

## ***The Book of Hebrews: Christ as the Ultimate Revelation of God***



**Why do we follow Christ?** According to the writer of the New Testament letter of Hebrews, we hear and respond because of the nature of Christ's work as the ultimate revelation of God. Our culture presents many things as "the best" or "the newest." Who wants to root for a losing team or use a rotary phone? Hebrews reminds us that our faith is not in the latest fad or idea, but in the **final work** accomplished by Christ on Calvary.

### ***Author, Date, & Location***

The author of Hebrews **does not identify himself** in the text of the correspondence and the personal messages at the end of the book do not offer many clues. Possible authors suggested have included Paul (due to the reference to Timothy in 13:23), Priscilla and Aquila, Apollos, Clement of Rome, and many others. **While Paul has been a popular option during the majority of church history, several facts argue against this idea** - the expert usage of the Greek language (much better than Paul's!), the rhetorical training and skill apparent in the book, and the non-Pauline themes of the material. We can surmise that the author was probably educated in a Greek gymnasium due to his rhetorical skill. His familiarity with Jewish thought demonstrates **deep knowledge of the traditions of Hellenistic Judaism**, most likely in the synagogues of the Diaspora. The author is a leader in a local church body, filled with pastoral concern for the members of their small group. He and the church body are **2<sup>nd</sup> generation Christians**, having received the gospel from those who heard Jesus themselves. Beyond these points, **the identity of the author remains veiled**.

**Many dates have been suggested for Hebrews.** Several facts have traditionally influenced dating the letter. First, the existence of a 2<sup>nd</sup> generation community with members who have been Christians for a long time means decades have passed since the crucifixion. Second, the community has experienced governmental persecution in the past. This leads some scholars to date the letter in conjunction with Claudius' expulsion (49 CE) and/or Nero's persecution (late 60's CE). Finally, Hebrews is quoted in **1<sup>st</sup> Clement**, a letter conventionally dated 95 CE. Conservatively applying this information, **a window of 60-90 CE** based on the citation and the timeline of the Christian community fits the current data.

Likewise, **many locations for the audience of Hebrews have been proposed** – from Spain to Jerusalem. While consensus is far from sure, **Rome is currently favored** based on the greetings by "those from Italy" (13:24, cf. Acts 18:2). Other indications of a Roman connection include the tradition of recognized authority for Hebrews from Roman writers such as Clement, usage of specific terms for leaders found in early church references to Rome, the description of generosity commonly known of Roman Christians, and the possible reference to Claudius' expulsion mentioned previously. The general character of the recipients – deep Jewish knowledge, a small group (probably in a house church), and the urban setting for their concerns – also **matches with the known historical records of the Christian community in Rome**.

## ***Genre & Purpose of the Book of Hebrews***

Although Hebrews is traditionally ascribed as a letter, **it does not fit the normal epistolary genre.** Instead, Hebrews is foremost a speech, **a first century sermon**, meant to be read to the audience of a small house church. Demonstrating his rhetorical skills, the author includes **many advanced techniques** including “hook words” to define topical shifts, repetition for emphasis, and other ancient Greek speech tactics. These clues help the presenter and audience understand the flow of the argument to maximize effect. Like many of Paul’s letters, **Hebrews would have been read aloud to the group**, followed by Q&A with the bearer of the letter for clarifying comments (cf. Phoebe in Romans 16:1). **“Hebrews was crafted not for the eye, but for the ear, and its forceful, artistic prose provided the vehicle for the argument”** (Lane, “Hebrews” DLNT, 451).

The author calls Hebrews a **“word of exhortation”** (13:22) written to encourage the audience in their faith. Filled with pastoral concerns and reminders of the importance of their faith, Hebrews implores the group **to continue to follow Christ**, despite apparent hardships in the past, present, and future. The author deliberately uses his rhetorical skills to add emphasis to his message, lessening the distance between himself and the audience to achieve greater impact with the homily.

## ***Themes of the Book of Hebrews***

The central thesis for the book of Hebrews revolves around **the need for the audience to listen to God’s message of salvation** as revealed in the work of Christ. This work is described as the final word of revelation from God, **surpassing the messages received by other divine mediators in Israel’s history** – angels, Moses, the priesthood. Recognizing the character of Christ’s sacrifice, the audience would be unwise to reject this message. **The author gives concrete exhortations** of how the recipients can continue to follow Jesus in a way that is reflective of his sacrificial work.

## ***The Structure of Hebrews***

The thematic complexity of Hebrews has challenged scholars for many years. W. Lane’s structure seen below attempts to recognize the interlocking nature of the original aural performance with the current literary status of the book. This parsing recognizes both the **major literary section themes** we see and the imbedded **rhetorical warnings** recognized by the original audience.

<b>Passage</b>	<b>Thesis</b>	<b>Warning / Encouragement</b>
1:1 – 2:18	The Revelation of the Son of God through His Son	The Peril of Ignoring the Word Delivered by the Son (2:1 - 4)
3:1 – 5:10	The High Priestly Character of the Son	The Peril of Refusing to Believe God’s Word (3:7 – 19)
5:11 – 10:39	The High Priestly Office of the Son	#1. The Peril of Spiritual Immaturity (5:11 – 6:12) #2. The Peril of Disloyalty to Christ (10:19 – 39)
11:1 – 12:13	Loyalty to God through Persevering Faith	Display the Necessary Endurance (12:1 – 13)
12:14 – 13:25	Living as Christians in a Hostile World	The Peril of Refusing God’s Gracious Word (12:14 – 29)

