

HEBREWS INTRODUCTION

A. THE RECIPIENTS OF THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS

1. The people addressed.

a. The addressees were not Gentile Christians, but Jewish Christians.

The letter to the Hebrews was known and quoted by Clement of Rome and the Shepherd of Hermas before the end of the first century A.D. The title of the letter “to the Hebrews” (pros Hebraious) goes back to Clement of Alexandria in about A.D 180. It may have received this title in the course of the second century, when it was included in the collection of Paul’s letters and the editor gave it the title “to the Hebrews” by analogy with “to the Romans”. As we shall see, Paul was probably not its author. The author is unknown and what precisely was understood by the term “Hebrews” is also unknown. Nevertheless, from the internal evidence in the letter, it is natural to think of the addressees as *Jewish Christians*.

The addressees had knowledge of the Old Testament writings. The whole argument in the letter is conducted against the background of knowledge of the Old Testament and considerable familiarity with and interest in the Levitical ritual. However, because the letter speaks of “the tabernacle” (tent)(8:2) and not of the temple, their knowledge does not come from first-hand acquaintance with the ritual in the Jerusalem temple, but is rather drawn from the Old Testament writings about the tabernacle.

The addressees were warned against falling away by an example from Israel. When the writer warns them against “falling away”, he uses the example of the Israelites in the wilderness under Moses, who disobeyed God, rejected the leadership of Moses and failed to enter the Promised Land (3:7-12). What was possible for the Israelites then, would also be possible for the Israelites now. This warning from the Old Testament would mean nothing to the addressees if they were Gentile Christians.

The addressees possessed the Old Testament foundation when they became Christians. According to Hebrews 6:1-3, they already had an Old Testament “foundation” when they received the gospel. This foundation consisted of repentance from dead works, of faith in God, of instructions in ceremonial purifications (plural: “washings”, not “Christian baptism”), of the laying on of hands, of the resurrection from the dead and eternal judgement. Now these things were the foundational teachings of the Old Testament: Ezekiel 18:11-13,30-32 taught repentance from such dead works, while Hebrews 9:14-15 taught that only the blood of Christ could cleanse people’s consciences from such sins. Genesis 15:6 and Habakkuk 2:4 (Heb 10:38) taught the necessity of faith in God, while Hebrews 3:12 warned the addressees that it was unbelief that kept the Israelites out of the Promised Land. Numbers 19 prescribed ceremonial purifications and Ezekiel 36:25 applied the method of sprinkling to spiritual purification of sins, while Hebrews 9:18-22 taught that without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins. In the Old Testament, the laying on of hands was used to commission people (Num 27:18,23; Dt 34:9), or as a part of the sacrificial ritual (Lev 1:4; 3:2; 4:4; 8:14; 16:21), while in the New Testament it was most probably associated with the impartation of the Holy Spirit (Act 8:18). Isaiah 26:19 taught the resurrection from the dead (Ex 3:6; Mk 12:26f) and Daniel 12:2 taught the resurrection to everlasting life as well as the judgement to everlasting contempt. Because of the coming of Christ into the world, these things were given a fresh and fuller significance and they are certainly foundational teachings in Christianity as well. But because the Hebrews were probably under pressure from various quarters and were not growing spiritually, they were more and more giving up the distinctive Christian beliefs and were reverting to Judaism, stressing only these foundational teachings, which were also a part of Judaism and certain Jewish sects as the Essenes and the community of Qumran.

The addressees were living under the old covenant when they became Christians. According to Hebrews 7:18 the regulations of the Old testament law were set aside and according to Hebrews 8:6 and 13, a new covenant made the old covenant obsolete. This insistence that the old covenant has been antiquated and superseded by the new covenant would only make sense to people who were still trying to live under it or who were reverting back to it. Gentile Christians never lived under the old covenant and would not need to be convinced that the old covenant had been superseded. A specific example, was that the addressees rightly took it for granted that the priesthood in the order of Aaron was divinely instituted, but according to Hebrews 7:11 wrongly took it for granted that that order was perfect and would never be changed. Therefore the writer quoted Psalm 110:4 to point out that God had predicted that the regulations of the old covenant order would be changed. Gentile Christians would never have believed that the Levitical priesthood had been perfect. Also the words in Hebrews 13:13, “to go to Christ outside the camp” is more intelligible to Jewish Christians than gentile Christians.

The addressees accepted the authority of the Old Testament Scriptures. The writer continually quoted the Old testament Scriptures because the addressees accepted its authority and would still accept its authority even if they reverted back to Judaism. Gentile Christians who fell away from the faith would not continue to believe in the authority of the Old Testament.

b. The addressees were probably non-conformist Jewish Christians.

