

The Argument of Hebrews

Study By: [Hampton Keathley IV](#)

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Introductory Matters

I. Introduction

A. Authorship

There has been much debate concerning the authorship of Hebrews because the letter itself does not indicate who the author is. Perhaps the most common conjecture through the centuries has been that the apostle Paul is the author. The Chester Beatty Papyrus numbered P⁴⁶ and dated prior to 200AD¹ contains a collection of Paul's epistles and includes Hebrews among them. Those holding to Pauline authorship suggest that Paul omitted his name because he, the apostle to the Gentiles, was writing to the Jews who would have likely dismissed the letter if they had known the source. The stylistic differences from Paul's other letters is attributed to his writing in Hebrew to the Hebrews with the letter being translated into Greek by Luke.²

In modern times few accept the idea that a Lukan translation of Paul's letter would account for all the stylistic differences in vocabulary, sentence building and imagery. About the only thing some commentators are certain of is that the author is not Paul.³

Others have suggested that Clement of Rome was the author, but this is not widely accepted because Clement's other writings show that his theology differs widely from the author of Hebrews. In addition, none of his other writings show such "creative contributions to Christian theology" as does Hebrews.⁴

Barnabas is also thought by some to be the author. This would give the letter of Hebrews a close affiliation with Paul as Barnabas was Paul's missionary companion, and this would explain the letter's resemblance to Paul's theology. Barnabas was a Levite and would

have been acquainted with the levitical system which is a major theme in Hebrews.⁵

Martin Luther denied Pauline authorship and attributed the letter to Apollos on the grounds that the author says the message “was confirmed to us by those who heard.” Since Paul was one of “those who heard,” it follows that he would not have written this. Apollos was close to Paul and this would account for the similarities with Paul’s writings. He was a native of Alexandria (Acts 18:24) and this would account for the Alexandrian coloring. He was known to be eloquent, and this would correspond to the advanced style of Hebrews. There are several reasons why Apollos could have written Hebrews and none to argue against it, except that early tradition does not support it.⁶

Others have been suggested such as Priscilla, Philip, Silas and Epaphras, but these are all conjecture and it is evident that we must admit that there is not enough evidence to know for sure who wrote Hebrews.

B. The Audience and Purpose for the Letter

Because the letter does not directly state who the audience is or the problems being dealt with, we must draw our conclusions from internal implications. The most obvious clue to the identity of the audience is the title “To the Hebrews.” Although we cannot be sure that this was on the original letter, there is no reason to doubt it.⁷ The extended treatment of Moses, Aaron, the levitical priesthood and Melchizedek also indicate a Jewish audience. Evidently there was some confusion about who Christ was with the danger being that angels were being assigned an equal or higher status than Christ. Along with this was the inclination to abandon Christ and return to the Mosaic law and the levitical priesthood.⁸ The purpose of the author of Hebrews is to establish Christ’s preeminence and His replacement of the Mosaic law and turn his audience back to faith in Him and Him alone. On the basis of the doctrine imparted, the author of Hebrews expects to inspire his readers to a response of faith in Christ as their savior and to a life of purity.

C. The Date

Just as the authorship of Hebrews is unknown, so is the date. Because of its use in 1 Clement, which is dated at 95 AD, most agree that the date must be prior to 95 AD, but the real debate centers around whether or not it was written before the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD. Because there is no mention of the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple, it seems logical to conclude that it was written before 70 AD. After all, if the purpose of the letter is to show the end of the Mosaic law, the destruction of the temple would make a stronger argument and surely would have been mentioned in the letter. In addition, temple rituals are referred to in the present tense (cf. 9:6, 9, 13; 13:10).⁹

The Argument

The author details the preeminence of Christ's person and work as the God-man and establisher of the new covenant to encourage the Hebrews not to revert back to Judaism because of persecution but to cling fast to the Messiah so they can enter into all the present and future blessings that accompany salvation.

