

HEBREWS: INTRODUCTION.

1. TITLE: The name “Hebrews” is not a part of the original letter. It was added later by the apostles. It is conjecture to try to determine why no title was included when it was written. It is my studied opinion that since it was written during the time of Nero when persecution was rapidly escalating, around 64 AD, it was the author’s way of not revealing the Christian recipients so they would not be targeted for more persecution. For the same reason, the author’s name is omitted as well. This title, however, is a key to understanding who the intended recipients were...Jews, whose native language was Hebrew. They were Hellenic Jews who had learned and spoke koine Greek, the universal language of the day, during the time of Roman occupation.

2. LETTER: There is no formal greeting as with all the other NT letters but, there is a personal salutation at the end. With the original letter written without a title, it is best taken as a “general letter” for circulation among more than one church. So, while the address is general in nature, the author is very personal in his remarks, as one who knew the recipients personally and many by name. The letter addresses the serious problem of apostasy or defection by Jewish Christians back to Judaism to escape persecution. As Peter described it, its like the dog going back his vomit or the pig after washing, to wallow in the mud (II Pt.2:22). Their fear of persecution had blinded them to what they were really giving up as Christians. This problem was not a one-church problem. It was becoming epidemic as the persecution intensified.

3. LANGUAGE: Hebrews was written in the highest literary Greek form of the day called “Classical Greek.” This was the type of Greek used to write the Septuagint (**LXX**), the Greek translation of the Hebrew OT. It was written during the time between the OT and NT, when the Jews were coming under the influence of the Greeks and their Hellenic Culture. As many Jews were losing touch with Hebrew, 70 concerned rabbis translated their Hebrew into classical Greek. The author quotes heavily from the **LXX** indicating his close familiarity with this translation but, also suggesting, so were his recipients. It may also suggest the author was well-read and well-educated. But clearly, he was well-versed and well-schooled in Judaism. He used the **LXX** to create his apologetic for Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of the OT sacrificial system to include both the priests and all their functions.

4. AUTHOR: While numerous names have been suggested over the years, it really comes down to four. First is Luke, a doctor and already the author of two NT books, Luke and Acts. Second is Apollos, who was a great orator (I Cor.1:12, 3:22, Acts 18:4-28). Third is Silas, who was an able teacher, missionary and amanuensis (Tasker, pgs.27ff). Fourth is Barnabas, who was also a great teacher, missionary and a great “thinker-type,” like Paul. Barnabas would be my choice as the book of

Hebrew is theologically the deepest and most difficult book in the NT. Whoever wrote Hebrews was either an understudy of Paul, like Timothy and Titus, who was himself a converted religious Jew, a Pharisee, or a very well trained and educated Jew like Paul, a co-partner with Paul in the ministry, thoroughly and deeply familiar with Judaism like Paul and who also had an exceptionally good hand on biblical Christianity like Paul, who both recognized and accepted Jesus Christ as God's Son, our Savior, as the embodiment and fulfillment of all that was promised to Israel like Paul. The doctrine and theology are Pauline but, the writing of it has Barnabas' finger prints all over it. Consider the following:

- a. Levite – He was from the priestly tribe of Levi and would have a more intimate familiarity with the spiritual issues of Judaism: Acts 4:36
- b. Encourager – It's the one thing that jumps out about Barnabas wherever he is mentioned. Compare this with the book of Hebrews which could very easily be entitled, Hebrews: A letter of Encouragement...13 chapters of encouragement: Acts 4:36, 11:22-24 cp. Heb.3:13, 6:18, 10:25, etc.
- c. Money – He never hesitated to use his wealth to support the infant church (Acts 4:37) and never made money an issue where he deserved support himself (I Cor.9:6). It all points to a clear understanding of grace as superior to the Law: cp.Heb.13:25.
- d. Paul – He escorted Paul right after his conversion when everyone else was still afraid of him (Acts 9:27). He had the wisdom and faith to see God at work bringing about genuine change, a central point the author makes in Hebrews, a change from Law to Grace, from the ritual sacrifices to the real sacrifice Who is Christ. He understood the change and was not afraid of it.
- e. Official Recognition: The church at Antioch officially recognized and set apart for the ministry several very capable men among whom was Barnabas: Acts 13:1-3, Gal.2:9.
- f. Missions – Barnabas was a co-partner with Paul (Acts.12:25). So, he was well exposed to and experienced in addressing the needs, issues, problems, etc. of his day. On these trips it was Barnabas who took and mentored Mark (Acts 12:25).

NOTE: If Barnabas was in fact the author, you might appreciate why the book was not name after him. Think: who would take seriously any book called, "Barnie?"

5. DATE: Since the temple was still in use at the time of writing, it had to be written before 70 AD, when General Titus marched into Jerusalem and burned it to the ground. A popular date is 65 AD. A.T. Robertson puts it later, around 67-69 AD. At any rate, its somewhere in the decade or 10 year period before the destruction.

