

“A Great Cloud of Witnesses”

An Introduction to the Letter to the Hebrews

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“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.” (Hebrews 12:1-2)

Introduction to the Letter

A. Author:

- i. Traditional: St. Paul
- ii. Modern: Unknown Jewish disciple / colleague of Paul (Timothy, Apollos, Barnabas, etc.)
- iii. * Dr. Smith’s suggestion: Pauline circle
 1. Substance = doctrine / theology of St. Paul
 2. Style = unnamed literary collaborator of Paul

C. Date:

- i. Majority view = 80’s-90’s A.D.
- ii. Minority view = 60’s A.D.
- iii. * Dr. Smith’s suggestion: Thrust of *Hebrews* most sensible when read “in the shadow of the Temple,” prior to 70 A.D.

D. Audience:

- i. Unnamed “holy brethren” (3:1, 12, 10:19)
- ii. Endured persecution and “hard sufferings” (10:32)
- iii. * Dr. Smith’s suggestion:
 1. Written primarily to a substantial group of Jewish priests—Levites—who though living in Jerusalem and being faithful to the Temple cult, had recently converted to Christianity:
 - Acts 6:7 “And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.”
 2. Strategic: Persuading / reinforcing the faith of this influential priestly group would have a “domino effect” on the faith of many others.

E. Style: Letter or Homily?

- i. *Hebrews* incorporates elements of classical rhetoric, yet lacks other key features of

Christian epistolary literature.

ii. An word of exhortation:

- *Heb.* 13:22 “I appeal (*parakalo*) to you, brethren, bear with my word of exhortation (*tou legou tes paraklesos*).
- *Parakalo*: An act of emboldening another in belief or course of action, encouragement, exhortation.

iii.* Dr. Smith’s suggestion: *Hebrews* is more homily than letter, written to challenge these Jewish priests to fully embrace Jesus as their true, eternal High Priest.

F. Distinctions / Key Themes of the Letter

i. Priesthood of Jesus Christ. More emphasis on His “priesthood” than any NT book:

- *Heb.* 4:14 “Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession ...”
- “Priest” (*heirus*) 27x in the letter.
- 15 of these occurrences concern Jesus the “high priest” (*archierus*).

ii. Superiority of the New Covenant over the Old.

1. “Covenant” (*diatheke*) = 19x.
2. *Heb.* 8:6-7 “... For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion for a second.”

iii. “Holy endurance” in communion with the saints

- *Heb.* 12:1 “... We are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses (*martyron*) ...”

Structure of the Letter

1. Prologue (1:1—4)
2. Jesus, Superior to the Angels (1:5—2:18)
3. Jesus, the Merciful High Priest (3:1—5:10)
4. Jesus, High Priest of a New and Greater Covenant (5:11—10:39)
5. A Call to Holiness (11:1—13:18)
6. Doxology (13:20—25)

Prologue (1:1—4)

Overview: The sacred author begins by asserting that there are two periods of salvation history, the *past* and the *eternal now* – the present age of the Son.

a. *Hebrews* offers us a methodology for reading the OT and NT.

b. Christology of *Hebrews*:

- “Heir” of all things (*kleronemos*); beneficiary, possessor of an estate.
- Through whom God “created” (*epoiesen*) the world. (LXX *Gen* 1:1)
- “Radiance” (*apauksama*) of the glory of God. [*Wis. Sol* 7:26 “She [Lady Wisdom] for she is a reflection [*apauksama*] of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image [*eikon*] of his goodness.”
- “Upholding” (*pheron*) the universe by His word of power (*dunamis*). *Pheron* has the

- sense of “bringing, bearing, carrying.”
- Having made “purification” (*katharismos*) = Temple language.

Jesus, Superior to the Angels (1:5—2:18)

Overview: In the first major section of *Hebrews*, the sacred author uses Scripture in order to authoritatively assert that Jesus is superior to the angels—displaying his superiority by becoming “a little lower than the angels” in taking on human flesh.

