

H A N D B O O K O N

Hebrews through Revelation

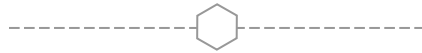


Andreas J. Köstenberger

**HEBREWS • JAMES • 1 AND 2 PETER
1, 2, AND 3 JOHN • JUDE • REVELATION**

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Hebrews through Revelation



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CHAPTER ONE

Hebrews

Introduction

Author, Date, and Genre

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews is unknown.¹ However, the powerful message of the book of Hebrews does not depend on our knowledge of the author. Clearly, the early church decided that the contents of the book speak for themselves and bear the mark of divine inspiration; consequently, the church included the book in the NT canon. What is more, while *we* don't know who the author of Hebrews was, the original recipients of the letter almost certainly did (cf., e.g., 13:22)!

While the book's authorship is unknown, we can infer some interesting details about the circumstances surrounding the writing of this letter from the contents of the book. First, there is no mention of the destruction of the Jerusalem temple, which, according to the unanimous testimony of ancient sources, occurred in AD 70. Since mention of the destruction of the temple (if it had already occurred) would have greatly served to advance the writer's argument that the old sacrificial system and its institutions, now that Jesus had come, had been rendered obsolete, it is highly probable that the document was written prior to AD 70.

1. For an argument for Apollos as the author, see George H. Guthrie, "The Case for Apollos as the Author of Hebrews," *FM* 18 (2001): 41–56; for an argument for Luke as the author, see David L. Allen, *Lukan Authorship of Hebrews*, NACSBT (Nashville: B&H, 2010). Andrew W. Pitts and Joshua F. Walker, in "The Authorship of Hebrews: A Further Development in the Luke-Paul Relationship," in *Paul and His Social Relations*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Christopher D. Land (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 143–84, argue that Hebrews constitutes Pauline speech material, recorded and later published by Luke.

Second, the author mentions that the “great salvation” in Jesus of which he speaks “was declared at first by the Lord” and “attested to us by those who heard” (2:3; I say, “*he* speaks,” because, even though we don’t know the name of the author, we do know that the author was male, based on the grammatical gender of the participle *diēgoumenon*, “telling,” in 11:32). Thus, it appears that the author didn’t count himself among the eyewitnesses of Jesus’s ministry or the members of the apostolic circle. Rather, he seems to have been a second-generation believer who had received the apostolic message and was passing it on to others.

Third, while the book of Hebrews ends like a letter—with exhortations to obey the leaders of the church and to pray for Paul, as well as a closing benediction and final greetings (13:7–25)—the book doesn’t start out like a letter. The epistles written by Paul, for example, typically follow the format, “Paul, an apostle, to [name of church or individual], grace and peace” (or a similar greeting; cf., e.g., 1 Cor. 1:1–3). By contrast, Hebrews begins more like an oral message, a sermon. In fact, while this is lost in English translation, the preface of Hebrews shows signs of careful rhetorical design, such as a pattern of alliteration in verse 1, which features as many as five words starting with the Greek letter *pi* (English “p”; see discussion at 1:1 below).

In addition, words of “speaking” and “hearing” replace the more customary terminology of “writing” and “reading,” again suggesting that the letter adapts a series of oral messages. The author’s closing remark, “I appeal to you, brothers, bear with my word of exhortation” (13:22), confirms this, since in the only other NT instance of “word of exhortation,” Acts 13:15, the phrase refers to Paul’s oral address in the synagogue of Pisidian Antioch. The cumulative evidence, therefore, points to the fact that the letter originated in a series of oral messages—sermons—that were later compiled and sent in the form of a letter, complete with an elaborate literary preface or introduction (1:1–4) and an epistolary conclusion (chap. 13).

Audience and Occasion

Who were the likely recipients of the letter? Again, several clues are embedded in the text and surrounding context. First, the title of the book is “[The Letter] To the Hebrews” (*PROS HEBRAIIOUS*). While not part of the original, inspired text of the letter, the title is rather early and likely accurate in pointing to a predominantly (if not exclusively) Jewish readership. This is corroborated by the contents of the letter itself, which exhibits an extensive and impressive familiarity with the minutiae of the Jewish priesthood, the OT sacrificial system, and various OT liturgical practices.

Some have suggested that the likely audience were people such as the “great many of the *priests*” who “became obedient to the faith” mentioned early in Acts (6:7). While it is impossible to confirm this hypothesis conclusively, it is intriguing to think that the author may have addressed a Jewish-Christian congregation and its leaders who had come to believe that Jesus was the Messiah but had subsequently been tempted to revert to Judaism in the face of mounting persecution. This is also supported by the multiple “warning passages” throughout the book (e.g., 2:3–4; 6:1–6).