II. The Superiority of Christ's Person (1-4:)

The author of Hebrews begins by expounding on the preeminence of Christ's person and shows that because He is the magnificent sovereign of the universe and the ultimate revelation of God, He is inherently greater than the angels, Moses and the priests of the old covenant.

A. He Is God's Final Word (1:1-4)

The superiority of Christ is first demonstrated by the contrast to the prophets of old who only spoke God's word. Christ *is* God's word and is, therefore, the ultimate revelation of God. This is emphasized by the use of $\epsilon\acute{\iota}\nu\ \alpha\iota\omega\upsilon\ \nu\acute{\omicron}\nu$, which, being without the article, stresses the quality of His person.¹⁰ As a son, Christ is the true reflection of the glory and nature of God.

The principle that Christ is God's final word is foundational to the rest of the author's argument. The readers must understand that the

revelation of Christ supersedes the old revelation and that Christ is superior to the law.

B. He Is Greater Than the Angels (1:5-2:18)

The second illustration of Christ's superiority compares Him to the angels.¹¹ In order to dispense the notion that Christ was some sort of angel, the author contrasts Christ to the angels, and he continues the "son" imagery of his first contrast. Christ is superior to the angels for the following reasons:

1. Because He Is a Son and the Angels Are Servants (1:5,7)

Christ is superior to the angels because, while the angels are merely servants of God, He is the Son of God and thus the heir to the throne of God.¹²

2. Because He Is Worshipped by the Angels (1:6)

A second contrast, which proves Christ's superiority, is the fact that He is worshipped by the angels. This quote from Psalm 97:7, an enthronement Psalm, supports the author's point.¹³ If He is worshipped by the angels, He must be superior to them.

3. Because He Is Sovereign (1:8-14)

In contrast to the servant angels, who worship the Son, Christ is seen as God Himself. The vocative is used and Christ is addressed as "O God" (vs. 8). He is the eternal king, seated on His eternal throne (vs. 8) ruling with justice (vs. 9) because He is the Creator/Sustainer (vs. 10-12) and because He will defeat the enemy (vs. 13-14). These many references look forward to Christ's rule of the eschatological kingdom.

Warning #1 "Pay Attention" (2:1-4)

Exhortation (2:1)

The author interjects a warning at this point to challenge his readers. Because this verse is connected to the previous section by "diaV tou~to," they are logically related. He picks up his original point about

Christ being the final revelation of God and warns them to pay careful attention.

Explanation (2:2)

Verse 2 gives the key to understanding the logical progression of the section. If the law (“the message spoken by angels”) was binding, then certainly the superior revelation of Jesus Christ was also binding and the readers must not neglect it or they would not share in Christ’s rule over His enemies.¹⁴

Exhortation (2:3-4)

He gives them further motivation to pay attention by telling them the results of neglecting this final revelation. In the same way that there was discipline for disobedience under the Mosaic law, the readers could expect the same under the new covenant (2:2).

4. Because of His Humanity (2:5-18)

After warning his audience of not paying attention and neglecting their future salvation, the author continues his comparison of Christ to the angels by emphasizing Christ’s humanity.

a) Future deliverance (2:5-16)

He begins the discussion by dealing with the subjection of the world to come. This coincides with the concept that the salvation is deliverance from one’s enemies. God gave dominion of the earth to man (Gen. 1:26), but he forfeited the ability in the Garden of Eden. Christ became man so that He could fulfill God’s original design of dominion (Heb. 2:5-8) and so that He could die for man and bring salvation (2:9-16).

b) Present deliverance (2:17-18)

In the midst of motivating them to persevere for future rewards and blessings, the author also shows them that there are present benefits. They have an empathetic high priest who can help them now.

C. Christ Is Greater Than Moses (3:1-4:13)

The author resumes his argument that Christ is superior to the Mosaic law by comparing Him to Moses. Moses was the giver of the law and as such represented the law. If Christ is superior to Moses, then Christ is superior to the law.

1. Moses Was a Servant - Christ Is a Son (3:1-6)

To prove Christ's superiority he uses a servant-son contrast again. Moses was the greatest prophet in Israel's history, but he was only a servant, while Christ is God's son.

