**Introduction to Hebrews**

**By Jane Evans for Hourglass Bible Study, Fall 2020**

**Title -** The title “Hebrews” appears in all early manuscripts. The earliest reference to the title is by Clement of Alexander about 180 AD so the tile may be later than the letter. The title may be a later attempt to explain the purpose of the letter. The book does not name the writer. It was probably a letter from the start, and originally not a sermon or tract.

**Audience** - Hebrews was clearly written to Christians, so the title probably means “Jewish Christians”, as distinct from Gentile (non-Jewish) Christians. If the audience was Jewish Christians, the author may have wanted to address some special problems of Jewish converts to Christianity.

**Why Written** -

1. In 13: 22, the writer calls his letter an “exhortation” (the Greek word could also be translated “encouragement” or “appeal”). The letter has passages of grave warning and bracing encouragement designed to strengthen the readers’ Christian loyalty.
2. The entire letter is an argument that Christianity supersedes Judaism. Readers may not have fully grasped this. Christianly renders Judaism obsolete. Readers may have been facing some sort of crisis.

**Situation of early church**

1. Christians were suspected by other religious bodies – by the Jews and by Roman authority.
2. There was a difficult relationship between the Jews and Christians. Did Christians have any obligations to Judaism now? How should they regard non-Christian Jews, whose leaders had brought about Jesus’s death?

Readers may be dismayed that Christianity meant abandonment of Judaism. They may have been considering turning from Christianity to Judaism.

**Were the Readers Jewish or Gentile Christians?**

Two indications that readers were Gentile:

1. The writer never says or implies that the reader turning away from Christianity would be a turning “back” to Judaism. Judaism is presented as obsolete, but not the reader’s previous religion.
2. The warm alert for the holiness of life in 12:14 and about sexual immorality in 13: 4 seem unlikely to be directed to Jews who were conspicuous in the ancient world for their ethical religion and standards of sexual morality.

If we conclude that readers were Gentile Christians, the title “Hebrews” was a mistake.

**To what church did the reader belong?**

Possible churches are:

1. Church at Rome – About 96 AD an elder or bishop in the church in Rome, Clement, wrote a letter to the church in Corinth in which he quoted the book of Hebrews. Also 13 : 24 has “from our Italian friends”.
2. Church at Colossae – Hebrews deals with some of the same questions as Paul’s letter to the Colossians
3. A group influenced by Essene Judaism – Themes in the Dead Sea Scrolls correspond to parts of Hebrews but this is not exclusive to the Essene beliefs.

Hebrews was likely written to a community we cannot identify.

**Date of the Letter**

Since quoted by Clement of Rome about 95 AD, the latest date for its writing sets at about 90 AD. In 13: 23, the writer refers to “our friend Timothy” is released. If this is Paul’s companion of about 50 AD, this narrows the date to 50 – 90 AD. The writer does not mention the Fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD, so the date would likely be before 70 AD.

**Who was the writer?**

Possible authors

1. Barnabus – The writer Tertullian refers to Barnabus as the author in about 220 AD.
2. Paul – This was the traditional view but no longer. The style of Hebrews is different from Paul’s style in Romans and Corinthians.
3. Apollas – Luther suggested this Jewish convert from Alexandria who became one of Paul’s colleagues.

Many New Testament books were written by writers that are now unknown.

**How the Author Thought**

The writer has a background in Christian belief and practice. He uses Jewish scripture with knowledge and understanding, rivers heroes of Judaism, understands Christianity by means of Jewish ideas and images. He was a Jew. He was influenced by Platonism (the world is of little value and salvation consisted in the soul’s escape from the prison of the body).

The real contrast in Hebrews is

1. Between the Old Covenant and the New.
2. Between the Jewish sacrifice and that of Jesus
3. Between the earthly tent and heaven

**Language**

Written in fluent and literary Greek, with no trace of having been translated. Uses the Septuagint version of the Old Testament.

**Themes**

1. Christ’s supremacy as God’s word to man, announced in the beginning of the letter and developed by two contrasts, with angels in 1: 1-14 and with Moses in 2: 1-6.
2. Christ’s supremacy as man’s way to God, beginning in 2: 5-18, developed in 4: 14 – 5:10 and expounded in 7 – 10
3. The need for faithfulness – negative warnings in 2, 3, 5 and 10 and more positive in 11 – 12.