Moreover, we have good reason to believe that the letter was directed to a Christian congregation or group of house churches in the city of Rome, which at the time of writing was the epicenter of persecution of Christians under Emperor Nero, who reigned AD 54–68. The reference to “those who come from Italy” who “send you greetings” at the end of the letter seems to point in this direction (13:24). A Roman destination is also consistent with what we know of the later years of Nero’s reign, during which he blamed Christians for the fire of Rome in AD 64 and had many of them executed.

It is likely that in the face of mounting persecution in the early or mid-60s AD some, if not many, Jewish believers—or potential believers—were tempted to retreat to the safer confines of Judaism, eliciting the author’s warning, “How shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?” (2:3). Now that Jesus had come, died, risen, and “sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high” (1:3), it was inconceivable that anyone could return to the old covenant system, which had been rendered obsolete by the finished cross-work of the Messiah and great eternal high priest, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Structure

The book of Hebrews presents one powerful, sustained argument for the superiority of the Lord Jesus Christ over the old covenant system of Judaism. Uniquely in the NT, the book focuses on the role of the Lord Jesus Christ as the great high priest of God’s covenant people, who established a new covenant that supersedes the old by his death, in his blood (see, e.g., 10:19–22). The following table seeks to trace the author’s argument in broad strokes.²

2. Cf. Cynthia Long Westfall, *A Discourse Analysis of the Letter to the Hebrews: The Relationship between Form and Meaning*, LNTS 297 (New York: T&T Clark, 2005), who argues for a tripartite division of Hebrews (1:1–4:16; 4:11–10:25; 10:19–13:16), “formally based on the two thematic discourse peaks in 4:11–16 and 10:19–25, which are formed by triads of hortatory subjunctives” (297). For surveys of structural proposals, see Barry C. Joslin, “Can Hebrews Be Structured? An Assessment of Eight Approaches,” *CBR* 6 (2007): 99–129; Steve Stanley, “The Structure of Hebrews from Three Perspectives,” *TynBul* 45 (1994): 245–71. A different breakdown is provided by Dennis E. Johnson, “Hebrews,” in *ESV Expository Commentary*, vol. 12,

Characteristically, the closing section in a given unit often does double duty, functioning simultaneously as the opening section of the following unit.

Structure of Hebrews

Literary Unit	Content Summary	Transition
1:1–4:16	God’s final revelation and salvation in his Son	4:11–16
4:11–10:25	Jesus as the great high priest and mediator of a new covenant	10:19–25
10:19–13:16	Jesus, who ran the race before us and suffered outside the camp	13:17
13:18–25	Epistolary closing	

Central Message

In the opening major unit, the author asserts that after a series of previous spokesmen—the OT prophets—God revealed himself “in these last days” by way of “a son” (1:1–2). The climactic nature of God’s end-time revelation in his Son provides the major overarching framework for the assertion pervading the remainder of the unit—and indeed of the entire book—that Jesus is superior to all previous mediators of God’s revelation and redemption. This includes angels, through whom, according to Jewish tradition, God gave the law to Israel (2:2). It also includes Moses, through whom God delivered Israel during the exodus and gave the law (3:1–6). It even includes Joshua, who led Israel into the promised land but failed to give the nation permanent rest from her enemies (4:8–10). What would have been particularly compelling for the writer’s original Jewish audience is that the name “Joshua” in Greek is spelled precisely the same way as the name “Jesus” (*Iēsous*)!³ Thus, the argument runs essentially like this: What the former “Jesus” (Joshua) was unable to do—namely, to provide permanent rest and deliverance for God’s people—the later “Jesus” (the Lord Jesus Christ) was able to do. This, in turn, perfectly sets up the discussion in the next unit regarding the superior, eternal high priesthood of Jesus Christ.

The second major unit in the book commences in 4:14 (in the midst of the transition section spanning 4:11–16) and is introduced as follows: “Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God . . .” While the high priestly nature of Jesus was hinted at in the preface

Hebrews—Revelation, ed. Iain M. Duguid, James M. Hamilton Jr., and Jay Sklar (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018), 23, who identifies six major sections (1:4–2:18; 3:1–4:13; 4:14–7:28; 8:1–10:31; 10:32–12:17; and 12:18–29; note, however, that Johnson’s outline on pp. 28–30 does not always correspond to this breakdown).