They were Christian converts from a non-conformist Jewish background. Their background was not so much the traditional normative Judaism of Jerusalem and its temple rituals as the non-conformist Judaism of communities like the Essenes and the community of Qumran. According to historians, such non-conformist groups of Jews could also be found in the countries to

which Jews had been dispersed (Diaspora). According to the historian Josephus, such communities distinguished themselves from other Jews when they performed their sacrificial duties by the superiority of the purifications which they habitually practised.

It appears that the Jewish community in Rome preserved non-conformist features especially such as “baptisms” or “ceremonial washings”. As these Jews became Christians, some of these practices were taken over into the Christian community at Rome. According to Hebrews 6:2, the Hebrew Christians took a great interest in such “baptisms” or “ceremonial washings”. According to the “Apostolic Tradition” written by Hippolytus at the beginning of the third century A.D., Christian baptism, as the central act of initiation into Christianity, took place on Sunday, but on the preceding Thursday the candidate was required to have a ritual bath for the removal of impurity. This ritual of purification before baptism is not taught in the New Testament, but it may well have been a legacy from Judaism in Rome. Therefore, if the letter to the Hebrews was sent to Rome, the reference to “instructions in ceremonial purifications” in Hebrews 6:2 may have had a more immediate relevance to their situation than might be readily apparent to a modern reader.

c. The addressees according to the internal evidence of the letter to the Hebrews.

According to Hebrews 2:3, they were probably a group of Jewish Christians, who had never seen or heard Jesus in person, but had learned of him from people who had themselves listened to him. According to Hebrews 10:32-34, after their conversion they had been exposed to persecution in which they had to endure publicly abuse, imprisonment and the looting of their possessions. According to Hebrews 6:10 and 10:34, they had especially helped other Christians, particularly those who suffered most during the persecutions. However, according to Hebrews 5:11 to 6:6, their growth as Christians had stopped and they were in danger of falling away from the Christian faith back into what they were before. It is very probable that they were reluctant to completely cut their ties with the Jewish faith, which still enjoyed the favour of the Roman government and gave them a measure of protection. The writer, who either knew them or was aware of their situation, warned them seriously against falling away from the Christian faith altogether, because they would not be able to be brought back to repentance (6:6) and would fall into the hands of the living God (10:31), who is a consuming fire (12:29). He also encouraged them, that if they held firmly to the confidence they had at first and persevered to do the will of God, they would really share in Christ’s glorious future (3:14), their hope would be very sure (6:11), they would receive what God had promised (10:36) and they would receive God’s kingdom that cannot be shaken (12:28).

The fact that the writer quotes only from the Greek translation of the Old Testament, we conclude that the people addressed knew the Old Testament in the Greek translation and were Greek speaking Jews (Hellenists). From the internal evidence, it is also implied that their knowledge of the ancient sacrificial ritual of Israel was derived from reading the Old Testament and not from firsthand contact with the temple service in Jerusalem.

According to Hebrews 10:25, some of them were in the habit of not meeting together with other Christians. This may point to the fact that they were a smaller group of people not having fellowship with the larger group of Christians in their area. They may have been a house-church within the wider fellowship of a city-church and tended to neglect the bond of fellowship that bound them to other Christians outside their own smaller circle.

2. The destination of the letter.

a. The destination was probably not Jerusalem.

From the internal evidence we have seen that the addressees did not derive their knowledge of the Jewish ritual from direct contact with the temple services, but rather from reading the Old Testament. The religious situation in Jerusalem was dominated by the temple, but the letter to the Hebrews rather speaks of the tabernacle. After the persecution against Stephen, who was a convert from the Greek speaking Jews in Jerusalem (Act 6-8), many Greek speaking Jewish Christians (Hellenistic believers) spread throughout Judea and Samaria and even to other countries like Syria and North Africa and founded churches there (Act 11:19-20). It is quite possible that the letter to the Hebrews was later sent to one of these churches. But because according to Hebrews 6:10, the addressees still continued to help God’s people in need, they were probably not living in Jerusalem. Throughout the apostolic age, the Jerusalem church was more prominent as a recipient than as a giver of such a ministry of love (Act 11:29-30; Rom 15:25).

b. The destination was probably not Alexandria in Egypt.

About one century after the letter was written, the belief arose in Alexandria that Paul was the writer. And this happened because it was at Alexandria that the letter to the Hebrews was for the first time copied into a book (codex) as a part of the Pauline writings. However, if the letter was sent to Alexandria, it would be strange that they would so soon have forgotten who wrote it to them and had to assume a writer.

c. The destination was most probably Rome in Italy.

In Hebrews 13:24 the writer sends greetings “from those from Italy”, which could mean that the letter was either written from Rome or to Rome. The church father Clement of Rome is acquainted with this letter in A.D. 96 and therefore, according to our extant literature, the first place where the letter to the Hebrews appears to have been known, was Rome. Therefore, it is more likely that people who had originally come from Rome sent greetings to Rome via this letter. Moreover, Timothy was well known in Rome (13:23).

