

Hebrews (An Introduction)

Background – The Period

Hebrews was likely written between AD 65 and AD 68 as there are hints that the temple in Jerusalem was still standing and the Jewish sacrifices were proceeding as normal (Hebrews 8.3-5, 10.11). This is significant as the temple was destroyed by Titus in AD 70 as prophesied by the Lord Jesus (Luke 21.5-7, 20-24).

BOOK	AUTHOR		PLACE WRITTEN	DATE A.D.	PERIODS		
					PERSONNEL	APOSTOLIC LITERATURE	CHURCHES
JAMES	James		Jerusalem	45			
GALATIANS MARK?	Paul	JOURNEY EPISTLES	Corinth	48	FIRST PAULINE PERIOD	BEGINNINGS	FOUNDING
1 THESS 2 THESS				52			
1 COR 2 COR				55			
ROMANS				56			
MATTHEW LUKE ACTS	Matthew Luke "		Jerusalem? Rome	58 61	FIRST HISTORICAL RECORDS		
COLOSSIANS EPHESIANS PHILEMON PHILIPPIANS	Paul	PRISON EPISTLES	Rome	61	CENTRAL PAULINE PERIOD		
1 TIMOTHY TITUS 2 TIMOTHY	Paul	PASTORAL EPISTLES	Macedonia Corinth? Rome	62 — 67	PAUL'S LEGACY	CENTRAL	ESTABLISHING
HEBREW'S JUDE	? Jude						
1 PETER 2 PETER MARK	Peter Mark			68?	PETER'S LEGACY		
JOHN 1 JOHN 2 JOHN 3 JOHN REVELATION	John		Ephesus? Patmos	85 96	JOHN'S LEGACY	CLOSING	CONTINUING

As the chart (left) shows, this date would make Hebrews one of the later epistles to be written.

The **author** of the book has been hotly debated for many years to no avail. We simply do not know who wrote the book. This is fitting as the epistle begins by stating that God Himself is the ultimate author of Scripture (Hebrews 1.1-2). In addition, the sole purpose of the book is to exalt the Person of Christ. Consequently, the human author is not important!

Having said that, Scripture indicates that most probably the 'human' writer was the **Apostle Paul**. For example, the writer was a personal friend of Timothy (Hebrews 13.23). He was in prison when the epistle was written and desired to be released that he might see the believers (Hebrews 10.34, 13.18-19, 23). Every epistle that the Apostle Paul wrote ends with grace (cf. 2 Thessalonians 3.17-18) but every other epistle, such as those written by Peter and James, end differently. Is it significant therefore that Hebrews ends thus: *Hebrews 13.25: Grace be with you all. Amen.*

A final and very strong argument for the authorship of Hebrews lies with the Apostle

Peter. Peter wrote to Jews or Hebrews (1 Peter 1.1, 2 Peter 3.1) and spoke clearly of Paul having written to them also. *2 Peter 3.15-16: And account that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation; even as our beloved brother Paul also according to the wisdom given unto him hath written unto you; As also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood.* Perhaps the epistle to the Hebrews is the very letter written by Paul that Peter was speaking of. After all, as the chart shows, 1 & 2 Peter were written after Hebrews.

Background – The People

Primarily the writer was addressing a known company of Jews who had made a profession of Christianity (Hebrews 2.3, 10.32-35, 12.3-5, 13.7) They were probably living somewhere in the Roman world, possibly Jerusalem or Rome (Hebrews 13.23-24). The letter was also written more widely to the whole Jewish nation¹ in general. Amongst these there were some **genuine** and some **professing** converts but many were **antagonistic**.

The particular company of believers to whom the letter was written were part of the generation after the Lord's ascension and were therefore second generation believers (Hebrews 2.3-4, 5.12). They had received the gospel from men who knew the Lord, but had now died (Hebrews 2.3, 13.7).

