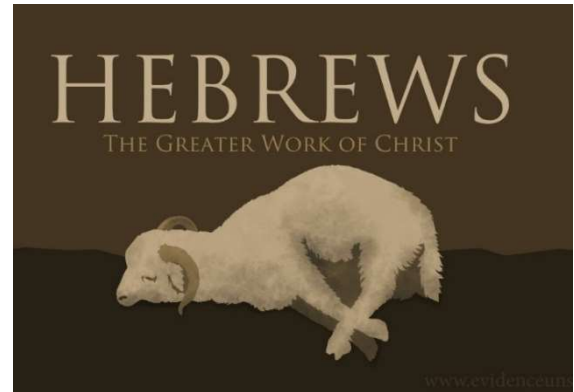


HEBREWS

Date of composition: A.D. 70s.

The new Jewish Christians had become spiritually dull and slow to grasp the full significance of what Christ had done as Savior (2:4). Believers were at the point of giving up their Christian faith and returning to the Jewish beliefs and practices of their ancestors. This attitude was worsened by the marginalization they suffered as a result of being publicly harassed, imprisoned, and their property confiscated. Their anxiety was further heightened by their disappointment that Christ had not yet returned (1:14; 10:36-39).

To win them back to Christianity, the author of the Letter to the Hebrews wrote the longest sustained argument of any book in the Bible. While the author remains unknown, he had a thorough knowledge of the Old Testament. Confidently, step-by-step, the author shows the excellence of Christianity over Judaism and how Jesus as Savior and High Priest fulfills the Old Testament.



Chapter 1

The author begins by recalling the privileged wilderness generation that experienced God's saving power but refused to live in trust and obedience. Now those who hear the Letter to the Hebrews risk joining that same generation in rebellion. Indeed, their accountability is greater now because God has spoken in his Son.

In verse 1:3, **“by making purification for sins he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high,”** the author alludes to Christ's death as the cause of his glorification; in fact, everything has been moving toward his suffering and death. The author's premise is that God's self-disclosure in his Son is the fulfillment of all previous revelation, which will ultimately become evident at his Second Coming when **“thy enemies are stool for thy feet” . . . for the sake of those who are inherit salvation**” (1:13-14).

Chapter 2

The author calls for greater attention to be given to their faith or else they may **“drift away from it”** (2:1). Beginning with Psalm 8:4-6, no other early writer expounds both the divinity and the humanity of Christ more eloquently than the author of Hebrews. Through Christ's obedient suffering, Jesus fulfilled his Sonship by becoming the High Priest able to deliver them from sin and the fear of death that plagues the human condition (14-18).

The author speaks not merely of Jesus' death, but his perfect, continual obedience in the face of opposition (2:10, 18; 5:8; 9:14; 10:5-10). At the heart of the author's message is the powerful example of Jesus' endurance for the beleaguered people of God. There can be only one appropriate response to such generosity: the sons and daughters of God must not be ashamed of Christ before a hostile world.

Chapter 3

The sacrificial system of the Old Testament was believed to remove outward impurity; but the work of Christ removes the inward impurity of the *heart*. Thus the work of Christ transforms the rebellious

heart of the wilderness generation (3:12) into a heart of the New Covenant characterized by joyous acceptance of the will of God.

The wilderness generation saw only the things of this world. Recall how the Jews were intimidated by Canaan's inhabitants, and so thought Egyptian slavery better than the promises of God. As a result, the wilderness generation refused to act with faith in God's power to overcome their enemies; they refused to enter the Promised Land, and thus denied the adequacy of God's power and the certainty of his promises. In fact, by their refusal they were acting as if he were not "living" (3:12). The hearers will be no better off if they refuse to live by faith in God's power and in anticipation of his promises (Numbers 20).

Chapter 4

The promise of entering God's rest that was forfeited by the wilderness generation is the promise of a heavenly homeland. To this end, the author is urging his hearers to an enduring identification with the great company of those who live by faith, despite the ridicule of and exclusion by an unbelieving society.