The church at Rome and the church in the west in general took a long time before they agreed to regard the letter to the Hebrews as one of Paul's letters. Their resistance to the belief that Paul was the writer of this letter was probably due to the fact that they originally knew that it was not written by Paul.

Moreover, the book of Romans shows that the church at Rome had a Jewish-Christian base (Rom 11:13,18). The church was probably founded by Jews and converts to Judaism, who had become Christians during Pentecost and had afterwards returned to Rome (Act 2:10-11). Through the following years, more and more Gentiles had become Christians in Rome, so that by the time the letter to the Romans was written, the Gentile Christians were in the majority. As a whole the church at Rome had accepted the implications of the Gentile world-mission, but a small conservative enclave within the church at Rome clung to the more conservative principles of traditional Judaism. According to Hebrews 10:25, the most probable historic situation was that the letter to the Hebrews was sent to this conservative Jewish Christian enclave or house-church at Rome, or at least to those Jewish Christians in the church at Rome who were in the habit of not meeting together with the other Christians in Rome.

B. THE WRITER OF THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS

We do not know for certain to whom the letter to the Hebrews was written. It is to a Jewish Christian community, and the best possibility is at Rome. We certainly do not know who wrote the letter to the Hebrews. The tradition of the early Christian Church ascribe it unanimously to Paul only from the end of the fourth century A.D. Before that, there was uncertainty and speculation only. Although people have argued that it could have been Clement of Rome, Luke (Calvin), Barnabas, Apollos (Luther) or even Priscilla and Aquila, we must conclude that we do not know who wrote the letter to the Hebrews.

a. The theory that Paul and Luke wrote the letter to the Hebrews.

In Alexandria in Egypt, the church father Clement of Alexandria wrote in his "Hypotyposes" in about A.D. 190, that the letter to the Hebrews was written by the apostle Paul for the Hebrews in the Hebrew language and that Luke translated it and published it for the Greeks. In this way Clement tried to account for the similarity in style between Hebrews, Luke and Acts. He wrote that because the Jewish Christians were prejudiced against Paul, Paul prudently left out his name, in order not to put the Jewish Christians off at the outset. But the church father Origen, who was a student of Clement, and realised that the letter to the Hebrews could not be a Greek translation from Hebrew, wrote in his "Church History" (vi. 25:11-14) in about A.D. 225, that only God knows who wrote the letter to the Hebrews. He wrote, "For my own part, if I may state my opinion, I should say that the thoughts are the apostle's (Paul), but that the style and composition are the work of someone who called to mind the apostle's teaching and wrote short notes, as it were, on what his master said. If any church, then, regards this letter as Paul's, let it be commended on this score; for it was not for nothing that the men of old have handed it down to us as Paul's. But as to who actually wrote the letter, God knows the truth of the matter."

b. The theory that Paul wrote the letter to the Hebrews.

Clement of Alexandria in about A.D. 190, refers to someone called "the blessed elder", possibly his own teacher Pantaenus, as saying that Paul was the anonymous writer of this letter, because as "apostle to the Gentiles" (Gal 2:8) he wanted the recipients to acknowledge Jesus as "apostle to the Hebrews" (3:1). While the Christian Church in the east ascribed the letter to the Hebrews to Paul since the last quarter of the second century, the Christian Church in the west only ascribed it to Paul from the end of the fourth century onwards. In the west, the Muratorian Canon (A.D. 170), Irenaeus (A.D. 170), Hippolytus (A.D. 240), and Gaius of Rome did not regard Paul as the writer. Eusebius (A.D. 300) remarks that even in his day some of the Romans did not consider Paul as the writer. Jerome (A.D. 384) and Augustine (A.D. 354-430) swayed opinion in the west towards accepting Paul as the writer, not because they were convinced, but because of the practical reason that its canonicity was bound up with the belief in its apostolic authorship. While the Synod of Hippo (A.D. 393) and the third Synod of Carthage (A.D. 397) still made a distinction between the 13 letters of Paul and the letter of Paul to the Hebrews, only the sixth Synod of Carthage in A.D. 419 ascribed all 14 letters to Paul in terms of which Athanasius of Alexandria had used in his Festal Letter in A.D. 367.

c. The reason why Paul cannot be the writer of the letter to the Hebrews.

Hebrews 2:3 says, "This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed *to us* by those who heard him." Thus, the writer of the letter to the Hebrews says that he was not an apostle who had heard the Lord Jesus Christ himself, but that he was a second-generation Christian, a disciple of the apostles and had heard the message of salvation from them. In contrast, according to Galatians 1:11f, Paul says that he had heard the gospel directly from Christ. Although what Paul and the writer of the letter have in common is the basic apostolic teaching, the manner of teaching, the language and style are not that of Paul.