3. The author of Hebrews often quoted from the Septuagint (LXX), the Greek translation of the Old Testament. In this way, he was able to relate the wording in a given Old Testament passage to his own message, which was written in Greek as well.

(“After making purification for sins, he sat down,” 1:3), this is the first time in the book that Jesus’s high priesthood is explicitly affirmed. The bulk of the middle section of the book is taken up with a detailed discussion and demonstration of Christ’s superior priesthood. Over against the Levitical priesthood, which was limited in its nature and efficacy, the writer asserts, Jesus’s priesthood is of a qualitatively different kind in that it was patterned after the priesthood of the enigmatic figure of Melchizedek (5:1–10; 7:1–28). As a result, Jesus became the mediator of a new, better covenant, which enables believers to draw near to God permanently in a way that OT believers were unable to do.

The third major unit, which is closer in length to the opening unit and shorter than the middle one, drives home the vital implications of Jesus’s superiority over various OT figures—whether prophets, national deliverers, or priests—for the way in which believers ought to live. Starting in 10:19, the author addresses readers with a threefold exhortation: “Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us . . . , and since we have a great priest over the house of God [cf. 4:14], let us draw near. . . . Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering. . . . And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works” (10:19–24). Believers are surrounded by a great “cloud of witnesses” (i.e., OT believers exhibiting exemplary faith) and must run the race of faith while fixing their eyes on Jesus, who has already completed the race (12:1–2). They also should be willing to endure the type of suffering that inevitably ensues from following a crucified Savior (13:12–13).

Major Units in the Book of Hebrews

Literary Unit	Opening Declaration/Argument	Exhortation
1:1-3	“Long ago, . . . God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son. . . .”	“Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it.” (2:1)
4:14-16	“Since . . . we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession.”
10:19-25	“Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, . . . and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith. . . . Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering. . . . And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works.”
13:17-25		“Obey your leaders and submit to them. . . . Pray for us. . . . Bear with my word of exhortation. . . .”

God's Final Revelation and Salvation in His Son (1:1-4:16)

Jesus Is Superior to Angels (1:1-2:18)

Often in the context of a current debate, we might say that “the final word on a given subject has not yet been spoken.” Or, a TV moderator might tell a panel participant that she’ll give him the “final word.” What the author of the book of Hebrews asserts is that when it comes to the most important matter in human life following the fall—forgiveness and salvation from sin—the final word has already been spoken in the most definitive way possible. What’s more, the final word was spoken by God himself—not in the various preliminary fashions we read about in the OT historical and prophetic books but in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. To explain the manner in which God spoke this final word in and through Jesus, the author places the coming of the Son of God within the matrix of God’s previous revelatory acts in OT times.

That said, the focus in chapters 1 and 2 of Hebrews is for the most part on Jesus’s superiority to angels (see 1:5, 6, 7, 13, 14; 2:2, 5, 9, 16). Why is this the case? In part, at least, the answer lies in the Jewish understanding, only hinted at in the OT (cf. Deut. 33:2) but occasionally finding more explicit expression in the NT, that the law was given by God to Moses through angelic intermediaries (cf., e.g., Acts 7:38; Gal. 3:19). The law, in turn, ever since it was given at Mount Sinai, served as a sort of constitution for OT Israel, providing the nation with an overall ethic as well as with specific stipulations regarding the priesthood, worship, sacrifices, and many other matters of vital national and ritual importance.

While Paul at times draws attention to the limitations of the law, in many ways it was God’s good gift to his people at that juncture in salvation history, providing his people with detailed instructions on how to live before him both corporately and individually. John hints at this when he writes in his prologue that “the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17). Thus, the law was rightly held in very high esteem by God’s people in OT times. In fact, their esteem for the law was so great that many argued that the law (Hebrew *Torah*) was eternal and already at God’s side at creation (similar to wisdom; cf. Prov. 8). Many of the Psalms, likewise, attest to Israel’s high esteem for the law and its perfection (see, e.g., Pss. 1, 19, and 119).

In light of this high regard for the law, it’s no wonder that many in the first century expected that the law would always govern the ways of God’s people, with the nation of Israel at the center. It is these assumptions that the author of the book of Hebrews challenges head-on. In the opening verse,

virtually every word is significant, which is underscored by the author's use of alliteration: "At many times [*polymerōs*] and in many ways [*polytropōs*], long ago [*palai*], God, after speaking to the fathers [*patrasin*] by the prophets [*prophētais*], in these last days spoke to us by a son" (1:1, my translation). It is impossible to duplicate the rhetorical effect of this magnificent opening assertion in English translation, but the Greek is as momentous as it is memorable (my own feeble attempt at alliteration).