Warning #2 "Do not harden your heart." (3:7-19)

The author pauses in his comparison of Christ and Moses to discuss the role of the people of God in the scheme of things. Israel's response to Moses and God is an example for the readers and their response to Christ.

The Example of Israel (7-11)

This section is linked to the preceding context by *Diov* (therefore), so this example illustrates what happened to those who did not "hold fast in confidence and pride to their hope" (3:6). The Israelites hardened their hearts and doubted God's ability, goodness, etc. and refused to trust Him to conquer the enemies in the land. The result was that they forfeited their right to enter the land and experience God's rest (vs. 11).

The Exhortation to the readers (3:12-19)

The author now applies the example of Israel to his audience. Just like the children of Israel failed to enter into the land because of their unbelief, his audience of believers can also fail to enter into God's rest in the kingdom and share¹⁵ in Christ's reign if they are not faithful. When he says that "all are open and laid bare before [Him]," he is referring to the judgment seat of Christ when Christ will judge believers for their faithfulness.

2. Moses Could not Bring Them Into God's Rest, but Christ Can (4:1-13)

With the events of Numbers 13:-14: in his mind, the author points out that Moses did not take the children of Israel into the promised land to enjoy the rest of God, but he assures them that the promise of God's "rest" still exists, and the key to entrance is belief (vs. 3).

III. The Superiority of Christ's Ministry (4:14-10:18)

After comparing Christ's person to the angels and Moses, the author begins his comparison of Christ to the priests who mediated the law. Christ is our Great High Priest who performs superior intercession to the priests of the old covenant. He supports this claim with the following points:

A. His Position in Heaven (4:14)

He is a superior high priest because of His position in heaven. Other priests worked in the temple, but Christ went directly into the presence of God (vs. 14).

B. His Empathy (4:15-16)

He is a greater high priest because He became a man Himself and can, therefore, sympathize with their weaknesses. He understands what they are struggling with as He makes intercession for them (vs. 15). But unlike other priests, who had to offer sacrifices for their own sins (5:3), Jesus did not.

C. His Priestly Order (5:1-10)

He was appointed by God like Aaron was (5:4), but His was a superior appointment because He was appointed after the order of Melchizedek (5:6,10).

Warning #3 "Don't Fall Away" (5:11-6:12)

Expression of the problem (5:11-14)

The author pauses from his lesson on Melchizedek because he realized that his audience would have trouble understanding what he was about to say. He rebukes them for being so slow to learn, and he supports his indictment by stating that they should have been teachers by now (vs. 11). Instead, they still needed to be taught themselves.

Expression of the warning (6:1-6:8)

Instead of returning to the basic doctrines of the faith, like one would expect after such a rebuke, he says they should press on with the more complicated doctrine at hand. His reason is this: if the readers do not make progress in the Christian life, they will regress to a state from which there is such hardness of heart that there will be no chance of repentance. If this happens they will suffer the loss of rewards at the judgment seat of Christ.¹⁶

Exhortation (6:9-12)

But he is confident that this will not be the case with these readers, and he exhorts them to be diligent in their faith and to follow the example of the old testament saints. He will elaborate on this later in chapter 11.

Example (6:13-20)

To drive his point home he reminds them of the faith of Abraham, who received the promises of God.

D. He Is a Priest Like Melchizedek (7:1-10)

He returns to his discussion of the priesthood of Melchizedek, which he had mentioned in 5:6 and 10 because Christ's role as high priest is an issue which is, evidently, a stumbling block for his audience. In order to prove the superiority of Christ's priestly ministry, the author compares Him to Melchizedek and the levitical priests and then shows His superior service. The first point is that Melchizedek was a prototype of Christ.

1. Melchizedek's Unique Person (7:1)

Melchizedek was an exalted person being both a king and priest. The author is more interested in his priesthood and will develop that topic in the following section.

2. Melchizedek's Unique Function (7:2, 4-10)

Melchizedek's superiority over Abraham is shown by the fact that Abraham offered tithes to him.