While the writer to the Hebrews uses only the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament in his quotations, Paul uses both the Hebrew original as well as the Greek translation in his quotations. While the writer to the Hebrews generally uses the name Jesus only, Paul generally uses the name the Lord Jesus Christ. While the writer to the Hebrews exhorted his readers to remember those who are persecuted or imprisoned (10:32; 13:3), Paul asked his readers to remember his chains (Col 4:18). While the writer to the Hebrews exhorted his readers to imitate the faith of their leaders (13:7), Paul exhorted his readers imitate his life (1 Cor 11:1). While Paul used the spoken form of Greek in his letters, both Luke and the writer to the Hebrews use the literary form of Greek in their writings, which was not better Greek, but a different form of Greek.

Conclusion. We don't know who wrote the letter to the Hebrews. Only God knows. But according to 2 Timothy 3:16, the writer was definitely inspired by the Holy Spirit and wrote to us what God wanted us to know, believe and do.

C. THE DATE AND PLACE OF WRITING THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS

Because the writer and the addressees are uncertain, the date when and place where the letter was written is also uncertain. In Hebrews 13:23 the writer states that Timothy, who was a junior fellow worker of Paul, had been released from prison, which means that the letter was written during the first century A.D. According to Hebrews 9:6-9 and 10:1-5, it seems that the readers were aware that gifts and sacrifices were still being offered, not in Rome, but in the temple at Jerusalem. Therefore the letter must have been written before A.D. 70, when Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed. Also according to Hebrews 8:13, the writer to the Hebrews says that the old covenant, which was made obsolete by the new covenant, was "ageing and would soon disappear." This would be very true especially in the period immediately preceding A.D. 70. In Hebrews 2:3, the writer speaks of himself and his hearers as probably belonging to the disciples of the apostles. They were therefore second-generation Christians, who heard the message of salvation from the disciples of Jesus and saw the miracles of the apostles after A.D. 30. According to Hebrews 10:32-34, they had experienced persecution and this could refer to the expulsion of the Jewish Colony from Rome by the emperor Claudius in A.D. 49. The historian Suetonius wrote that Claudius expelled them because "they were constantly indulging in riots at the instigation of Chrestus (!)". During this persecution, Priscilla and Aquila fled from Rome to Corinth, where Paul met them in A.D. 50. A large scale eviction of this nature would inevitably have been attended by public insult, persecution, imprisonment and widespread looting by the people of Rome. However, according to Hebrews 12:4, these Christians had not yet been called to suffer death for their faith, as was the case during the persecution under Nero in A.D. 64. Therefore, we conclude that the letter to the Hebrews was most probably written to especially the Jewish Christians in Rome not long before the outbreak of persecution against the Christians in Rome in A.D. 64.

D. THE PURPOSE OF THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS

Throughout the letter, the writer warns against falling away from the Christian faith. Some people say that he warns against falling back into unbelief, that is, warning against back-sliding back into the world. However the best interpretation is that the writer is warning against falling back into Judaism. The Hebrews were originally Jews, who had become Christians. But due to various unknown pressures, they were not growing spiritually to maturity (5:11-14). Instead, of going forwards, they were going backwards. They were beginning to give up the distinctive teachings of Christianity and were only emphasising those teachings, which was also the foundational teachings of Judaism (6:1-3). Therefore, on the one hand, the writer warns them against the consequences of falling away from the Christian faith. And on the other hand, he teaches them the truth how the new covenant in Jesus Christ has antiquated and superseded the old covenant and exhorts them to persevere in growing spiritually.

E. THE DIVISION OF THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS

The theme of the book of Hebrews is "An exhortation to have faith in Jesus Christ and not fall away."

The book may be divided into two parts as follows:

Part one consists of Hebrews 1:1 to 9:18. Jesus Christ is worthy of your faith.

It consists of four sections;

Section one consists of Hebrews 1:1 to 2:18. Christ is the Revealer of God's final revelation. The finality of Christianity. It contains: An introduction concerning God's final revelation through Jesus Christ and Christ's superiority to the Old Testament prophets (1:1-4), Christ's superiority to angels (1:5-14), the first practical warning not to ignore this revelation (2:1-4), the humiliation and glory of Christ (2:5-9) and Christ as Saviour and High Priest of his people (2:10-18).

Section two consists of Hebrews 3:1 to 4:13. Christ is God's Son over God's house. The true home of the people of God. It contains: Christ's superiority to Moses (3:1-6), the second practical warning not to harden their hearts against this revelation (warning that the rejection of Christ is more serious than the rejection of Moses)(3:7-19), a warning that "the true rest of God" may be forfeited (4:1-10) and an exhortation to make every effort to enter into the true rest of God (4:11-13).