In the opening statement, the author contrasts "long ago" with "in these last days" (cf. Num. 24:14; Jer. 23:20; Dan. 10:14). Notably, the word "to speak" is constant; the contrast, however, is between God speaking by various *prophets* (plural) and his speaking by a *son* (singular). The repeated phrase "many" (*poly-*) in the expressions "at many times" and "in many ways" (two more plurals) stands in contrast with the absence of any such qualifications pertaining to God's *singular* "son" revelation. This son, the author adds, God appointed as heir of all things (a likely allusion to Ps. 2:8), and this son also served as the agent of God's creation, the Word through which (better, "whom") God spoke everything into being (1:2; cf. 11:3; John 1:2–3). Clearly, none of the OT prophets, while occupying a significant role as God's spokesmen, had such an exalted status as "the heir" (singular) "through whom" (singular) God created the world. (Note that the term "prophets" is likely rather broad and includes even OT figures such as Moses.) The book of Hebrews is also a superior form of revelation. God has spoken in his Son as testified through the apostles and the book of Hebrews.

Right at the outset, then, the author impresses on his audience, in a manner that is highly effective rhetorically, the superiority of Jesus, "the Son," over previous figures who served as intermediaries conveying communication from God to his people. In the remainder of his introduction, the author continues to develop the notion of Jesus's superior relationship with God and position in God's plan when he calls him "the radiance [*apaugasma*, only here in the NT] of the glory [*doxa*] of God and the exact imprint [*charaktēr*, only here in the NT] of his nature [*hypostasis*; cf. esp. Heb. 11:1, where ESV translates *hypostasis* as 'assurance']" and affirms that Jesus "upholds the universe by his powerful word" (1:3, my translation). The word denoting Jesus as the "exact imprint" of God's nature—presumably referring to his preexistent state—most likely conveys metaphorically the impression of a coin or seal. While upholding a distinction between God the Creator and Jesus the Son and Word of God, the author proffers an extremely high Christology—even prior to the destruction of the Jerusalem temple—and equates Jesus's and God's natures (what theologians call "ontology," or essential being).

That said, there are some scholars who deny that the author of Hebrews espoused a belief in Jesus's preexistence. They contend that the author is merely viewing Jesus within a framework of "wisdom Christology." According to these scholars, when speaking of Jesus being "the radiance of God's glory" and "the exact imprint of his nature," the author of Hebrews refers only to the human Jesus as the embodiment of wisdom, and references to Jesus's preexistence are to be taken only in a general and metaphorical sense. As the embodiment of divine wisdom, these scholars argue, Jesus also represents God's creative energy and saving intent. However, a plain reading of the first chapter of Hebrews and careful consideration of OT allusions suggest that the author creatively intersperses references to Jesus's preexistence, incarnation, and exaltation and holds both to the full humanity and to the full deity of Christ in proper balance and in relation to one another.

At this, the author takes a decidedly priestly turn when he speaks of (the incarnate) Jesus, "after making purification for sins," sitting down "at the right hand of the Majesty on high" (an allusion to Ps. 110:1, later quoted in 1:13 and several other times in the letter), "having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs" (1:4; see also 8:1; 10:12; 12:2). By speaking of the purification (*katharismos*, used frequently in the Greek translation of Leviticus; cf., e.g., Lev. 8:15; 12:7–8; 13:6–7; 14:2; 15:13, 28; 16:19, 20, 30) for sins accomplished by Jesus, the author previews what will constitute a major topic of discussion in this letter—namely, Jesus's role as the great high priest who inaugurated a new covenant by his blood shed at the cross (see later uses of "cleansing" language in 9:13–14, 22–23; 10:2, 22; on the high priesthood of Christ, see 2:17; 3:1; 4:14; 5:1; 7:26; 8:1; 9:11). What is more, the fact that Jesus is depicted as having sat down—and in the past, at that—resoundingly underscores the definitive, once-for-all nature of the purification for sin he accomplished, which contrasts with the repetitive nature of sacrifices performed by Jewish priests under the OT sacrificial system in keeping with the nature of the Levitical priesthood (cf., e.g., 10:11). This contrast already hints at the fact that Jesus's priesthood was of a different kind, as the author will develop later on.