3. Melchizedek's Unique Genealogy (7:3)

Melchizedek's lack of genealogy was perhaps typological of Christ's eternal existence and continuing priesthood.

E. He Is Superior to the Levitical Priesthood (7:11-28)

After showing that Melchizedek was superior to Abraham and Levi, the author springs from his mention of Levi to the inadequacy of the levitical priesthood.¹⁷ His argument is that the levitical priesthood could not bring perfection and another priest was needed. The change in priesthood (vs. 11) equals a change in law (vs. 12) and demonstrates that Christ is superior to the levitical priesthood and that a new economy is in place.

Christ is the ultimate priest because God swore He would be a priest forever (vs. 20), because Christ lives forever (vs. 21) and because He will always be there to make intercession for us (vs. 25). He is sinless and therefore a better mediator than sinful priests (vs. 26-27).

F. His Is a Superior Ministry (8:1-13)

The author sums up his arguments to this point about the superiority of Christ's person and ministry and introduces the logical conclusion that the new covenant that Christ mediates is superior to the old covenant.

1. He Is in the Presence of God (8:1-5)

One reason His service is superior is because He is in the heavenly temple in the very presence of God.

2. He Is the Mediator of a New Covenant (8:6-13)

The author has just shown the superiority of Christ to Melchizedek and the Levitical priests. He now makes the logical connection that the covenant which Christ mediates is superior to the old covenant. Here the author gives the theme statement to his letter. Just as Christ is superior in His person and ministry to all those He has been compared with, so is the new covenant superior to the old. To prove his point he quotes from Jer. 31:31-34. If Jeremiah recorded God's promise that there would be a new covenant, that implied that the old covenant was inadequate.

The author also points out that it was the sinfulness of the people that caused the failure of the old covenant. It was not adequate to deal with their sin.¹⁸

G. The Superiority of the New Covenant (9:1-10:18)

The author gives his final and summary demonstration of Christ's superiority by comparing the old covenant with the new.¹⁹

1. The Limitations of the Old Covenant (9:1-10)

The old covenant was mediated by sinful priests in an earthly tabernacle and was not sufficient to heal the broken relationship between God and man.

2. Christ's Mediation of the New Covenant (9:11-10:18)

The author contrasts the work of the priests under the old covenant to Christ's work under the new covenant.²⁰ Christ's personal sacrifice brought healing to the broken relationship and eternal salvation to mankind.

a) A better sanctuary (9:11, 24)

Christ's tabernacle is superior to the earthly one of the old covenant.

b) A better sacrifice (9:12-10:18)

Christ's blood is superior to the blood of animals, and His sacrifice did not need to be repeated as did the sacrifices of the old covenant.

IV. Application of the Greatness of Christ (10:19-13:25)

After giving his argument about the superiority of Christ to the old covenant, the author turns to what the response of the readers should be. They need to take advantage of this new relationship with God brought about by Christ's sacrifice by trusting in Him in the midst of trials and by living a godly life.

A. The Exhortation to Endure (10:19-25)

The superior sacrifice and mediation of Christ has enabled each believer to enter into the very presence of God and has enabled the believer to enjoy a superior relationship with God. The author urges his audience to take advantage of this privilege, to have an enduring faith in God and to encourage other believers to do likewise.

Warning #4 (10:26-39)

The author warns the readers that just as there was no sacrifice under the old covenant for deliberate sin,²¹ in the same way, Christ's sacrifice will not protect the believer who willfully continues to sin from the wrath of God. On the other hand, if they persevere, they will be richly rewarded.

1. Punishment Under the Old Covenant (10:26-28)

The author reminds them of the consequences for deliberate sin under the old covenant.

2. Punishment Under the New Covenant (10:29-31)

The author explains that punishment for denying Christ will be more severe.

3. Promise of Reward (10:32-39)

The author reminds them of the earlier days when they endured persecution and encourages them to persevere in confidence and godliness because God will reward those who do not give up.

