salvation (2:1-3). The notion of neglecting implies a prior possession. For example, the fact that Timothy was told not to neglect his ministry gift automatically implies that he presently possesses such a gift (1 Tim 4:14). He also calls his audience holy brethren who are partakers of the heavenly calling (3:1). The term “brethren” is used 10x in Hebrews. Four of these uses do not describe the original audience. The word simply refers to either humanity in general (2:17) or is used in the OT sense of Jewish brethren (2:12; 7:5; 8:11). However, the remaining six uses do describe the original audience. These uses either inarguably refer to believers or must refer to believers since the exhortations they are associated with would be inapplicable to unbelievers (2:11; 3:1, 12; 10:19; 13:22,23). In Heb 4 the writer expresses concern that his audience will not attain *rest* rather than not attain *salvation* (4:1). He also refers to them as fellow believers together with him (4:3). He assumes that Christ their high priest is interceding for them (4:14, Cf. 7:26-8:1; 10:21), and that they already have access to the throne of grace to obtain help in time of need (4:16). He speaks of the intense persecution they have already experienced (10:32-34). Why would they experience such intense persecution on account of an empty profession? He assumes their need is patient endurance rather than salvation (10:36-39). According to 10:22-25, they have been cleansed, sprinkled from an evil conscience, made a public confession, and identified with other believers. He presupposes that they could serve the living God (9:14), have been sanctified (10:10), have received the ministry of the Holy Spirit (10:15), and that Jesus is the author and finisher of their faith (12:2). He also refers to them as sons (12:7) and as those who are inheriting a kingdom (12:28).

The believing status of the audience is also evidenced through the numerous exhortations given in the book. Pentecost identifies at least 38 exhortations that the writer gives to his readers. Yet there is not to be found in the book a single exhortation to trust Christ for salvation. One would expect this exhortation to show up at least once if the writer was addressing unbelievers. By way of comparison, one of the reasons we know that the Gospel of John has an evangelistic purpose is because the purpose statement of the book is an exhortation to saving faith (John 20:31). Yet no similar exhortation is found in Hebrews. In sum, it is safe to say that the book was written to believers rather than to unbelievers or a mixed audience. Thus, the warning passages should be understood in terms of conveying a loss of blessing flowing from justification and are unrelated to justification itself. See **Addendum: 8 Evidences Why Hebrews was Written to Believers Only** below.

Second Generation Believers

Although the audience was comprised of believers, they were second-generation believers. This becomes clear from 2:3, which says, "...After it was at first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard." Thus, a chain is established from the Lord, to the apostolic generation, to the next generation that heard the gospel from the apostolic generation. The apostolic generation confirmed the message to the next generation through signs and wonders performed under the power of the Holy Spirit. The fact that the audience was a second-generation Christian audience may explain why they were more casual about the value of their initial confession.

National Identity

Some have postulated that the book was written to Gentiles. They contend that the title "Hebrews" is not found in the earliest manuscripts and the book was not so named until Clement did so in 180 AD. This view is also buttressed by the arguments for Pauline authorship since Paul was the apostle to the Gentiles and Peter was the apostle to the Jews. However the arguments for a Gentile audience should be discarded. Why would a Gentile audience be concerned with Levitical priestly practices? The audience was obviously well acquainted with the OT system and rituals. The numerous references to the OT and OT history argue convincingly that a Jewish audience is in view. Others have postulated a mixed audience comprised of both Jews and Gentiles. A Jewish/Gentile audience is apparent in Paul's other letters as he deals with Jewish/Gentile conflicts (Eph 2). However, no such conflict is evident in Hebrews. Thus, a purely Jewish audience is addressed.

Location

Other NT letters addressed exclusively to believing Jews are addressed to those spread out in the *Diaspora* (1 Peter 1:1). However, the situation seems to be different in Hebrews. The audience is under duress to return to the Levitical system as represented by the functioning temple. For this temptation to be real, the audience must have been in close proximity to the temple. Thus, it is safe to conclude that the audience was located in the land of Canaan. The letter's frequent allusions to the functioning temple (8:4, 13; 9:6; 10:1-2; 13:10) as well as the audience's intimate knowledge of the details of the Levitical system seem to support this conclusion as well.