- Hebrews* ch. 1 makes reference to no less than seven OT Scriptures.
 - 1:5 draws upon *Psa.* 2:7 [“Your are my Son ...”] and *II Sam* 7:14 [“I will be to him ...”]
 - 1:6 draws upon *Psa.* 97:7 [“Let all the angels ...”]
 - 1:7 draws upon *Psa.* 104:4 [“Who makes his angels winds ...”]
 - 1:8 draws upon *Psa.* 45:6-8 [“Your throne, O God, is forever ...”]
 - 1:10-12 draws upon *Psa.* 102:25-26 [“You, Lord, founded the earth ...”]
 - 1:13 draws upon *Psa.* 110:1 [“Sit at my right hand ...”]
- Bolstering his argument in ch. 2, the sacred author underscores that these truths of the OT were “declared by the angels” (2:1-2).
- Hebrews* 2:6 draws upon *Psa.* 8:4-6 [“What is man ...?”]
- This brings the sacred author’s thesis to a head in 2:9—Jesus was “for a little while made a little lower than the angels” (see: *John* 1:14).
- Following upon this, 2:10-12 complete the barrage of Scriptures with three more—one from *Psa.* 22:22 [“I will proclaim ...”] and two from the prophet Isaiah (*Isa.* 8:17-18; 41:8-9).
- * The overwhelming majority of the many OT references are drawn from the *Psalter*.
 - Q: What is the significance of this?
 - A: In addition to being divinely inspired truth, “declared by angels,” the *Psalter* was the songbook of the Temple liturgy.
- If the sacred author is seeking to persuade a group of Jewish priests, faithful to the Jerusalem Temple, this would be an effective strategy.
- The argument of 1:5-2:18 concludes with the first of many references to the high priestly ministry of Jesus Christ (read v. 17).

Jesus, the Merciful High Priest (3:1—5:10)

Overview: In the second major section of *Hebrews*, the sacred author argues that Jesus is a High Priest worthy of our faith and abundant in mercy.

- In 3:1-6, the sacred author compares Moses with Jesus.
 - It was Moses who built “God’s house” (i.e., Israel) in the Old Covenant.
 - Having established Jesus’ Sonship (1:1-4), he can now argue that Jesus’ house (the Church) is greater than Moses’ house, since Moses was God’s servant, yet Jesus, the New Moses, is God’s own Son.

- b. *Hebrews* 3:7-17 (and again in ch. 6) contain some of the most sobering words of the letter:
- In 3:7-17, the audience is warned about falling back into “unbelief.” Scripture is again invoked, drawing upon wilderness motifs from *Exodus* and *Numbers*.
 - Believers must stay “firm to the end” (v. 14), and not forfeit their salvation.
 - Take heart, the author exhorts: If today you hear God’s voice, harden not your heart! (v. 15)
- c. In exhorting his audience to strive to “enter God’s rest” throughout ch. 4, a key text stands out in 4:12. Here, we encounter the truth that it is not we who judge Scripture, but Scripture that *judges us* ... even the intentions of our heart.
- d. 5:1-4 Here, the sacred author reminds his audience of the responsibility of all high priests; to be holy mediators on behalf of the people, and one who offers sacrifices for sins—for Israel and for *himself*, on the Day of Atonement.
- e. Following this, in 5:5-10, the sacred author again returns to the *Psalter* for support; specifically to two “royal” psalms (*Psa.* 2:7, 110:4).
- f. This portion of the letter connects: (a) Jesus’ Sonship with (b) the “type” of Jesus’ priesthood, namely, that of the OT figure *Melchizedek*.

Jesus, High Priest of a New and Greater Covenant (5:11 – 10:39)

Overview: In the third major section of *Hebrews*, we reach the heart of the body of the letter. Here, the the sacred author focuses on the high priesthood of Jesus, which is not of the Levitical order, but rather, of the priest king Melchizedek.

- a. In 5:11-14, the sacred author challenges readers to develop in spiritual maturity; to look in the mirror and see themselves as infants needing “milk” (v. 12), rather than adults able to eat solid food.
- b. In 6:1-12, the sacred author returns to the theme from chapter 3—that of falling away (see above). Here, the teaching is set in the context of baptism, or “enlightenment” (6:4).
- St. Justin Martyr: “This bath is called *enlightenment*, because those who receive this [catechetical] instruction are enlightened in their understanding....”
 - St Gregory Nazianzus: Baptism is God’s most beautiful and magnificent gift.... We call it gift, grace, anointing, *enlightenment*, garment of immortality, bath of rebirth, seal, and most precious gift. It is called ... *enlightenment* because it radiates light; *clothing* since it veils our shame; *bath* because it washes; and *seal* as it is our guard and the sign of God’s Lordship.”
- c. In 6:13-20, the sacred author urges believers to “patiently endure” (6:15), as did Abraham, who, remaining childless with Sarah, waited a quarter century from God’s initial promise that he would have many descendants until the birth of Isaac.
- d. *Hebrews* 6:19 underscores the unshakable faith we are called to with the image of hope as a “sure and steadfast anchor” of our souls. The anchor became one of the most common images in early Christian iconography.
- e. Returning to the topic of Jesus’ high priesthood, ch. 6 ends and 7 begins by proclaiming that it is Jesus who is our hope, for he has gone before us as a “forerunner” into the “inner shrine” (6:20).

