

Introduction to Hebrews

©David Peterson (2013)

Character and purpose

- A 'word of exhortation' (13:22; compare Acts 13:15), rather than a letter (though it finishes like a letter)
- A series of 'sermons' based on key OT passages, notably

Ps. 8:4-6, the basis of Hebrews 2

Ps. 95:7b-11, the basis of Hebrews 3-4

Ps. 110:4, the basis of Hebrews 7

Jer. 31:31-34, the basis of Hebrews 8-10

Prov. 3:11-12, the basis of Hebrews 12

- *Progressive expositions* of the person and work of Christ in the light of OT Scripture (doctrinal passages), leading to a series of *related exhortations* (both warning and encouragement)

e.g.	1:1-13	Exposition
	2:1-4	Exhortation
	2:5-18	Exposition
	3:1-6	Exhortation

- Written by an *authoritative figure*, well-versed in the Scriptures and known to the readers; in some way linked to Timothy (13:17-19, 22-25), but not Paul; Apollos or Barnabas have been suggested, but there is no way of being sure
- Written *before the destruction of the Jerusalem temple by the Romans in AD 70*, probably to Jewish Christians outside Palestine; the readers had previously suffered persecution, imprisonment and the plundering of their property (10:32-34), possibly in the persecution at Rome under Claudius in AD 49

- From the *exhortations* we learn that at least some of them were

in danger of drifting from Christ (2:1-4)

in danger of hardening their hearts against God's word (3:1 - 4:13)

unwilling to receive the 'solid food' the writer wished to give them and unwilling to progress to maturity in Christ (5:14 - 6:3)

drifting from Christian fellowship and in danger of throwing away their confidence in Christ because of renewed opposition and the delayed return of Christ (10:25-39)

- From the biblical *expositions* we learn that they needed to be convinced that

Jesus as Son of God is greater than the angels (1:1-14)

Jesus as Son of God has put everything in subjection under his feet and can bring believers to share with him in his glory (2:5-18)

Jesus as Son of God and heavenly high priest can sustain struggling believers 'to the uttermost' (5:1-10; 7:1-28)

Jesus as Son of God and heavenly high priest has fulfilled all the OT provisions for cleansing and sanctification by inaugurating the New Covenant (8:1 - 10:18)

Outline of the structure and argument (linking expositions and exhortations)

1. *Opening declaration*: God's final word in his Son (1:1-4)

2. *Biblical proofs and primary exhortation*: the greatness of the Son and the need to pay the most careful attention to what we have heard (1:5 - 2:4)

3. *God's plan of salvation outlined with a challenge to respond appropriately*: the ministry of the Son enables us ultimately to reign with him in glory and in the present to hold firmly to the confidence and hope he gives us (2:5 -3:6)

4. *An exhortation based on Psalm 95:7-11: a warning about hardening hearts in unbelief, with encouragements to enter the rest that the Son has made possible (3:7 – 4:13)*

5. *An exhortation based on a preliminary exposition of the Son's high priestly ministry: holding firmly to the faith we profess and approaching God with confidence (4:14 – 5:10)*

6. *An exhortation preceding the central section of the argument: warnings about immaturity and falling away, together with encouragements to realize the hope set before us (5:11 – 6:20)*

7. *Central exposition of the work of Christ and its benefits (7:1 – 10:18):*

- a. The Son who has been perfected as high priest forever in the order of Melchizedek (7:1-28)
- b. The high priest who has inaugurated the New Covenant (8:1-13)
- c. The eternal consequences of his sacrificial ministry (9:1-28)
- d. The sanctifying and perfecting of believers (10:1-18)

8. *An exhortation concluding the central section of the argument: encouragements to persevere in faith, hope and love, together with a warning about turning away from the Son of God and his achievement for us (10:19-39)*

9. *An exhortation based on biblical examples, climaxing in the example of Jesus: encouragements to persevere in faith in the face of testing (11:1 – 12:3)*

10. *A series of concluding exhortations, prayer and greetings: enduring hardship as God's discipline, strengthening one another to persevere in faith and holiness, resisting false teaching and taking advantage of every God-given resource to do his will (12:4 – 13:25)*