¹ It is easy to be confused with the terms **Hebrew**, **Jew** and **Israel**. The word **Hebrew** means 'one from beyond' and was first used of Abram (Genesis 14.13), likely because he had crossed over from his own land, Ur of the Chaldees (Genesis 11.31). Descendants of Abram have since been called **Hebrews**. A **Jew** is strictly a 'man from Judah' and was used to describe a member of the state of Judah following the division of the kingdom (2 Kings 16.6, 25.25). **Israel** was the name first given to Jacob (Genesis 32.28) and, later, the whole nation descending from his twelve sons. After the division of the kingdom, the ten northern tribes were known as **Israel**. Following the captivity the whole nation was called **Israel** and the people were called **Jews**. **Hebrew** emphasises the *language*, **Jew** emphasises the *people*, **Israel** emphasises the *land* and the *covenant blessings* (Romans 9.4).

Background – The Problem

Converted Jews faced two great difficulties in the early days of Christianity: **antagonism** from the majority of unconverted Jews and the **attraction** of the old religion. In terms of antagonism, early believers were persecuted by Judaism, being treated as traitors and apostates² (Acts 8.1, 9.1, 1 Thessalonians 2.14-16, Hebrews 12.3-5).

However, the problem of the **attraction** of the old religion was a far greater problem. These Jewish believers had given up: a God-ordained religious system, the rich heritage of the prophets, an association with illustrious men such as Jacob and Moses, the glory of the Aaronic priesthood, the sacred earthly sanctuary, the covenant of the law, the Day of Atonement and 1500 years of history. All this was visible and tangible glory. What had they gained by becoming Christians? Intense persecution, a hired hall or unfurnished upper room, a remembrance supper, two simple symbol emblems, a comparatively small company of Jews and Gentiles and 30 years of history. Most of this was invisible and intangible. ***Was it all worth it? Had they made the right choice? YES!***

Background – The Purpose

The simple purpose and thrust of the whole epistle is to show that what Christians had was far **better** than the **attraction** of the old religion. **They had CHRIST!** Whatever they had lost, they had gained far more in Christ.

Christ is shown to be **better** (a major theme of the epistle) throughout the book. Christ is **better** than: the prophets (Chapter 1), the angels (Chapters 1-2), Moses (Chapter 3), Joshua (Chapter 4), Aaron (Chapters 4-5) & Melchizedek (Chapters 5-8). He is Mediator of a **better** covenant (Chapter 8). He has entered into a **better** sanctuary (Chapter 9) and effected a **better** sacrifice with **better** blessings (Chapters 9-10).

So great is the Lord Jesus that:

- What was formerly *partial* is now **complete** (Chapters 1-6).
- What was formerly *temporal* is now **eternal** (Chapters 7-10).
- What was formerly *earthly* is now **heavenly** (Chapters 11-13).

In magnifying the Person of the Lord Jesus the author also shows that the religion of Judaism is now obsolete. New Testament revelation in the Son has superseded the old Mosaic and Levitical order. Although a divine institution, Judaism was introductory, temporary and imperfect. A new covenant and better things had been established through Christ. **It was Judaism or Jesus!**

Together, **Romans** and **Hebrews** form the greatest doctrinal books in the New Testament. It is worth noting the differences between them:

- Romans emphasises the **way of salvation**, the **moral** law and moves from **law to grace**.
- Hebrews emphasises the **Person of salvation**, the **ceremonial** law and moves from **shadow to substance**.

Background – The Practical

Some of the readers were displaying the warning signs of **profession** rather than **possession**.

- The scriptures were being treated casually. *Hebrews 2.1: Give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we should let them slip.*
- There was a lack of faith in God. *Hebrews 3.12: Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God.*
- There was little or no spiritual growth. *Hebrews 5.12: (Ye)... are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat. They should have been teaching others.* They needed the ABCs of Scripture teaching.
- They were not attending the meetings regularly. *Hebrews 10.25: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is.*
- They were marked by faltering service, prayer and worship. *Hebrews 12.12: Wherefore lift up the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees.*

Does all this describe us? Are we at risk of succumbing to the attraction of the 'old' religion, the **world**? Has Satan convinced us that the pleasures he can offer us there are better than what God has? What is the antidote? CHRIST. *Hebrews 12.3: For consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds.*

² 'apostates' are defined as those who deliberately 'fall away'. There are some in the book of Hebrews described as such (Hebrews 6.6). This describes those who having heard the gospel deliberately turn from light to darkness, from freedom to bondage and from life to death.