

# INTRODUCTION TO HEBREWS

January 19, 1986

## I. Preliminary considerations.

- A. Hebrews is unique as an epistle in all the New Testament (NT).
- B. It does not strictly follow the form of other NT epistles (there is no formal greeting but there is a usual conclusion).
- C. The two most pressing problems connected with the epistle are those of authorship and destination.

## II. Canonicity.

- A. The Western church was slow in according the epistle canonical rank because of the question about its apostolic rank (and probably because heretics appealed to Heb.6 for the impossibility of a second repentance, e.g. the Montanists).
- B. In the East, it was readily received (and considered Pauline).
- C. Late in the fourth century, the West gave the book canonical recognition, including it in the Pauline corpus.

## III. Form.

- A. Hebrews lacks an introduction that ordinarily gives information about the writer and the readers. It concludes with personal items typically found in NT epistles.
- B. In the estimate of the writer himself, Hebrews is considered to be a word of exhortation, Heb.13:22.

## IV. Characteristics.

- A. It has a high literary quality marked by careful construction and elegant diction.
- B. It is permeated with Old Testament (OT) allusions and quotations (for instance, Ps.110:1,4 is used repeatedly). Unlike most NT uses of the OT, the quotations are cited not simply to confirm the doctrine that is taught, but to provide the groundwork for the presentation.
- C. The ritual system of the OT is used as the wrapper for the exposition of the superiority of Christ (the main doctrinal theme of Hebrews). For this the author of Hebrews goes back to the ritual of the tabernacle rather than the temple, ignoring current Judaism.
- D. The finality and superiority of the New Covenant to the old Covenant is evident in the use of the word "better".
- E. The Christology is rich and varied. More than twenty names and titles are employed. The deity and humanity of the Son are emphasized in a way approached only by the gospel of John.
- F. The eschatology is both fulfilled (Heb.1:2; 6:5) and unfulfilled (Heb.9:28; 10:37).
- G. A series of warnings and exhortations are woven into the argument of the epistle. They include the danger of the neglect of salvation and the need to continue to advance to maturity.
- H. Some of the prominent terms used are: angel, holy, sanctify, sin, sacrifice, blood, high priest, promise, covenant, word, witness (verb), better, perfect (verb), faith, salvation, rest, heaven.

## V. Readers.

- A. The epistle was directed to Hebrew Christians who were in danger of apostasizing (cut off from the vast majority of their countrymen who had rejected Jesus as their Messiah, yearning for the splendor of the temple worship, discouraged because of persecution, they were tempted to slip back into Judaism).
- B. The recipients were in Jerusalem or at any rate in Palestine.
- C. The argument that the Jewish cultus cannot save but is merely a shadow of better things (i.e. the reality as seen in Jesus Christ) fits a Jewish audience best. Nowhere is a Jewish readership expressly stated, but that is the audience that best fits the epistle's contents.
- D. Our oldest manuscripts contain the title "To Hebrews" (although this was not part of the original document).
- E. We adhere to the traditional view.

## VI. Authorship.

- A. Hebrews is an anonymous epistle as far as we are concerned, but the author was not unknown to the recipients, cp. Heb.13:19,23.
- B. Uncertainty of authorship is seen throughout Church history, and various persons were named as possible authors, like Paul, Barnabas, Silas, Apollos, and Luke.
- C. Pauline authorship is rendered difficult by these considerations.
  1. His name is not mentioned (always his custom).
  2. The writer seems to place himself outside the circle of apostles in Heb.2:3.
  3. The style is markedly non-Pauline in that the classical touch with its smoothness is evident, there being the absence of rough features such as the anacoluthon (why write to the Jews in a polished style familiar to the Greeks and then write in a rough style to Greeks?).
  4. Paul's pattern of referring to our Lord is absent. Hebrews used the personal name Jesus 9X; Jesus Christ 3X; Lord Jesus once, for a total of 13X. Paul uses Jesus 218X, whether alone or in combination. Christ Jesus, a favorite designation, is totally absent. The titles for Christ such as High Priest, Captain of our salvation, Author and Finisher of our faith, etc., are not found in Paul.
- D. The most likely candidate for authorship of Hebrews in my opinion is Apollos, as:
  1. He was eloquent, Act.18:24.
  2. The OT was familiar to him and accords well with the use of the OT in Hebrews.
  3. Apollos was with Paul from time to time, 1Cor.16:12; cp. Ti.3:13.
  4. He was a Jew of Alexandria, Act.18:24, which accords well with the use of the LXX in Hebrews.
  5. Luther was the first to suggest Apollos.

## VII. Date.

- A. Since the writer speaks of the ritual of the Law in the present tense (Heb.8:4; 9:9; 10:1), we conclude that the temple was still standing.
- B. If the writer had been able to point to the fall of Jerusalem and the cessation of the temple service, it would have served his thesis of the superiority of the new order over the old, but it is nowhere referred to in Hebrews.
- C. So we hold to the traditional view that Hebrews was written some years before the fall of Jerusalem in 70AD.
- D. Jewish Christians living in Palestine needed to focus their attention on the doctrine in Hebrews to avoid the loss associated with the impending national destruction (this sets the stage for the urgency of Hebrews).

## VIII. Outline of the contents. As to contents, Hebrews is decidedly a Christological treatise.

- A. The superiority of Christ and Christianity, Heb.1:1-10:18.
- B. Resulting exhortations, Heb.10:19-13:17.