Addendum: 8 Evidences Why Hebrews was Written to Believers Only

Because the epistle to the Hebrews is a challenging book to understand, many believers today don't take the time and effort to mine its rich truths. One reason it has become difficult to understand is the debate concerning whom Hebrews was written to.¹ Many view Hebrews as a message that was written to a combination of "true" believers and "professing" believers, i.e., unbelievers. With the mixed-audience view, the five warning passages (2:1-4; 3:1-4,16; 5:11—6:12; 10:19-39; 12:14-29) are typically regarded as being addressed to "professing" believers (= unbelievers), with the rest of the book addressing

"true" believers. However, if the entire book of Hebrews was in fact written to "true" believers, then all of it becomes beneficial to believers today. In this way a believer today doesn't have to dismiss parts of Hebrews because those parts were not written to him. There are eight reasons to believe the entire book of Hebrews was written to believers (i.e., to those who have eternal life):

First, the writer calls the audience "holy brethren" (3:1).

Second, the writer describes himself and his readers ("we") as ones who "have faith" (10:39). This would be true only of believers.

Third, readers are referred to as "sons" who have a relationship with God the Father (12:5,7,8). Unbelievers, professing to believe or otherwise, do not have a "son" relationship with God the Father until they are adopted and have eternal life (Gal 4:5).

Fourth, the author did not exhort readers to "believe in Jesus for eternal life" anywhere in Hebrews. The starting point for unbelievers is to place their faith in Jesus Christ for the gift of eternal life (John 3:16; Rom 6:23).

Fifth, the author did exhort 13:22) readers to "press on to maturity" (6:1) in the faith they already possessed (6:4-5). To exhort unbelievers to "press on to maturity" makes no sense. Without faith in Christ there is no life to be matured!

Sixth, the readers went through sufferings, reproaches, and tribulations for their faith (10:32-33). They even "accepted joyfully the seizure of [their] property" (10:34, NASB). It seems unlikely that unbelievers would be willing to go through these things for a nonexistent faith.

Seventh, in each of the five warning passages, the writer uses first person plural pronouns (us or we); he includes himself with the readers. Because the author was a believer in Jesus Christ, this is noteworthy. He views the warnings as applicable to both himself, as a believer, and to his readers, also believers. Had the warnings been for "professing" believers/unbelievers, he would not have included himself. For example, (10:26) says, "For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins." The writer sees "sinning willfully"— a return to animal sacrifices as a means for atonement, (10:29)— as something which he, as a believer, could commit, as could the believers he is writing to. After the five warning passages below are the verses containing "us" and/or "we" demonstrating the author included himself in the warning.

First warning (2:1-4): 2:1,3

Second warning (3:1—4:16): 3:6,14; 4:14

Third warning (5:11—6:12): 6:1

Fourth warning (10:19-39): 10:19-24,26

Fifth warning (12:14-29): 12:25

Because the warning passages in Hebrews include the author, it does not stand to reason that these sections are addressed to unbelievers.

Eighth, there are no clear signs *in the text* to indicate switching of the audience between “true” believers and “professing” believers. The burden of proof for a spiritually-mixed readership rests on those who propose this view. This is not simply an argument from silence. It is logical to assume that the writer is addressing one consistent group of Jewish believers unless a change is clearly indicated by the text. The idea that the readership switches back and forth between believers and unbelievers seems to be governed by its proponents’ need to support their theological position rather than by evidence from the text.

Why Does It Matter That Hebrews Was Written to Believers Only?

Hebrews is a “word of exhortation” (13:22) written to Jewish believers who were experiencing persecution and considering returning to the external practices of Judaism, including animal sacrifices for sins. The writer encourages these believers to persevere in their faith, even in a hostile world. This encouragement includes five warnings about the consequences of not holding fast to their faith.