- f. In ch. 7, the sacred author enters into an intense and lengthy discussion of the priestly pattern of Melchizidek, as a way of presenting Jesus' unique high priesthood.
- This “priestly order of Melchizidek” is *prior to* and *greater than* the (corrupted) Levitical priesthood in every respect, with which it is sharply contrasted.
 - In saying that Melchizidek is “without father and mother” (7:3), the sacred author is not being literal, but suggesting that his primordial priesthood is not received through Levitical / Aaronic descent, as with the Levites. As such, Melchizidek is a “type” of Christ.
 - The sacred author’s argument rests decisively on *Psa.* 110:4 as well. There, David is described as a “priest forever, after the order of Melchizidek.”
 - Beginning in *Heb.* 7:11, the sacred author explains that the priesthood of Melchizidek was established by God *prior to* the Levitical priesthood, with Aaron as its high priest. In other words, M’s priesthood represents God’s original design of priesthood, a kind of natural reality of father/son priesthood, which ran from from Creation until the time of Moses.
 - This is crucial—as Jesus was not of the tribe of Levi—but of Judah. In the eyes of the priestly audience, Jesus would have been wholly disqualified from any priestly role, let alone that of the high priest.
 - A critical piece of the sacred author’s argument lies in *Heb.* 7:15, where he discusses Melchizidek’s priesthood as not constrained by Levitical / Aaronic birth, but by “the power of an indestructible life.”
 - For these reasons, Jesus is not only a true high priest in every respect, but a greater high priest, and the guarantor (or “surety”) of a “better covenant” (v. 22).
 - Finally, the chapter concludes with the sacred author contrasting the sinful, fallible, mortal high priests of the Levitical order – with Jesus, who is untrammelled by death (7:23) and able to save “for all time those who draw near to God” (v. 25):
 - The sacred author boldly declares that Jesus is our unique high priest, who is “holy, blameless, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens” (v. 26).
 - For all of these reasons, Jesus is unique as high priest. He and he alone could *offer up himself* as a definitive, “once for all,” unrepeatable sacrifice for sinners (v. 27). Here, beautifully co-mingled, is a Christology that presents Jesus as both: (a) the spotless high priest who (b) offers a perfect sacrifice – in himself.
- g. *Hebrews* 8:1 includes a clue, a key word that the sacred author has arrived at the pinnacle, the climax of the book, when he writes “Now the point ...” [*de kepalaion*]. In Koine Greek, *kepalaion* can refer to the “main point” or “sum of money.” Here then is “the money quote” of the book!
- WE HAVE SUCH A HIGH PRIEST, ONE WHO IS SEATED AT THE RIGHT HAND OF THE THRONE OF GOD.
- h. *Psalm* 110—upon which the author has been heavily relying—begins with the expression, “The Lord said to my lord [*David*] sit at my right hand ...” Jesus is the “lord” and high priest who is seated at the right hand of God. He is the spotless and eternal high priest of God!
- i. The remainder of ch. 8 builds upon this high priestly Christology, even as the sacred author returns to again discuss at some length the first covenant, and the sinful and imperfect high priests who offered sacrifices in sinfulness.
- j. Whereas the Levitical high priests has “*something to offer*” in the Temple, i.e. the blood of

bulls and goats (8:3), Jesus offered *something greater*—his own flesh and blood—his humanity, for our sake.