Section three consists of Hebrews 4:14 to 7:28. Christ is the great High Priest. The high priesthood of Christ. It contains: An encouragement concerning what Christ's high priesthood provides (4:14-16), the qualification of the high priesthood in general (5:1-4), Christ's qualifications for the high priesthood (5:5-10), the third practical warning not to remain spiritually immature (5:11-14), a serious warning against falling away (5:6:1-8), an encouragement to persevere (6:9-12) and an encouragement about the steadfastness of God's promise (6:13-20). Christ belongs to a better order, the order of Melchizedek: The greatness of Melchizedek (7:1-10), the imperfections of the priesthood of Aaron (7:11-14), the superiority of the new priesthood (7:15-19), which is superior because of God's oath (7:20-22), because of its permanence (7:23-25) and because of the character of Christ (7:26-28).

Section four consist of Hebrews 8:1 to 10:18. Christ is the minister of a better sanctuary and better sacrifice. The covenant, the sanctuary and the sacrifices. It contains: Christ's high priesthood in the heavenly sanctuary is superior to Old Testament priesthood and the new covenant is superior to the old covenant (8:1-6), the old covenant has been superseded (8:7-13), the sanctuary under the old covenant (9:1-5), and the temporary ritual in that sanctuary (9:6-10), and in contrast, Christ's

high priestly ministry in the heavenly sanctuary which obtains eternal redemption (9:11-14), which consists of the shedding of his blood as a ransom for sins (9:15-22), which is the perfect and final sacrifice (9:23-10:18).

Part two consists of Hebrews 10:19 to 13:25. Have faith in Jesus Christ and do not fall away from the faith.

It consists of four sections:

Section one consists of Hebrews 10:19-39. The indispensable character of unswerving faith. It contains: An exhortation to worship God through Christ (10:19-25), the fourth practical warning not to commit the sin of deliberate apostasy (10:26-31) and a call to perseverance (10:32-39).

Section two consists of Hebrews 11:1-40. The nature and heroes of faith. It contains: The nature of faith (11:1-3), the faith of Abel, Enoch and Noah (11:4-7), the faith of Abraham and Sarah (11:8-12), the ultimate destination of those who believe (11:13-16), more about the faith of the patriarchs (11:17-22), the faith of Moses (11:23-28), the faith exercised during the exodus and settlement in Canaan (11:29-31), more examples of people of faith (11:32-38), the faith of the Old Testament people is vindicated only in Jesus Christ (11:39-40).

Section three consists of Hebrews 12:1 to 13:25. The fruits of faith. It contains: An exhortation to persevere in faith by following Jesus Christ, who is the Pioneer and Perfecter of faith (12:1-3), an exhortation to accept God's discipline (12:4-11), an exhortation to get up and live a holy Christian life in dependence of God's grace (12:12-17), an encouragement that the heavenly Jerusalem is much better than the earthly Sinai (12:18-14) and the fifth practical warning not to refuse this final revelation of God (12:25-29).

Section four consists of Hebrews 13:1-25. Concluding exhortations and PostScript. It contains: Exhortations to love brothers, to entertain strangers, to remember prisoners, to honour marriage, to avoid sexual immorality and the love for money (13:1-6), an exhortation to imitate the faith and life of others (13:7-8), an exhortation to bring true Christian sacrifices (13:7-16), an exhortation to obey leaders (13:17), a request for prayer (13:18-19), a prayer and doxology (13:20-21), some personal notes (13:22-23) and final greetings and a benediction (13:24-25).

F. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS

1. The letter to the Hebrews is a word of exhortation.

According to Hebrews 13:22, the letter to the Hebrews is not really a letter in the strict sense of the word, but "a word of exhortation". In Acts 13:15-41, the leaders of the Jewish synagogue asked Paul to give such "a word of exhortation". Paul stood up and preached a sermon about Jesus Christ, how he fulfilled the words of the prophets and was executed, but resurrected from the dead, so that "through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the Law of Moses" (Act 13:39). Then he exhorted them to believe what the prophets said, that God was going to do something new in their days. Likewise, the writer to the Hebrews gives the Jewish Christians in Rome a sermon in written form about Jesus Christ, exhorting them not to fall away from the Christian faith.

2. The quotations from the Greek Old Testament translation belong to an old version.

We know the Greek Old Testament translation from two very old Bibles, called the Codex Vaticanus, which dates from , and the Codex Alexandrinus, which dates from. About one third of the quotations in the letter to the Hebrews from the Greek Old Testament comes from the Codex Vaticanus version and about two-thirds from the Codex Alexandrinus version. The conclusion is that the writer of the letter to the Hebrews used an older version of the Greek translation of the Old Testament than we know from both these old Bibles.