Rosemarie Matlak’s summary relates the overall message of Hebrews to believers today: As modern day Christians, we are also beguiled and pressured to distance ourselves from Christ through false teachers, worldly philosophies, discouraging circumstances, social pressure, and even persecution. As believers we all experience times of spiritual defeat...in our walk with God. It can be tempting to return to our old way of life where we felt accepted and admired...and to the pursuit of wealth and comfort rewarded us with immediate gratification.” [Rosemarie Matlak, *Hebrews Study Guide* (2010), p6.]

Many of today’s believers are not Jewish and none of us live in the First Century, but we all still face similar challenges. Over the past twenty years many born-again people have left Bible-teaching churches for the liturgical practices of Catholicism or Orthodoxy. Many believers have departed from the teachings of God’s Word to practice counterfeit means to spiritual maturity like transcendental meditation, centering prayer, *lectio divina*, and prayer labyrinths. Sadly many believers have been duped into ceasing to believe that everlasting life is everlasting and thus they have begun trying to give and work so as to retain that life. Legalism both for justification and sanctification is quite alluring today. When a believer in Jesus Christ returns to a religious system or perspective that denies the sufficient work of Christ on the cross, they are making the mistake the book of Hebrews warns against. One way Hebrews is applicable to Gentiles today is when an active Mormon comes to faith in Christ apart from their works he is contradicting the teachings of the church of his family and friends. The result is that he will face very real pressure to stop saying he knows he has everlasting life simply by faith alone in Christ alone. If this new believer continues to

confess his belief in justification by faith alone, the result is often complete rejection by all his friends and family. New believers from a Mormon background face a very real temptation to return to Mormonism at least in some external way to restore relationships with their relatives in particular.

Of course, leaving a Bible-teaching church and returning to the works-based system of Mormonism will prevent the new believer from going on to spiritual maturity and puts him in danger of being disciplined by the Lord.

Even someone who has no religious background may be tempted and/or pressured to return to their previous lifestyle without God instead of following Jesus more closely and continuing on to spiritual maturity. Old friends may hound the believer to come back and party like the old days. These “friends” and their lifestyle may hamper the believer from growing spiritually. But Hebrews is warning against more than just returning to a sinful lifestyle. The warning is against denying the sufficient sacrifice of Jesus Christ in their life. This might take the form of verbally rejecting or denying critical truths about Jesus including his death, resurrection, or ability to forgive our sins. Such a change in beliefs is what Hebrews warns against.

The writer of Hebrews was deeply concerned because he knew that the believer who departs from the faith reaps fiery judgment in this life (6:7-8; 10:27-31). Worse, the believer who apostatizes will not be one of those chosen to be Christ’s partners (*metochoi*), His co-rulers, in the life to come (1:9; 3:14). Instead of hearing the Lord’s “Well done, good servant” at the Judgment Seat of Christ (Luke 19:17), he will experience rebuke and shame before His Lord and Savior (Luke 19:20-26; 1 John 2:28). That’s why this matters. Departure from the faith is a terrible thing.

Conclusion

Knowing that the entire book of Hebrews was written to believers in Jesus Christ is vital to understanding God’s message in Hebrews. Because it was written to believers, the entire book is relevant for today’s Christians. The message is not that “professing” believers must prove their faith by commitment and perseverance, but rather that “true” believers are to move on to spiritual maturity despite difficulties. The dangers are clearly described in the five warning passages in Hebrews: negligence, unbelief, immaturity, willful sinning, and unresponsiveness. A believer today who “neglects” their spiritual life, remains “immature” and “unresponsive” to the Lord Jesus is not at a spiritually neutral place. These warnings remind us that not going on to maturity has negative consequences, and we must guard against these dangers if we are to press on to maturity.