B. The Means of Endurance (11:1-40)

After encouraging them to endure, the author told them the means of enduring was faith (10:38), now he elaborates on what faith is.

1. The Description of Faith (11:1-3)

Faith is confidence in the person and promises of God, and since neither are tangible, God rewards those who demonstrate faith.

2. The Demonstration of Faith (11:4-38)

Just as the heroes of the old covenant had faith in the promises of God, so the readers should have faith in the promises of new “Revelation” of God.

a) Examples from general history (11:4-7)

The author gives examples of men who demonstrated faith who lived before the founding of the nation of Israel.

(1) The example of Abel (11:4)

Abel offered his sacrifice by faith in the promise of God.

(2) The example of Enoch (11:5-6)

The fact that God took Enoch directly to heaven without experiencing death shows that Enoch had extraordinary faith in God.

(3) The example of Noah (11:7)

Noah’s faith is demonstrated by his building an ark to float on water which did not yet exist.

b) Examples from the Patriarchs (11:8-29)

The author gives examples of faith from the Patriarchs.

(1) The example of Abraham (11:8-19)

Abraham left his own country at God's command without knowing his destination and by faith he offered up his son Isaac.

(2) The example of Isaac (11:20)

Isaac demonstrated faith in God when he passed on God's blessing to Jacob and Esau.

(3) The example of Jacob (11:21)

Jacob blessed Joseph's sons and worshipped God.

(4) The example of Joseph (11:22)

Joseph had confidence that God would deliver the nation from Egypt and requested that his bones be carried to the promised land.

(5) The example of Moses (11:23-29)

Moses gave up the throne of Egypt and temporal pleasure to be persecuted as a follower of Yahweh because he believed in the future that God promised the nation.

c) Examples from the Nation in the land (11:30-38)

Probably due to limited time the author lists several individuals from the conquest of the land through the end of the nation's occupation of the land as further examples of those who lived by faith in the promises of God.

***3. The Delay of Fulfillment of the Promises Explained
(11:39-40)***

The author explains that the reason for the delay in God's fulfillment of the promise to old testament saints was so that the readers might be included in those promises.

C. The Motivation for Endurance (12:1-29)

The writer encourages the readers to stay “in the race” of living the Christian life by following the example of Christ, by knowing that they are God’s children and that they have His enabling grace.

1. The Example of Christ (12:1-4)

The writer urges the readers to follow the example of the old testament saints²² and to persevere in the midst of persecution by focusing on the person and work of Christ.

2. The Encouragement of Discipline (12:5-11)

The author points out that hardship and discipline are certain signs that the readers are children of God because fathers discipline their children as a sign of their love and concern.

3. The Enablement of Grace (12:12-15)

God’s grace should enable them to live in peace with all men and to live righteous lives.²³

4. The Example of Esau (12:16-17)

In stark contrast to the righteous is Esau who was immoral and disdained the things of God and suffered the consequences.

5. The Explanation of the New Relationship to God (12:18-24)

The readers are privileged to a new relationship with God that is not based on fear as was the old covenant, so the writer is basically asking why the readers would want to return to a covenant based on fear.²⁴

Warning #5 (12:25-29)

The author warns the readers not to be like Esau (12:16) and throw away their inheritance in the kingdom by succumbing to fleshly desires for security.²⁵

D. Concluding Exhortations (13:)

The author concludes his letter with a list of exhortations which detail to his readers the godly life which should naturally follow a commitment to the new covenant.

1. Show Love to Others (13:1-3)

Because the unity in Christ transcends racial and cultural boundaries, the author encourages the Christians to love and hospitality to others. In the event that a Christian brother was imprisoned, he also exhorts the readers to support them.

2. Be Faithful to the Marriage Relationship (13:4)

The author also exhorts them to remain pure and faithful in their marriages lest they come under the judgment and discipline of God.

3. Do not Covet (13:5-6)

The writer urges the readers not to seek life in temporal things by coveting material goods, but to be content with what they have and trust God to provide for them.