3. The Old Testament is regarded as inspired by God.

The words spoken by the prophets in the Old Testament are regarded as spoken by God in the letter to the Hebrews. For example, the words spoken by Moses in Deuteronomy 32:43 are quoted as God's words in Hebrews 1:6. The words spoken to God in the Old Testament are even regarded as spoken by God in the letter to the Hebrews. For example, the words spoken by the Psalmist to "the Lord" in Psalm 102:25-27, are in Hebrews 1:10-12 regarded as spoken by God to his Son Jesus Christ, called "the Lord". The words spoken by the Psalmist in the Old Testament are regarded as words spoken by the Holy Spirit in the letter to the Hebrews. For example, even the introductory word spoken by the Psalmist in Psalm 95:7b, "Oh that you would hear his voice today!" before he quotes God's words, is regarded in Hebrews 3:7 as the word spoken by the Holy Spirit. According to Hebrews 9:8, in the details of the Old Testament sanctuary, the Holy Spirit signifies spiritual truths for the present time. And finally, the words of consecration and obedience, spoken by the Psalmist in Psalm 40:6-8, are in Hebrews 10:5-7 spoken by the Messiah Jesus Christ when he came into the world.

4. The Old Testament is regarded as a parable or mystery which was waiting for an explanation. The explanation given in the letter to the Hebrews takes the form of messianic typology.

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews never treated the Old Testament as an allegory as the Jewish philosopher and historian, Philo (30 B.C.-A.D. 50), did. Philo treated the Old Testament characters and events as allegories setting forth eternal

principles of ethics and metaphysics. But the writer to the Hebrews treats the characters and events of the Old Testament as “types”, that is, as “examples or illustrations” pointing to Jesus Christ and the gospel. He treated them as “temporary foreshadowings” of the fulfilment which had taken place once-for-all in the First coming of Jesus Christ. For example, Melchizedek is a type of the Coming High Priest, Jesus Christ. The sanctuary on earth is a “copy” and “shadow” of the sanctuary in heaven (8:5). The Old Testament Law is a “shadow” of the “realities” that have come with Jesus Christ and the gospel (10:1).

5. The historical perspective of the Old Testament is preserved.

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews thinks of “the age of anticipation” as foreshadowing “the age of fulfilment”. For example, in chapter 3 and 4, he distinguishes clearly between three historical periods: First he speaks of the wilderness period, when the Israelites looked forward to a “rest”, which they did not fully experience when they entered Canaan under Joshua (3:16-19). Then he speaks of the period of David, a long time later, when it was still a time to enter the same “rest” (4:6-8). And finally, he speaks of the present time, when there still remains a “Sabbath-rest” for the people of God (4:9). Also in chapter 11, the writer shows a clear appreciation of the historical sequence of the Old Testament, as men and women of faith drew ever nearer to the time when God would fulfil the promises which they greeted from afar (11:13).

6. Quotations from the book of Psalms.

In chapter 1, the writer quotes Psalms 2, 104, 45, 102, and 110. In chapter 2, he quotes Psalm 8:4-6. In chapter 3 and 4, he quotes Psalm 95:7-11. In chapter 5 and 6, he quotes Psalm 110. And in chapter 10, he quotes Psalm 40. After quoting the Psalm more or less verbatim, and sometimes quoting other related Old Testament passages, he uses words and phrases from his quotation to build his argument.

7. The letter speaks much of the death and exaltation of Jesus Christ, but little of his resurrection.

In the apostolic preaching throughout the book of Acts and in Paul’s letters, we find the proclamation of the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. However, the letter to the Hebrews speaks much of the death of Christ on the cross and his appearance at the right hand of God. This is due to the fact that throughout the Old Testament times the two important acts within the temple were the shedding of the animal’s blood in the court of the sanctuary and the presentation of its blood in the sanctuary. These two acts are shadows or types of their fulfilment in the shedding of Christ’s blood on the cross and his appearance in heaven at the right hand of God. Of course, the ascension of Christ to heaven presupposes his resurrection from the dead. Hebrews 13:20 even clearly teaches the resurrection of Jesus Christ, by saying, “The God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep.”

G. THE MAIN MESSAGES OF THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS

1. The letter to the Hebrews establishes the finality of Christianity.

It establishes the finality of the Christian gospel by contrasting it with all that went before it. And he establishes the finality of Christianity by showing the supremacy of Jesus Christ in both his Person and his work. With respect to his person, he regards Jesus Christ as greater than all the human servants and spokesmen, greater than all the prophets and greater than Moses. He regarded Jesus Christ as greater than all God’s other servants in the universe, the angels. He shows that Jesus Christ is God in chapter 1 and that he is man in chapter 2. Jesus Christ is the Son of God, God’s agent in creating and maintaining the universe, and yet, he became the Son of Man, who submitted himself to humiliation and death. Now Jesus Christ is exalted above the heavens, enthroned at God’s right hand, and he lives forever there as his people’s Representative with God. The writer warns that whoever rejects this revelation of God in Jesus Christ, must face the dreadful judgement of the living God (10:26-31; 12:25-29).