Occasion for Writing

The nation of Israel had come under judgment because of its rejection of its own messiah (Dan 9:26; Matt 12:31-32; 23:36-38; 24:2; Acts 2:40). This judgment was to be meted out in the rapidly approaching events of 70 AD. However, the Jewish believers addressed in the

letter through their baptism or confession (3:1; 4:14; 10:23) had publicly severed themselves from the nation and instead had publicly identified themselves with the new order ushered in by Christ's death. In making such a public statement, they were publicly testifying to the inadequacy of the Jewish religion. Such a public statement obviously did not sit well with the Jewish leaders of the time. Thus, these leaders were placing the recipients of the letter under duress to return to the religion of Judaism.

The primary tool that the leadership was using to create this desired result was persecution. The audience had already been put out of the synagogue (John 16:2) and had experienced religious persecution at the hands of the Jews (10:32-34). Apparently the Hebrews were being worn down by this persecution over an extended period of time. Thus, they were becoming discouraged. Consequently, they were contemplating renouncing their confession and returning to Judaism. Someone may have had the idea that if they just showed up on the right feast day, then their persecutors would overlook their baptism. Perhaps they thought that their persecutors would forget their baptism completely since thousands were being baptized and the Jewish establishment had no record of who was baptized. After all, if Paul had returned to temple activity (Acts 20:16; 21), why could they not do it also? The temple already figured prominently in their thinking by virtue of the fact that the Book of Acts records numerous instances of believers fellowshipping in the temple (Acts 2:1; 3:1,11; 5:12,21,42). They thought they could still be Christians and hold on to some aspects of Judaism for the purpose of appeasing their persecutors as a means of escaping persecution. Thus, their desire to return to Judaism should be categorized as regression rather than apostasy. They were not completely renouncing Christianity. Rather, they were simply syncretizing some aspects of Judaism with Christianity for the purpose of appeasing their persecutors and alleviating the persecution they were under.

The temptation to lapse back into Judaism was compounded by the fact that they were living in a transitional era in between the Day of Pentecost and the destruction of the temple in 70 AD. Because the temple was still standing during this era, it was still available to seek refuge in. The temptation to lapse back into Judaism was also compounded by the fact that the addressees of the letter were second-generation believers who may not have appreciated the significance of their baptism as much as the first generation of believers had. The temptation to lapse back into Judaism was also compounded by the fact that they had only been excommunicated from the synagogue. Unlike the temple, which was divinely ordained, the synagogue was a human institution. Thus, the argument was probably made that because they had only been removed from the human institution and not the divine institution, it was not too late for them to return to Judaism.

Purpose for Writing

Because of such prolonged religious persecution at the hands of the Jews, the Hebrews were becoming discouraged (12:3). They were in desperate need for a word of

encouragement. Such encouragement and exhortation was the goal of the writer of Hebrews (13:22). The writer accomplishes such exhortation in two ways. First, he shows that what the readers possess in Christ is superior to every significant vestige of Judaism. The writer takes the most significant aspects of Judaism (angels in Heb 1–2, Moses in 3:1–4:13, and the Aaronic order in 4:14–10:18) and shows how Christ is superior in comparison. Given the supremacy of Christ over Judaism, it is foolish to return to Judaism. In using this methodology, the writer in no way disparages Judaism but simply shows that what the believers currently possess is better than anything the previous dispensation had to offer. Thus, the writer's trajectory is from good to better rather than from bad to good (8:6). Hence, the adjective "better" is found 13x throughout the book.

The second strategy that the writer uses to exhort his audience is through the warning passages. Here, the writer warns his audience of the consequences they will face if they syncretize Judaism with Christianity. Thus, the writer warns the believers of the consequences of drifting away from the truth (2:1-4), disobeying the truth (3:7–4:13), immaturity (5:10–6:20), despising the truth (10:26-39), and denying the truth (12:25-29). Because the addressees were already believers, the warnings need to be understood from the perspective of a loss of blessing that flows from justification rather than issues related to justification itself.