In the Greek Old Testament *great priest* is the same as *high priest*. Thus the expression, "great high priest" (4:14) is really, "great great priest" or "high high priest." This underscores the High Priest—Jesus—is far superior to the Levitical priests because he has entered heaven and sat down at the right hand of God. In contrast, the priesthood of the Old Testament was only able to "handle" sinners because the high priest himself was subject to weakness and sin.

Chapter 5

"**Every high priest**" refers to the priests descended from Moses' brother, Aaron. While the Old Testament tradition emphasizes the dignity of the high priest and his *relationship to God*, Hebrews focuses on Christ the High Priest and his *identification with humanity*.

The Old Testament instructs the high priest to make two sacrifices—one for himself and one for the people, which reveals the inadequacy of the old order. For the Son of God offered one sacrifice "**once for all**" (9:28).

"**Prayers and supplications**"... "**loud cries and tears**" express the cost of the Son's faithful obedience (5:7). Jesus did not "learn" obedience by suffering for disobedience as human beings do, but experienced what it was like to be perfectly obedient in the face of unrelenting antagonism from the unbelieving world.

"**Dull(ness) of hearing**" is the inexcusable regression to spiritual immaturity (5:11). It was dullness of hearing that led to the wilderness generation's hardness of heart and to ultimate loss. The author wants his listeners to leave their immaturity and their fixation on what is elementary, and advance to the spiritual maturity and perfection that is brought about by Christ's priestly ministry.

Chapter 6

The faithful who come after Christ continue the line of those who lived before and will reach their final goal through Jesus. So to reject Christ is to reject the whole history of God's relationship with his people. This rejection is the unbelief or "**dead works**" that lead to eternal loss (6:1).

Therefore the author warns his hearers to embrace his teaching of Christ's high priesthood through which they can escape this fate. They must abandon their shameful spiritual regression or they will fall and suffer God's final judgment.

Chapter 7

Using Psalm 110:4, the author highlights Melchizedek's eternity as a reflection of the Son's eternity. Melchizedek is indeed superior to Abraham in the quality of the gift that Abraham offers him, and the dignity of the one who offers it. In turn, Melchizedek blesses Abraham, which is the crowning demonstration of his greatness and authority. The two ways in which Melchizedek is superior to the

later Levitical priests is that he does not reckon his genealogy from them, and that he lives eternally (7:8-9).

Therefore the Jewish priesthood has been abolished as the means of approaching God, and replaced by Jesus the High Priest. This is a radical alteration in the relationship between the law and the people of God. It reveals what the law was always intended to be – not a means of approaching God but a foreshadowing of the atonement that would one day be given by Christ.

Indeed, that the priests were “**many in number**” attests to their ineffectiveness (7:23). The great number of Levitical priests was made necessary by their mortality. Multiplicity meant that their priesthood was founded on nothing more than human weakness. Now all God’s people have the high priestly privilege of entrance into the heavenly Most Holy Place through Christ the High Priest, whose priesthood is powered by the eternity of God, and not by the frailty of mortal humanity.

Chapter 8

Since the prophecy of the new covenant means that the old covenant is obsolete, the Son’s sacrifice is different from that of the Old Testament priests. For when sin is removed, there is no hindrance to approaching God: forgiveness and obedience promised by the new covenant become a reality.

The author next turns to the time when Moses was solemnly instructed by God to construct the Tent of Meeting in Exodus 25:40. In the Old Testament the outer parts of the Tent of Meeting represented the earth and sky, while the Holy of Holies within depicted God’s heavenly dwelling. However, the Son is superior to the Tent erected by Moses. This does not mean that the Tent of Meeting was false, but that it was only temporary—to “train” the people of God to appreciate the heavenly reality itself.

Chapter 9

The Holy Place of the Tent of Meeting, with its repetitious worship, was merely preparatory, a reminder that access to the Holy of Holies was not available before Christ. The Jewish priests continuously performed rituals that were never completed in order to get them beyond the “first Tent.” The constant offering of gifts, sacrifices and washings touched only the realm of food and drink, and did not accomplish the essential purpose of sacrifice: cleansing the worshiper’s conscience of sin.