- k. Not only is the corrupted nature of the OT priesthood invoked, but the Temple itself. The sacred author reminds his priestly audience that the Temple was a “copy and shadow” of the heavenly tabernacle – see: *Exod. 25:40*.
- l. In contrast, Jesus, who is seated at the right hand of God *ministers in the heavenly Tabernacle* (8:2), therefore, his ministry is *diaphoroterias* –“much more excellent” than that of the high priesthood of the Old Covenant (8:6), since it is founded on “better promises.”
- m. As the chapter ends (8:13), we are face to face with one of the clearest allusions to the destruction of the Temple. Being established in the Old Covenant, it is “growing old” and about to *aphanismos* (“evaporate / vanish”).
- n. As ch. 9 opens, the sacred author continues contrasting the two tabernacles—the earthly one with the heavenly one. All along, he is guiding the priestly audience to leave behind their former worship, of the earthly priests and tabernacles, and participate in the worship of the heavenly high priest and the heavenly temple, in Jesus.
- o. After describing the sacred objects within the *Holy Place* (9:2-5), he leads the recipients of the letter into the *Holy of Holies*, where the Levitical high priest solemnly traversed but once a year, on the high holy Day of Atonement (*Lev. 16*).
- p. The sacred author is well-positioned to offer a revelation: that Jesus, the eternal high priest, has upon Calvary, “*entered once for all into the Holy of Holies*”—but not with the blood of goats, but *dia tou idiou haimatos*—“by means of his own blood.” (Read 9:12-14).
- q. Thus, Jesus is indeed the *mesites* (“mediator / key stakeholder”) of a new covenant, so that those who “are called” may receive an eternal inheritance (9:15).
- r. In 9:23-28, the sacred author affirms the efficacy of the earthly “copies” of the heavenly realities, for a time. Yet, they are surpassed by Jesus, who in his Resurrection and Ascension, has entered into a Temple “*not made with human hands*” but in heaven itself (v. 24).
- s. Thus, there is now no more need of earthly high priests to enter the earthly Temple year after year “*with blood not their own*” (v. 25), or to offer sacrifices “*repeatedly*.”
- t. Rather, Christ has appeared once for all at the end of the age to put away sin by *tes thysias autou*— “*the sacrifice of himself*” (9:26).
- u. *Hebrews 10* brings this extended body of the letter to a close. There are 2 parts to the chapter:
- 10:1-18 concludes the sacred author’s discussion of Christ’s once for all sacrifice.
 - Here, even the liturgical posture of the earthly high priest, as “standing (*hesteken*) daily at his service” (v. 11) is contrasted with Christ the eternal high priest, who “sits down” (*ekathisen*) at the right hand of God.
 - Finally, in 10:19-39, the priestly recipients are admonished to indeed enter into this “heavenly sanctuary” which is opened up once for all, in Jesus.
 - The “curtain” (*katapetasmatos*) in v. 20 is a dual reference. On one hand, it referred back to the blue veil that separated the *Holy Place* from the *Holy of Holies*. Yet, in this context, the curtain is a kind of allegory to describe the flesh of Christ, i.e., his true humanity.
 - Commenting on this text, St. Ephrem the Syrian writes:
 - “Therefore, brethren, we have confidence to enter the sanctuary,” which is faith. In his blood he renewed for us the way of faith that the former priests had already. But since it had become obsolete among them, he renewed it for us at that time “through the curtain, that is, through his

flesh.”

A Call to Holiness (11:1—13:18)

Overview: In the final section of the letter before the doxology, the sacred author turns from Christology to ecclesiology and morality—to holy living. In naming a great cloud of witnesses, he appeals to the recipients to fervent endurance. In practical ways, he calls them to walk in holiness, to right worship, to charity, chastity and peace of heart. He exhorts them to submit to their Christian leaders as unto Christ himself.

- a. In 11:1-40, the sacred author provides an OT “hall of fame,” celebrating the great faith of Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Moses and many others.
 - Here, we can articulate a key principle of Jewish biblical interpretation: *the past makes the present hopeful*. God’s glorious saving deeds in the past provide God’s people with not merely a reminder of His acts of deliverance, but a ‘pattern’ or ‘blueprint’ for the ways He will again save His people.
- b. 11:1-3 “Faith is the [assurance] substance ...”
 - Greek: *hupostasis* = assurance
 - Latin Vulgate: *substantia* = substance
 - Pope Benedict XVI— “Saint Thomas Aquinas ... explains it as follows: faith is a *habitus*, that is, a stable disposition of the spirit, through which eternal life takes root in us and reason is led to consent to what it does not see.”
- c. 11:4-7 Early examples of faith
 - It is impossible to please God without faith (v. 6).
 - Abel: offered a better sacrifice and “is still speaking: (v. 4)
 - Enoch: “assumed into heaven” (v. 5)
 - 11:8-23 Noah: put his faith into action (v. 7)
- d. 11:8-23 Abraham and the Patriarchs
 - Abraham exemplifies human faith *par excellence*.
 - Left everything, sojourned in a foreign land, roamed like a nomad.
 - In offering up his only son, believed “God was able to raise men from the dead” (v. 19)
 - Sarah—overcame doubts, blessed with miraculous birth.
 - Isaac, Jacob and Joseph each gave their sons visions of God’s promises for the future.
 - Pope Benedict XVI “When the *Letter to the Hebrews* says that Christians here on earth do not have a permanent homeland, but seek one which lies in the future (see: 11:13-16), this does not mean for one moment that they live only for the future: present society is recognized by Christians as an exile; they belong to a new society which is the goal of their common pilgrimage and which is anticipated in the course of that pilgrimage.”
- e. 11:23-28 Moses
 - Moses’ parents courageously hid him.
 - Refused to be the son of Pharaoh’s daughter.
 - Choose persecution rather than fleeting pleasures of sin.
 - Suffered for the Christ (v. 26).

f. 11:29-39 Cacophony of faithful men and women.