6. TARGET GROUP: Most likely, the recipients were Hellenic Jewish Christians, in local assemblies, probably some in home churches, living and meeting somewhere

in Palestine, either in or around but not too far from Jerusalem and possibly as far north as Antioch, the new center for the Christian Church (Acts 11:26).

7. CIRCUMSTANCES: Persecution against Christians started with the stoning of Stephen. He was an Hellenic Greek and not a Jew (Acts 6:1-7:60 – saga). This incident set in motion a succession of more martyrdoms (Bk. Acts). This alone struck fear in the hearts of many Christians, both Jewish and Gentile. Fear took over and reason no longer reigned. Persecution came from two directions. First, from racial but, especially religious Jews who regarded Jewish Christians as defectors from Judaism. They interpreted the tenets of Christianity as a very real threat to Judaism. So, the fear was on both sides, the persecutors and the persecuted. The fear by Jewish Christians of being persecuted motivated some to defect back to Judaism to escape persecution. On the other side, there was a very real fear that, if Christianity took hold and Jewry accepted and followed its teachings, then it would be the proverbial “nail of the bell.” Judaism would eventually die on the vine of history and any and all the hopes of Israel as a nation would vanish forever. It must be understood that the one and only thing that has always kept Jewry together, despite the history of anti-Semitism and dispersions, has been their universal beliefs and hope based upon the teachings of the OT in general but, the Mosaic Law and the Prophets in particular. If somehow these were discredited, then Israel and her future would simply cease to exist...so, they thought!! Note however, this driving conviction is a fundamental contradiction to the unconditional Abrahamic Covenant (Gen.12:1-3).

It is on this critical point the author wrote Hebrews. The intention was to dispel such fears, to avoid defection from Christianity back to Judaism, to avert further persecution and to carefully explain how Jesus Christ, as demonstrated in the Law and taught and foretold by the prophets, did not come to destroy the Law or the Prophets but rather, to fulfill them. See: Mt.3:13-17, 5:17,18, Rom.8:3,4. If understood and accepted, the rollout would end their fears and persecution. However, it was Israel’s rejection of Jesus Christ as the promised Messiah and Savior (Jn.1:9-13) that created her own fears and dilemma and finally led to her own judgment in 70 AD. Almost like a treatise, Hebrews is a passionate personal letter, profoundly theological and written to address these complex and compelling fears.

Second, persecution also came from the gentiles...from Rome. Recall, the first time the Jews attempted to have Rome condemn Christ, it was on religious grounds, blasphemy, as Jesus Christ had claimed to be the Son of God, even equal with God (Jn.10:30). Rome would not touch it. So, the Jews changed the charge against Christ from blasphemy to sedition, a political charge, insisting on His claim to be King of the Jews (Jn.19:1-22). This got Rome’s attention as they now saw Christ and all his followers as a potential threat to the Roman Empire. With that, Rome agreed to execute Christ, Roman style for a non-Roman citizen...crucifixion, a very degrading, slow and painful death. With that, public Jewish opposition to Christians essentially evaporated. But, Rome persisted persecuting Christians, wherever, until the early

300s AD. It ended in the year 312 AD when Constantine I became the first Roman Emperor to convert to Christianity. It happened on the eve of battle, before going out against a rival ruler in the west, Maxentius. Constantine won and attributed his victory to his new found faith in Christ. Christianity became a legalized “religion.”

8. DANGER: The primary inherent danger that concerned the author was the defection of Jewish converts back to Judaism. For the most part, it was to avoid persecution and to a much lesser extent, it was a denial of Jesus Christ as the promised Messiah and Savior. At the heart of this very real danger was Doctrinal Immaturity (5:11-6:3 cp. Rom.10:17). They were shallow in their understanding of the Mosaic Law and the Prophets. Therefore, they lacked the basic and necessary “frame of reference” for recognizing Jesus Christ as their Messiah-Savior. In addition, they had failed to mature in their new Christian faith. And so, in both cases, they lacked deep, strong roots of understanding. And the testing brought this out.

9. PURPOSE: Generally speaking, there are at least 5 things the author attempts to achieve:

- a. Combat the danger of drifting away from Christianity (2:1);
- b. Bring about doctrinal maturity in the Christian faith (5:11-6:12);
- c. Combat the danger of going back to Judaism, ie - works, rituals, religion (10:1);
- d. Prepare for more persecution (12:3-15);
- e. Warn against false doctrine (13:9).

10. MOVEMENT: The book is developed in two major sections.

- a. Part I (1:1-10:18) – “The Pre-Eminence of The Son in His Person and Work;”
- b. Part II (10:19-13:25) – “Practical Application of His Pre-Eminence to the CWL.”

11. SPIRITUAL LESSON: Taken as a whole, the one great spiritual lesson that readily applies to all Christians of every generation is this: Doctrinal maturity is the basis for achieving a strong and enduring faith and it is this kind of faith that is the spiritual key for unlocking the grace way for pursuing the CWL in general and for properly handling all tests in life in particular.

12. KEY VERSE (6:9): “But beloved, we are convinced of better things concerning you and things that accompany salvation...”

13. CHART: (Handout).

14. OUTLINE: (Handout).

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