When the author speaks of Jesus having inherited (in the perfect tense, denoting an abiding result) a more excellent "name" than the angels, he uses the expression "name," as was common in Jewish parlance, as an embodiment of a person's identity, character, and role. Most likely, "name" here invokes the divine name YHWH (the so-called tetragrammaton), which God the Father shared with the Son as the exalted end-time Ruler of the universe (see the quotation of Ps. 102:25–27 in 1:10–12; see also the other three instances of "name," *onoma*, in 2:12; 6:10; and 13:15). After first mentioning angels in verse 4, the

author continues to dwell on the topic of Jesus's superiority to angels for the remainder of chapter 1 and for much of chapter 2. In support of his argument, the author cites several OT passages, mostly from the book of Psalms.⁴ He begins by adducing an exceedingly important messianic passage that surfaces repeatedly in the NT, namely Psalm 2:7, where God is cited as addressing an individual as follows: "You are my Son; today I have begotten you." Most likely, this does not refer to an eternal act of divine generation of God the Son by God the Father, but to the messianic appointment of the Son of God.

In typical "pearl-stringing" fashion—a common Jewish (rabbinic) practice of citing a whole cluster of Scriptures that all address a related topic—the author follows this reference to Psalm 2:7 with a reference to another exceedingly important OT messianic passage, 2 Samuel 7:14: "I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son." The author's point in both cases is that God did not appoint an angel to be the Messiah, nor did he place an angel in the messianic line as Son of David. Rather, this role was reserved exclusively for Jesus, whose stature before God is unrivaled and whose role in God's plan is unmatched. The author will later point out that part of the reason for this is that Jesus had to be not only fully divine but also fully human, a requirement no angel could ever fulfill.

In another contrast, the author, in conjunction with referring to Jesus as the "firstborn" (*prōtotokos*, not a reference to Jesus's actual birth but to his pre-eminence; cf. Rom. 8:29; Col. 1:15, 18; Rev. 1:5), cites Psalm 97:7 in 1:6, "Let all God's angels [or 'gods'] worship him" (implying that the object of the angels' worship is Jesus), while saying of the angels, "He makes his angels winds, and his servants flames of fire" (Heb. 1:7, quoting Ps. 104:4; my translation).⁵ Jesus is therefore a proper object of worship, while the angels are not; their role is rather that of divine messengers (note that "angel," *angelos*, in the original Greek meant "messenger," whether angelic or human). While it may seem strange to some that people might actually worship angels, angels had taken on a very high role during the Second Temple period, which was characterized by the absence of direct divine revelation.⁶ Paul's Letter to the Colossians

4. On the string of OT passages in 1:5–14, see Joshua W. Jipp, "The Son's Entrance into the Heavenly World: The Soteriological Necessity of the Scriptural Catena in Hebrews 1:5–14," *NTS* 56 (2010): 557–75, who argues that the event the catena describes—the Son's enthronement to the heavenly world—is critical for the logic of the author's argument regarding how humanity's salvation is accomplished.

5. The Hebrew of Psalm 97:7 has *Elohim*, "gods," which is translated in the LXX as *angeloi*, "angels." The author of Hebrews conflates the two ideas by choosing the wording *angeloi theou*, "God's angels."

6. "Second Temple" refers to the period between the rebuilt Solomonic temple in ca. 520 BC and the destruction of the same temple by the Romans in AD 70.

strongly speaks out against angel worship, implying that such was practiced by some (2:18), and the book of Revelation features an instance where the seer falls down to worship an angel, who at once sternly rebukes him, saying, “You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers the prophets, and with those who keep the words of this book. Worship God” (Rev. 22:9). In our day, angels have often become an object of strange fascination, exuding an aura of mystique. In our daily lives, most of us hardly ever think of angels (except perhaps at Christmas). Yet while the notion that every person has a guardian angel is not necessarily endorsed by Scripture, the Bible clearly attests to the reality of both fallen and unfallen angels, such as at the birth of Jesus as well as at his temptation and the resurrection. And while angels are God’s servants and messengers and rank among his most wonderful creatures, they are creatures nonetheless, while Jesus, the Son of God, is uncreated and himself the agent of creation (cf. 1:2).

Verses 8–9 speak again of the Son’s unique appointment—his messianic anointing—in God’s plan: “But of the Son he says, ‘Your throne, O God, is forever and ever; the scepter of uprightness is the scepter of your kingdom. . . . Therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions’” (Ps. 45:6–7). The author continues by contrasting God’s creation, which will perish, with God—and the Son—who will remain and whose “years will have no end” (1:12, quoting Ps. 102:25–27). This again makes a clear distinction between God, the Creator, who is eternal, and the universe—including angels—which is created. There was a time when there were no angels (though the Bible does not record their creation), but God has always existed. And the Son, as “the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature” (1:3), is eternal as God is, while the angels have a beginning in time. What is more, not only is the Son ontologically superior to angels in terms of his essential being; his role as mediator of divine revelation and redemption is superior to that of angels. The author will shortly develop this point in greater detail.