- Israel crossing the Red Sea.
- Joshua and the walls of Jericho.
- Rahab, hiding the spies.
- Kings, prophets, martyrs.
 1. Gideon, Barak, Samson, David, Samuel, etc.
 2. Daniel and his companions.
 3. Isaiah sawed into two.
 4. Maccabean martyrs.
- “And all these ... did not receive what was promised, since God had foreseen *something better* for us” (vv. 39-40) [Greek: *ti kreitton* = better, stronger, mightier]

g. 12:1-11 Jesus, our Perfect Example of Faith

- As *Heb.* 12 opens, in summing up the “hall of faith,” we are brought directly into contact with our title / theme: “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of *martyron* (“witnesses”)...”
- In 12:1, the author draws on imagery from athletic games:
 1. “Cloud” (*nephos*) was a common Greco-Roman metaphor for crowds
 2. Believers are called to cast off every *onkon* (“weight, burden”).
 3. He speaks of running the race *dia hupomones*, i.e., “with endurance, fortitude, steadfastness.”
 4. “Contest that is set before us ...” An *agōn* (contest) implies struggle, as in *agonize*.
- 12:2 Jesus, the “pioneer and perfecter”
 5. “Pioneer” (*archegon*) because Jesus goes where no other has gone.
 6. “Perfecter” (*teleiōtēs*) because he *completes* faith by fully trusting God and remaining faithful to God in a way that the believers are to follow.
- 12:3-11, the sacred author draws upon a text in *Proverbs* (3:11-12) to discuss how the Heavenly Father disciplines us—in love. Without such *paideuo* (discipline, training) we would be left as illegitimate children (v. 8).

h. 12:12-29 is an extended exhortation for believers to “strive” for holy living.

- 12:12-13 continues the *race* metaphor, summoning believers on toward the finish line.
- 12:14 “Pursue [*diokete*] peace with all. An athlete would ordinarily “pursue” victory over his competitors, but here peace is the goal.
- 12:16 “So that no one becomes immoral or profane [*pornos*] like Esau.” *Pornos* commonly refers to sexual immorality. In choosing food over his rights as firstborn Esau sought immediate *physical gratification* rather than spiritual benefits. Esau’s story is a cautionary tale for the priestly audience of *Hebrews*, who may have been tempted to relinquish their faith in exchange for Temple privileges.
- 12:18-24 contrasts the Old and New Covenant one last time in the letter. Here, “Sinai” represents the Old (Mosaic) Covenant, whereas “Zion” represents the New (Davidic) Covenant. “Since Hebrews has argued that the royal and priestly figure in Ps 110 is Christ, the psalm’s reference to Zion is a suitable climax for the journey of Christian faith.”
- 12:22—Just as the motif of “ANGELS” was crucial at the beginning of the letter (see above), so now, at the end, a *myriasin* (“myriad, innumerable” of angels join in the “festal gathering.”

- 12:24 “*The blood of Abel*” cried out for vengeance after his murder at his own brother’s hand (*Gen. 4 :1-10*).
- 1. How does Christ’s blood “speak” in a superior way? Abel’s blood could not truly “cry out” out for vengeance against Cain, whereas while Christ’s blood communicates grace (*Heb 4:16*).
- 2. “Abel’s blood brought a limited atonement, while Jesus’ blood brought complete atonement.”
- *Consuming fire*. A possible allusion to *Deut. 9:3*.
- i. *Hebrews 13:1-19* presents believers with an array of final admonitions to in “brotherly” charity (v. 1):
- Show hospitality to strangers (v. 2).
- Remember those in prison (v. 3).
- Honor marriage / live in chastity (v.4).
- Live free of the tyranny of money (vv. 5-6).
- Honor Christian leaders (v. 7, 17).
- Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever! (v. 8).
- Avoid “diverse and strange teachings’ (v. 9)
- * vv. 10-16 is a complex and oblique passage; the larger meaning is likely referring to holy worship at the “altar” (v.10), that is, the Eucharistic assembly.

Doxology (13:20—25)

- “*May the God of peace ...*” Closely resembles St. Paul’s benedictions elsewhere.
- “*Brought up from the dead ...*” The only “explicit” reference to Christ’s Resurrection in the letter – is reserved for the closing benediction.