2. The letter to the Hebrews explains the complete different order of priesthood of Jesus Christ.

a. Jesus Christ is both priest and sacrifice.

The special aspect of the person and ministry of Jesus Christ, which the letter to the Hebrews emphasises, is his priesthood, which consisted of him being both a perfect high priest and a perfect sacrifice. According to Psalm 40:6-7 and Isaiah 52:13 to 53:12, Jesus Christ is both priest and sacrifice.

b. Jesus Christ is a high priest of a different order.

Jesus Christ is not simply a better high priest than any of the former priests of the order of Aaron; he is a high priest of a *completely different order*. Psalm 110:4 says, “The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: “You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.” The priesthood according to the order of Aaron was only a shadow of the real priesthood of Jesus Christ.

c. Jesus Christ as our priest is superior to all other priests.

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The ministry Jesus Christ received is as *superior to the ministry* of all the Old Testament priests, as the new covenant is superior to the old covenant (8:6). The writer stresses repeatedly Christ's qualifications to be the effective high priest of his people. He was God who took on the human nature and lived among us (Ch 1-2), and was tempted like all of us, yet without sinning. Therefore, he can be and is *a merciful high priest, who can sympathise with all our weaknesses* (2:17-18; 4:15). Of all the people who ever lived, only Jesus Christ was *completely sinless, blameless, pure, holy and perfect forever*. Therefore, only he could become a perfect sacrifice for the sins of his people in the world (7:26-28). And of all the human priests and prophets who have ever lived on earth, he is the only One who was *resurrected from the dead and lives*. Therefore, only he is alive today and lives forever to exercise his ministry as our high priest forever.

d. The ministry of Jesus Christ as our high priest.

He especially prays for us (7:23-25). There in the heavenly sanctuary, Jesus Christ represents us in the presence of God the Father (9:24). And we, who believe in him, may approach the throne of God with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need (4:16). Jesus Christ saves completely everyone who comes to God through him (7:25). The priesthood of Jesus Christ is also taught by the rest of the New Testament: In Luke 22:32, Jesus prays for Peter and in John 17 he prays for his disciples and their disciples. Romans 8:34 teaches that he intercedes for us and 1 John 2:1-2 teaches that he is our Advocate with God the Father whenever we have committed a sin.

3. The letter to the Hebrews teaches the complete effectiveness and finality of Christ's sacrifice.

a. Jesus Christ sacrificed his own body.

While the Old Testament priests in the order of Aaron brought animal sacrifices, Jesus Christ gave himself as a living sacrifice for the sins of his people. In Psalm 40:6-8, someone who knew the uselessness of animal sacrifices, dedicated his own life to God for the obedient accomplishment of his will. In Hebrews 10:5-7, this language is recognised as the language of Christ, when he came into the world. In the body which Christ prepared for him, he fulfilled the will of God. At the end it was this consecrated body, this obedient life, that he offered up to God in death on the cross. His sacrifice was completely acceptable to God and effectually cleansed his people in their heart and conscience.

b. Jesus Christ sacrificed himself once-for-all.

While the Old Testament priests in the order of Aaron had to sacrifice repeatedly, Jesus Christ sacrificed himself once-for-all. The writer pays particular attention to the annual sin-offering presented on the nation's behalf by the high priest on the Day of Atonement (9:25-26; 10:1-4). This sin-offering could not meet the real need of the people, because it did not cleanse their consciences of sin. That is why it had to be repeated year after year. But the sacrifice of Jesus Christ is completely perfect and therefore was once-for-all time. No sacrifice is ever needed again! The complete redemption and cleansing effects in the lives of the followers of Jesus Christ has been a matter of plain experience for more than 1900 years! Such a sacrifice as Jesus Christ brought needs no repetition. It is once-for-all time!

c. The sacrifice of Jesus Christ is completely effective.

According to Hebrews 10:4, it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. But according to Hebrews 9:14, the blood of Jesus Christ purifies us from all sins (1 Jn 1:7). His death on the cross is a ransom for all sins committed during the Old Testament period (9:16) and a ransom for all our sins (Mk 10:45). His death obtained eternal redemption for his people (9:12). It cleanses our consciences from all guilt, thus justifying us before God (9:15; Rom 3:24-25). It makes us completely holy, thus sanctifying us before God (10:10; 1 Cor 1:30), and makes us perfect forever (10:14; Rom 8:30). This perfectness includes the facts that God implants his laws in our hearts and writes them on our minds (10:16) and that he will not remember our sins and lawless acts anymore, that is, he will never bring our sins against us in the Final Judgement Day (10:17). All these realities prove that the old covenant has been fulfilled in the new covenant. For example, the promises made in the old covenant in Jeremiah 31:33-34 is fulfilled in the new covenant in Hebrews 10:16-17 (Isa 38:17; 43:25; 44:22). And according to Hebrews 10:19-22, we can and may draw near to God with a sincere heart and in full assurance of faith (4:16).