Before wrapping up his argument thus far, the author plays his final trump card, citing a passage that was exceedingly important in the messianic teaching of Jesus and the early Christians—namely, Psalm 110:1. He writes, “And to which of the angels has he ever said, ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet?’” (Heb. 1:13). The answer to this rhetorical question, of course, is, “None.” What’s more, the citation of Psalm 110:1 here makes the mind of the alert reader wander back to the author’s statement in the opening verses that Jesus, after making purification for sins, “sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high” (1:3). The obvious implication is that, since Jesus *already* sat down at God’s right hand, God has *already* made his

enemies a footstool for his feet! Thus, the messianic prophecy of Psalm 110:1 has already been fulfilled in Jesus. At the same time, though, there remains a time at which God will utterly subject all of Jesus's enemies to him, per the book of Revelation. The author concludes this section by contrasting Jesus's role once more with that of angels, referring to them as "ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation" (1:14). In this sense, then, the angels are subservient even to humans, as their role is to serve them as directed by God (cf. 1 Cor. 11:10; 1 Pet. 1:12).

Use of the Old Testament in Hebrews 1:5-13

Hebrews	OT Passage	Quote
1:5a	Ps. 2:7	"You are my Son; today I have become your Father."
1:5b	2 Sam. 7:14	"I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a Son."
1:6	Ps. 97:7	"Let all God's angels worship him."
1:7	Ps. 104:4	"He makes his angels winds, and his servants a fiery flame."
1:8-9	Ps. 45:6-7	"Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, the scepter of uprightness is the scepter of your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions."
1:10-12	Ps. 102:25-27	"You, Lord, laid the foundation of the earth in the beginning, and the heavens are the work of your hands; they will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment; like a robe you will roll them up, like a garment they will be changed. But you are the same, and your years will have no end."
1:13	Ps. 110:1	"Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool."

The word "therefore" in 2:1 indicates a transition to the first of several "warning passages" in the book. The warning is against "drifting away" from "what we have heard," which is clearly implied to be the Christian gospel message: that Jesus died on the cross for our sins so that we can be saved by believing in him. In what follows, the author compares this message to the "message declared by angels"—namely, the law (see discussion above). Just as the Israelites were accountable to the stipulations of the law, the author uses an argument from the lesser to the greater, so people are accountable to the gospel of Christ now that Jesus has come and provided "such a great salvation" (2:3).

This message was proclaimed first by Jesus himself, then passed on by those who were eyewitnesses (cf. Luke 1:2; John 15:27; Acts 1:21-22), which apparently does not include the author of the book of Hebrews ("it was attested to *us* by those who heard," 2:3; see discussion in the introduction above). Undergirding the early Christian gospel preaching was God's own witness through "signs

Hebrews

God's Final Revelation and Salvation in His Son (1:1-4:16)

and wonders . . . and by gifts of the Holy Spirit,” which presumably refers to the period of early Christian proclamation following the first Pentecost, which is narrated at some length in the book of Acts.

The author’s point here is simply this: *Now that Jesus has come, and died, and risen, and the gospel message has been proclaimed far and wide, there is no going back to the Mosaic law.* This would be to “neglect such a great salvation”! Indeed, it is inconceivable that God would have gone to such lengths to send Jesus, and that Jesus would have endured such severe suffering to procure our salvation, and then for people to act as if all of this were of no consequence, living as if none of this had ever happened. The saving events surrounding the death and resurrection of Christ are too momentous in God’s salvation-historical plan to be neglected and ignored.

Warning Passages in the Book of Hebrews

Hebrews Exhortation

2:1-4 “How shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?” (v. 3)

3:7-4:13 “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.” (3:7-8, 15; 4:7, quoting Ps. 95:7-8)

5:11-6:12 “Let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity.” (6:1)

10:19-39 “Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith. . . . Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering.” (vv. 22-23)

12:14-29 “See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God.” (v. 15)

Angels continue to serve as a sort of foil for the author’s argument as he continues by asserting that “it was not to *angels* that God subjected the world to come” but to *Jesus*, “who for a little while was made lower than the angels” (2:5, 9). As proof, the author continues his string of Psalms quotations by invoking Psalm 8:4-6 (though he vaguely says his quotation is found “somewhere,” 2:6). In so doing, he provides a messianic interpretation of this psalm, in particular the reference to the “son of man”—namely, Jesus, who was made “lower than the angels” for a little while—namely, the time of his incarnation and earthly ministry. What’s more, the author notes that the period of Jesus’s temporary choice of a status beneath the angels has now given way to “glory and honor” and a position of supreme authority. The author also adds that this temporary lowering of Jesus served God’s purpose for Jesus: “that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone” (2:9). In other words, for Jesus—“the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature” (1:3)—to die efficaciously for human sinners, he must be human himself. In this way, he can “taste death for everyone” (2:9)—though,

of course, his vicarious, substitutionary atonement is *effective* only for those who believe.