But Christ’s blood is the offering of his life unto death on the Cross. Instead of sprinkling blood on the Ark’s mercy seat representing God’s throne, he took his seat at the right hand of the throne, demonstrating the effectiveness of his shed blood.

Chapter 10

The author strengthens the all-encompassing nature of Christ’s sacrifice by placing the Old Testament sacrifices in the plural. In contrast, the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ provided a final salvation for God’s people. The author could not be more emphatic: the law “**can never**” to provide such perfection, no matter how many sacrifices were offered (10:1).

For such sacrifices were no more than a *memorial* to sin because the sacrifices consisted merely of blood of bulls and goats. However, the Blood of Christ cleanses the conscience of sin—sin that is no longer remembered (10:17). While the old sacrifices were a “reminder” of sin’s dominance, the Lord’s supper is a reminder of its defeat and definitive removal. Thus, the impotency of the old anticipated the sufficiency of the new.

Christ’s obedience says everything about the rejection of the old covenant priesthood as a way of approaching God. By the words of the psalm (Psalm 40:6-8) Christ makes it clear that God has rejected that whole system, not because it was practiced with hypocrisy, but because it was fundamentally unable to remove sin.

In addition, the ineffectiveness of the old is exposed by the priests' perpetual *standing* throughout their ministry. The priests can never sit because their job is never done. Conversely, Christ in his preeminent position as High Priest is permanently *seated* at God's right hand (10:12-14). Having offered one sacrifice for sins, Christ's sacrifice is finished.

The "curtain" or "veil" was equivalent to the curtain before the Most Holy Place in the Mosaic Tent, and was representative of the barrier that kept mankind from approaching God (10:20-21). The Son's assumption of flesh, however, is no "veil" but is integral to his self-offering as the ultimate revelation of God.

With the foreboding judgment in 10:25, the author warns against willful disobedience of those who have received the truth. In fact, by focusing on the history of this faithful people, the author encourages his hearers not to shy away from suffering by silently disassociating themselves from the persecuted. Rather, they are who **"have faith and keep their souls"** (10:39).

Chapter 11

"Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1). To show that the lives of the ancient faithful persevered in faith, the author reminds the Israelites of their heritage. That is, from the time of Abel, the life of faith is a mixture of suffering and triumph. Noah's faith led to an inner recognition of God and a complete surrender to Him. Continuing, Abraham lived as an alien in the Promised Land but also experienced God's power (the birth of Isaac). As Abraham and his descendants were ready to confess that this world was not their home, so also the author's hearers are only temporary aliens in this world. Furthermore, they should not be surprised if they are persecuted; for Moses and the people who endured the wrath of Pharaoh, also experienced God's deliverance from Egypt.

The author recalls their ancestor's faith from the time of the Judges until just before the time of Christ. The faithful should rest assured that God will not break faith with his obedient people.

Chapter 12

The author urges the faithful to run the race with endurance, keeping their eyes on Jesus. They are to reach out to this great **"cloud of witnesses,"** who are the heroes who lived by faith (12:1). To suffer shame from the sinful world is a source of great honor, like a prize won by an athlete in pursuit of victory. To this end, they are to dispense with absolutely anything—**"every weight and sin"**—that will distract them from successfully running the race of faith (12:1).

Using the ultimate example of Jesus' sufferings, the author wants his hearers to look forward to their final destination in the presence of God. Unlike Esau, they have not come into a state of judgment; rather, through Christ they have come into a state of bliss that anticipates their eternal destiny.

Chapter 13

The author makes a final appeal, in that while they may not have yet been imprisoned, they should minister to their brothers and sisters with the full sympathy of those who share their experience. All who join the author in this response embrace the purpose of the Letter to the Hebrews. Finally, the ending of the letter addresses several personal issues, which demonstrates the intimate relationship between the sender and the recipients. The author concludes by praying that God will enable his hearers to do all that he has been urging them to do through Jesus, who is sovereign over them and to whom they belong as sheep in a household.