4. Evaluate and Obey Your Leaders (13:7-17)

The author exhorts his audience to evaluate the teachings of their leaders to see if they are trying to lead them back into the bondage of the old system, and if they are consistent with the gospel of Jesus Christ, obey them because they are accountable for their followers.

5. Concluding Remarks (13:18-25)

The writer urges his readers to pray for him and those with him and for his soon and safe return to them and sends his concluding greetings.

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1 Young Kyu Kim, "Palaeographical Dating of P46 to the Later First Century," *Biblica*, 69, (1988) p. 248.

2 Philip Edgumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977), pp. 19-22.

3 William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1-8* (Dallas: Word, 1991), p. xlix.

4 Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 4th ed. (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1990), p. 678.

5 Zane Hodges, "Hebrews," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* (Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books, 1983), 1:778.

6 Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, p. 679.

7 Ibid., p. 683.

8 Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, p. 11.

9 Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, p. 701-04.

10 A.T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville, Tenn: Broadman Press, 1934), p. 794.

11 The attention that the author devotes to this topic would indicate that there was some sort of aberrant doctrine going around that Christ was perhaps only an angel or at the very least that they were worshipping angels. James Moffat, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1924), p. 9. Also compare Col. 2:18 for an example that there was a problem with some people worshipping angels.

12 The son imagery was very important to the Jewish audience. In the Jewish household there were servants and sons. And although the servants were often a close part of the family, only the sons were the heirs to the father's estate. This heirship was brought out earlier in verse 2. Therefore, Christ is the only heir to God's throne. It is also

significant that this is a quote from Psalm 2:7 (a royal enthronement psalm) which emphasizes Christ's future reign.

13 This possibly comes from the LXX rendering which translates the Hebrew <yh!Oa\$ (meaning gods) as "angels." Hodges, "Hebrews," p. 782.

14 Since he is writing to Christians (cf. "holy brethren" in 3:1 and his use of "we" in 2:3), who have already been saved, and in view of the author's many quotations from royal enthronement psalms (1:5-14) and use of the word "salvation" in 1:14, the use of the word "salvation" in 2:3 must be a future deliverance from one's enemies. He will resume this deliverance theme later as he talks about the "rest" that Moses couldn't give.

15 Oberholster holds that metaco" is a key word in Hebrews. Sharing or partaking with Christ involves co-reigning with Him in a special way that supercedes just being in heaven. See "The Eschatological Salvation of Hebrews 1:5-2:5," *Biblio Theca Sacra*, Vol. 145, No. 577, p.88.

16 Paul uses similar language in 1 Cor. 3:15 to describe the loss of rewards. Oberholtzer points out that the land is not destroyed in the burning process, only the fruit of the land, i.e. the thorns. See "The Thorn Infested Ground in Hebrews 6:4-12," *Biblio Theca Sacra*, Vol. 145, No. 579, p. 326.

17 Lane, *Hebrews*, p. 180.

18 Hodges, "Hebrews," p. 800.

19 Wescott writes that this is "a summary description of Christ's High-priestly work." Broke Foss Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, n.d.), p. 255.

20 Don Stitzel, "The Argument of Hebrew 7-9," Master's Thesis Dallas Theological Seminary, 1971, p. 36.

21 Hodges, "Hebrews," p. 805.

22 Lane writes, “The writer recognizes...that an earnest appeal for Christian endurance cannot finally be based upon the antecedent exposition of faithfulness to God under the old covenant.” See, *Hebrews 9-13*, p. 406. In other words, following the example of the OT saints is not enough. We need to focus on Christ.

23 This is reminiscent of the discussion of Melchizedek who was king of Salem (the word for peace) and his very name implies righteousness (qdz = righteous).

24 Oberholtzer, “The Failure to Heed His Speaking in Hebrews 12:25-29,” *Biblio Theca Sacra*, Vol. 146, No. 581, p. 74.

25 Oberholtzer further points out that Esau’s inheritance “was lost because of his lack of future perspective and because of his present physical distress.” *Ibid.*, pp. 68-69.