Structure/Outline

I. Doctrinal Section of the Letter to the Hebrews (Heb 1:1–10:18)

(1) The attributes of Christ demonstrating Him to be superior to Old Covenant Judaism (1:1-3)

(A) Although God spoke in various ways during the dispensation of the Old Covenant, God has spoken through Christ in the dispensation of the New Covenant (1:1-2a)

(B) Seven significant attributes of Christ showing His superiority to Judaism (1:2b-3)

- (a) Christ is heir of all things (1:2)
- (b) Christ is maker of all things (1:2)
- (c) Christ is the radiance of the Father's glory (1:3)
- (d) Christ is the exact representation of God's nature (1:3)
- (e) Christ upholds all things (1:3)
- (f) Christ made a complete purification of sins (1:3)
- (g) Christ sat down at the right hand of God (1:3)

(2) Christ is superior to the Angels (Heb 1:4–2:18)

(A) Use of Old Testament passages that demonstrate Christ's superiority to the Angels (1:4-14)

- (a) Intro (1:4)

- (b) Psalm 2:7; 2 Sam 7:14 (1:5)
 - (c) Deut 32:43 (1:6)
 - (d) Psalm 104:4 (1:7)
 - (e) Psalm 45:6-7 (1:8-9)
 - (f) Psalm 102:25-27 (1:10-12)
 - (g) Psalm 110:1 (1:13)
 - (h) Conclusion (1:14)
- (B) Hebrews are warned against drifting away from Christ (2:1-4)
- (C) Reasons for the incarnation (2:5-18)
 - (a) To fulfill God's purpose for man (2:5-9a)
 - (b) To taste death for all (2:9b)
 - (c) To bring many sons to glory (2:10-13)
 - (d) To destroy the works of the devil (2:14)
 - (e) To liberate those in fear of death (2:15)
 - (f) To become a faithful priest (2:16-17a)
 - (g) To make atonement for sins (2:17b)
 - (h) To sympathize with those tested (2:18)
- (3) Christ is superior to Moses (Heb 3:1—4:13)
 - (A) Similarities between Christ and Moses (3:1-2)
 - (B) Differences between Christ and Moses (3:3-6)
 - (C) The Hebrews are warned against disobeying God (Heb 3:7—4:13)
 - (a) Rebellion at Kadesh Barnea (3:7-11)
 - (b) Consequences of unbelief (3:12-19)
 - (i) Departure from God (3:12)
 - (ii) Hardening of the heart (3:13-16)
 - (iii) An act of rebellion (3:17)
 - (iv) Loss of blessings (3:18-19)
 - (c) Exhortation to enter the "rest" (4:1-13)
 - (i) Promise of rest (4:1-2)
 - (ii) Scriptural pattern of rest (4:3-5)
 - (iii) Perpetuity of promised rest (4:6-10)
 - (iv) Exhortation to enter rest (4:11-13)
- (4) Christ is superior to Aaron (Heb 4:14—10:18)
 - (A) Christ is our heavenly, sympathetic high priest (4:14-16)
 - (B) Christ fulfills the basic prerequisites of the Aaronic priesthood (5:1-9)
 - (a) Prerequisites (5:1-4)
 - (i) Man (5:1-3)
 - (ii) Called by God (5:4)