Thus Jesus became the “founder” (*archēgos*) of our salvation (2:10; cf. 12:2; cf. 6:20, where Jesus is called a “forerunner,” *prodromos*). In describing a salvation-historical necessity according to the plan of God, the author asserts that “it was fitting” that God, the sovereign Creator, “for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering” (2:10). This, of course, does not imply that Jesus was somehow imperfect prior to his cross-death on our behalf. It does mean, however, that suffering is part of God’s plan and suffering is the pathway to eventual glory (see 12:1–2). This doesn’t mean only that Jesus procured our salvation once for all by suffering and dying on the cross for our sins; it also means that Jesus already traversed the way of suffering as our forerunner, so that we are called to follow in his footsteps and be prepared to endure suffering in this world as well (cf. 13:12–13; 1 Pet. 2:21–25). As Christians, we’re called to suffer. Put differently, suffering is an inexorable part of our Christian calling. By suffering in his full humanity, Jesus not only died efficaciously for us; he also continues to point the way to how we should live as his followers for the remainder of our days on earth. God’s desire in sending Jesus to suffer was not merely to procure our salvation; rather, his desire was to “bring many sons to glory” (2:10; “sons” in the original is gender-inclusive and includes women as well as men). “For he who sanctifies [presumably the Spirit] and those who are sanctified [believers] all have one source [God]” (2:11). This assertion is backed up by a series of three OT citations, Psalm 22:22, Isaiah 8:17 // 12:2, and Isaiah 8:18. All three passages highlight trust in God and the Messiah’s identification with us as his “brothers” and “the children” God has given him.

Use of the Old Testament in Hebrews 2:12-13

Hebrews	OT Passage	Quote
2:12	Ps. 22:22	“I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise.”
2:13a	Isa. 8:17 // 12:2	“I will put my trust in him.”
2:13b	Isa. 8:18	“Behold, I and the children God has given me.”

Hebrews 2:14 begins to drive home the author’s argument that commenced in verse 5 following the warning passage of 2:1–4.

First, the phrase “not to angels,” which began the literary unit in verse 5, is echoed by similar terms in verse 16: “not . . . angels.” This *inclusio* (literary

bookend) sets off verses 5–16 as a literary subunit containing a cohesive argument.

Second, the introduction to 2:14, “Since therefore,” indicates that the author draws the necessary conclusion that follows from his argument in verses 5–13, which focus on the salvation-historical rationale for and the dynamic underlying Jesus’s incarnation (cf. the phrase “it was fitting,” v. 10; see above).

Third, the word “children” in verse 14 picks up the same word from the preceding OT quote in verse 13.

The argument in 2:14 is akin to what was already said in verse 9 (“because of the suffering of death . . . he might taste death for everyone”), except that here the author adds that “through death *he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil.*” Thus, the angelic realm is part of God’s salvation-historical theater and includes both unfallen angels and the devil. At the same time, the salvation Jesus procured is a transaction of which God is the source and humans are the beneficiaries.

The author thus canvasses the entire range of salvation-historical activity involving God, unfallen angels, Jesus, the devil, and humanity:

Cosmic Scope of Redemption in Hebrews

God: The source of salvation

Angels: The world is not subjected to them
Not the recipients of salvation

Jesus: Made a little lower than the angels
Tasted death for everyone
Destroyed the devil, who held power over death

Devil: Power over death destroyed

Humans: Beneficiaries of salvation

Jesus’s death is not merely “for everyone”—that is, vicarious and substitutionary; it also breaks the devil’s power over death and constitutes deliverance from “fear of death” and “lifelong slavery” (2:15). At this, the author brings closure to his argument in this portion of his letter by reiterating that it was not angels who were the beneficiaries of salvation but humanity, “the offspring of Abraham” (v. 16), whereby the author may be referring to Abraham not merely as the father of the Jewish people—though he certainly was—but more broadly as the ancestor of all those who would benefit from the salvation Jesus procured.