4. The letter to the Hebrews teaches about the true sanctuary.

While Moses was instructed to construct an earthly sanctuary (tent) according to the pattern he was shown on Mount Sinai, this sanctuary was only a copy, a shadow pointing to what is the real sanctuary in heaven (8:2-5). This earthly sanctuary must not be viewed in terms of the philosophy of Plato, as a copy of some archetype or eternal idea in heaven. The heavenly realities are not glorified archetypes of things on earth, but are the spiritual realities which cannot be fathomed by limited people on earth (Job 11:7-8). The real heavenly sanctuary is not a more ideal type of sanctuary somewhere in heaven, but represents the holy and majestic presence of God. The writer uses the known things on earth, which people can imagine, to describe the realities in heaven, which people cannot even imagine! The writers of the Bible, like Ezekiel, the writer of Hebrews and John in the book of Revelation, use apocalyptic language to describe the eternal heavenly realities or realities of the spiritual order. The writer reveals the realities in heaven in terms of "the new Jerusalem" and "the heavenly sanctuary", which would come down onto the new earth after the Second Coming of Christ (Ezekiel Ch 40-48; Rev Ch 21-22). In Hebrews 12:22-24, the writer describes the realities in heaven as the presence of God the Father, the Judge of all people. Jesus Christ, the Mediator of the new covenant, is at his right hand. The throne of God is surrounded by uncountable number of angels in joyful assembly, and also by the victorious church in heaven, which consists of the spirits of righteous men, that is,

Christians who had already died (Rev Ch 4-5). Both in heaven now there is no real temple building and on the new earth there will be no real temple building. Revelation 21:3 and 21 describes this reality the best when it says, "Behold, the tabernacle (tent, sanctuary) of God is with men and he will tabernacle with them. ...And I did not see a temple building in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple!" Also on earth now, Christians need no earthly temple or building to worship God. God does not live in any earthly temple or building (Act 7:48; 17:24-25). Because the curtain in the earthly temple had been torn from top to bottom after the death of Jesus Christ (Mt 27:51), Christians who live on earth no longer need earthly temples to worship God or earthly priests to represent them before God. They have direct and permanent access to God through Jesus Christ, their Mediator (4:16; Eph 2:18; 3:12). According to Ephesians 2:19-22, on earth, the Christians themselves are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit. According to 1 Peter 2:5, Christians themselves are the living stones, which are being built into a spiritual house. Christians not only live on earth in the direct spiritual presence of God, but now also worship God no longer through the Old Testament sacrifices, but in spirit and in truth (Jn 4:23-24). Christians are a holy priesthood, which offers spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God (1 Pet 2:5). According to Hebrews 13:15, one such spiritual sacrifice is to continually offer God a sacrifice of praise, which is the fruit of lips that confess his name (Mat 10:32-33; Rom 12:1; Phil 4:18; Heb 7:24-25).

As is clear from all the cross-references to other passages in the New Testament, the letter to the Hebrews is not an intruder into the New Testament, but makes a proper and indispensable contribution to the whole New Testament!

5. The book of Hebrews is an important book in the New Testament.

It is important, because it teaches *the relationship between the Old and the New Testament*.

Hebrews 10:1 teaches, "The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming - not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never ... make perfect those who draw near to worship". The Old Testament contains *the shadows*, while the New Testament contains *the realities* of these shadows! The Old Testament covenant, priesthood, sanctuary, festivals and offerings were *foreshadowing* the realities of the New Testament. The Old Testament "types" or "illustrations" pointed forward to the New Testament "antitypes" or "fulfilments". The Old Testament reveals God's "preparation" and the New Testament reveals God's "fulfilment". The Old Testament contained "the old covenant" (the first covenant, the law). The New Testament reveals "the new covenant". It teaches that Jesus Christ fulfilled the Old Testament shadows and prophecies (cf. Matthew 5:17).

Christians no longer have *priests*, because Jesus Christ is our "only high priest". Christians worship God no longer in a *sanctuary*, but "in spirit and truth". Christians no longer celebrate the Old Testament *festivals*, but especially the Lord's Supper and the Sunday as "the day of the Lord". Christians no longer bring *animal sacrifices*, because the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross was the perfect "sacrifice once for all". "God's people" in the Old Testament were limited to the faithful people in *Israel*, but "God's people" in the New Testament is extended to believers from every nation on earth (Jewish believers and non-Jewish believers)!

Therefore, Christians should not study the Old Testament without looking at its fulfilments in the New Testament. Christians should interpret the Old Testament revelation in the light of the New Testament revelation. (e.g. Hebrews 7 teaches a change of priesthood and Hebrews 8 teaches a change of covenant).