- (b) Jesus fulfills the prerequisites
 - (i) Called by God (5:5-6)
 - (ii) Man (5:7-10)
- (C) Believers are warned of the consequences of immaturity (Heb 5:11—6:20)
 - (a) The fact of immaturity (5:11-14)
 - (b) What the audience should leave behind (6:1-3)
 - (c) The warning (6:4-6)
 - (d) The illustration (6:7-8)
 - (e) The confidence (6:9-12)
 - (f) The reason for the confidence (6:13-20)
- (D) The superiority of the Melchizedekian priesthood to the Aaronic priesthood (7:1-28)
 - (a) Description of Melchizedek (7:1-3)
 - (b) Melchizedek is superior to Aaron (7:4-10)
 - (c) Weaknesses of the Levitical priesthood (7:11-19)
 - (d) Melchizedekian priesthood based upon a better covenant (7:20-22)
 - (e) Melchizedekian priesthood based upon resurrection life (7:23-25)
 - (f) Melchizedekian priesthood based upon sinless perfection (7:26-28)
- (E) Christ is superior to Aaron because He occupies a superior position of ministry (8:1-5)
- (F) Christ's priesthood is superior to the Aaronic priesthood because it is based upon a better covenant (8:6-13)
 - (a) Superiority of Christ's covenant (8:6)
 - (b) Temporality of the Levitical covenant (8:7-13)
- (G) The limitations of the earthly tabernacle (9:1-11)
 - (a) Tabernacle furniture (9:1-5)
 - (b) Limitations of the tabernacle (9:6-11)
- (H) Superiority of Christ's sacrifice (Heb 9:12—10:18)
 - (a) Christ's blood is better (9:12)
 - (b) Christ's purification is better (9:13-14)
 - (c) The New Covenants mediated are better (9:15-22)
 - (d) Christ's position is better (9:23-24)
 - (e) Christ's single sacrifice is better (9:25-28)
 - (f) Inadequacy of Levitical sacrifices (10:1-4)
 - (g) Christ's volition is better (10:5-10)
 - (h) The effectiveness of Christ's sacrifice is better (10:11-14)
 - (i) Christ's covenant is better (10:15-18)

II. Application Section of the Letter to the Hebrews (Heb 10:19—13:25)

- (1) Exhortation section (10:19-39)
 - (A) Exhortation to approach God (10:19-22)
 - (B) Exhortation to hold fast to the confession (10:23)
 - (C) Exhortation to do good deeds (10:24)
 - (D) Exhortation to regularly assemble (10:25)
 - (E) Hebrews are warned against despising the gospel (10:26-39)
 - (a) Warning (10:26-31)
 - (b) Encouragement (10:32-39)
- (2) Illustrations of the life of faith (11:1-40)
 - (A) Explanation of faith (11:1)
 - (B) Examples of faith (11:2-40)
 - (a) Intro (11:2)
 - (b) Antediluvian era (11:2-7)
 - (i) Creation (11:3)
 - (ii) Abel (11:4)
 - (iii) Enoch (11:5-6)
 - (iv) Noah (11:7)
 - (c) Patriarchal era (11:8-22)
 - (i) Abraham and Sarah (11:8-19)
 - (ii) Isaac (11:20)
 - (iii) Jacob (11:21)
 - (iv) Joseph (11:22)
 - (d) Mosaic era (11:23-29)
 - (i) Moses' parents (11:23)
 - (ii) Moses (11:24-28)
 - (iii) Israel (11:29)
 - (e) Conquest era (11:30-31)
 - (i) Jericho (11:30)
 - (ii) Rahab (11:31)
 - (f) Subsequent eras (11:32-38)
 - (g) Conclusion (11:39-40)
- (3) Exhortation to patient endurance (12:1-29)
 - (A) The exhortation (12:1)
 - (B) The example of Christ (12:2-4)
 - (C) Exhortation to endure discipline (12:5-13)
 - (D) Miscellaneous ways to endure (12:14-17)
 - (E) The believer's refuge (12:18-24)
 - (F) Hebrews are warned against denying the gospel (12:25-29)

- (4) Pastoral reminders (13:1-19)
 - (A) Love (13:1)
 - (B) Hospitality (13:2)
 - (C) Visiting prisoners (13:3)
 - (D) Sexual fidelity (13:4)
 - (E) Financial fidelity (13:5-6)
 - (F) Imitate leaders (13:7)
 - (G) Doctrinal fidelity (13:9-14)
 - (H) Sacrifices (13:15-16)
 - (a) Praise (13:15)
 - (b) Giving (13:16)
 - (I) Obey leaders (13:17)
 - (J) Prayer (13:18-19)
- (5) Benediction (13:20-25)