

Hebrews

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March 22, 2023



Hebrews – Introduction: Part 1

There have been about as many understandings of God as there have been people. The result is that as people grouped themselves together first in tribes then in cities and ultimately in nations, each group developed their own religions and understandings about God around certain agreed upon beliefs. There were sun gods, gods of the mountains, volcano gods, sea gods, and so on. Over time, religion became a strict order of moral virtues and laws as defined by the law giver or keeper. Buddha and Mohammed handed down moral orders for their followers to live by. Moses gave the Jews the 10 Commandments, but the Jewish law keepers added hundreds of laws under each one of the 10.

And then there is Jesus.

How do we live out a faith that is uniquely Christian? As William Barclay puts it, to Paul it was largely about an inward fellowship with God, a life so spiritually intimate that we can speak of being Christian as living in Christ and Christ living in us. For James and for Peter in general, the Christian life was living a life at such a high moral standard that it could only be lived by the power of the Spirit and within the community of the church. Care of widows and orphans was pure religion James 1:27 tells us. Others want to be able to have a religion that makes intellectual sense, that satisfies the questions of the mind. Arguably this is what John was doing in the first chapter of his gospel and the first chapter of his first epistle. John wanted to make the coming of Jesus make sense. And then we come to Hebrews. The author of Hebrews wants to ask, “what kind of faith is necessary to see the door to God open? How can the barriers be removed and access to God’s living presence be possible?” To the writer of Hebrews there is but one Person who can take you into the very presence of God and that Person is Jesus Christ. In Hebrews 10:19-23 he sums up the whole idea. “Since therefore, brethren, we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus by a new and living way which he inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near 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. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful.”

“Let us draw near”. This is what we are able to do through faith in Christ and Him alone. There is no other.

So of the gospel and New Testament writers, who wrote Hebrews? One of the most important of the early church fathers was Clement of Alexandria. He believed that Paul wrote Hebrews in the Hebrew language and the it was translated into Greek by Luke. Another equally important early father was Origen. He believed Hebrews was a collection of Paul's thoughts that a scribe wrote down and then either Luke or Clement of Rome put them together as a book with a single theme. Another father, Tertullian argued that Barnabas was the author in part due to the author's knowledge of life inside the Great Temple and the fact that Barnabas was a Levite. All of these fathers lived in the Second Century and by the 400's AD there was a consensus that Paul was the author. But in the 1500's Martin Luther comes along and argues that Paul would never have written Hebrews 2:3 which suggests that faith came to the author from others who had actually heard Christ, whereas Paul's whole position in the church largely stemmed from his encounter with the Risen Christ on the Damascus Road and in the desert after he left Damascus (Galatians 1:15-17). So the question of who the author is, is difficult, so difficult that it was Origen himself who said, “But who wrote the epistle, truly only God knows.”

The biggest problem of course first is that the work is anonymous. At the beginning of every other letter of Paul's is a standard greeting identifying himself. James and Peter do the same, but no such greeting is found here. Second, the writer seems to be very familiar with Plato's school of Greek thought as well as his obvious in-depth familiarity with the Old Testament and the inner working of the Great Temple. There could not be many with those kinds of credentials. Luther argued that given the author's Greek and Hebrew background and mental ability that Apollos could be the author. One modern scholar argued for Priscilla and Aquilla. So, the authorship of Hebrews remains as one of the New Testament's great mysteries.

When was it written? It seems the author is speaking of persecutions that have already been suffered and overcome and persecutions that are coming. Nero's persecution was in 64 AD and the persecution of Domitian was about 85 AD, so if we say somewhere around 80 AD we would be close.