In 2:17, then, the author picks up on his statement in verse 11 (“That is why he is not ashamed to call them brothers”) and anticipates the assertion in verse

18 by stating, “Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.” Here, the author hints at the theme of Jesus’s high priesthood, which he previously touched on in the introduction to the letter (1:3) and which will occupy much of the remainder of the letter. As a high priest, Jesus can sympathize with our frailty because he was tempted just as we are (v. 18).

Jesus Is Superior to Moses and Joshua (3:1–4:16)

“Therefore, holy brothers” in 3:1 introduces a new stage in the author’s argument. “Holy brothers” is an interesting address; in 3:12, the address is simply “brothers.” The phrase “who share in a heavenly calling” anticipates later references to believers’ heavenly calling, such as the reference to Abraham as one who “was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God” (11:10) and the reference to other OT believers who desired “a better country, that is, a heavenly one” (11:16; cf. 12:23; 13:14). The author’s burden in this section is to show that just as Jesus is superior to angels (chaps. 1–2), he is also superior to Moses and Joshua, God’s servants who were instrumental in delivering God’s people from bondage in Egypt and bringing them into the promised land.

The author urges his readers to “consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession” (3:1), continuing to hint at the theme of Jesus’s high priestly office, upon which he will elaborate later in the letter. Just like Moses, Jesus was “faithful” over “God’s house” (a metaphor for the stewardship entrusted to them), yet Jesus was counted worthy of greater “glory,” or honor, than Moses, because he was faithful as a “son” rather than merely as a “servant,” as Moses was (vv. 2–6). This analogy would have communicated effectively to a first-century Jewish audience familiar with the extended household in which a son had greater status and privileges than a mere servant. Developing the household analogy further, the author affirms that God—as well as Jesus—is the “builder” of the house (which makes Jesus both the builder and the son exercising faithful stewardship over the house), while believers are the house itself—if they hold fast to their confession and heavenly hope (3:6).

At this juncture (vv. 7–11), the author cites at length Psalm 95:7–11, introducing the OT quote with the phrase “as the Holy Spirit says.” The remainder of chapter 3 and chapter 4—the second “warning passage” in the book—is given to a midrashic (commentary-style) exposition expounding the contemporary relevance of this psalm for the author’s audience at their particular juncture of salvation history. The quote starts out with the word “Today” (3:7), and it

is on this word, “today,” that the author rests his main rhetorical emphasis, as verse 13 makes clear: “But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.”

Three levels of time in salvation history are in play here: (1) the original setting in Moses’s day and Israel’s wanderings in the wilderness during the exodus from Egypt (Exod. 17:7; Num. 20:2); (2) the setting during the time of the psalmist, who called on his contemporaries not to harden their hearts as the Israelites did in the wilderness (Ps. 95); and (3) the setting of the author of Hebrews and the congregation to which he speaks or writes. Astutely, the author picks up on the fact that the wilderness Israelites didn’t heed God’s call not to harden their hearts toward him, and thus incurred divine judgment. This, he observes, occasioned the reiterated call by the psalmist.

Salvation-Historical Instances of “Today” in Hebrews

1. Israel during wilderness wanderings (Exodus, Numbers)
2. Israel at the time of the psalmist (Psalm 95)
3. The Jewish audience of the book of Hebrews (Hebrews)

And yet, the author asserts, in his day it is necessary for him to issue the call yet again. The “Hebrews” to whom he writes must not harden their hearts as Israel did in the wilderness, or divine judgment will inexorably ensue. All this is based on the author’s underlying conviction that, in Scripture, God still speaks today.⁷ He speaks through the Law (in the present case, the books of Exodus and Numbers), and he speaks through the Psalms (here, Ps. 95). These exhortations are not merely dead words of sheer antiquarian interest, intended for those who want to know what happened in the past. As the author will shortly assert, God’s Word is “living and active”—through his Word, God continues to address his people, issuing warnings to them not to repeat past failures of God’s people. For, as a later sage remarked, those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it.

This, then, following the initial warning in 2:1–3 not to “neglect such a great salvation,” is the second warning passage in this letter: “Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God” (3:12). In 2:4, the author had drawn attention to the way in which “God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit”; in the present case, the Scripture-literate

7. Cf. Graham Hughes, *Hebrews and Hermeneutics: The Epistle to the Hebrews as a New Testament Example of Biblical Interpretation*, SNTSMS 36 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), who examines the author’s understanding of the OT as God’s Word before the coming of Christ and assesses the implications of this examination for contemporary hermeneutics.

reader is aware that wilderness Israel, likewise, received striking manifestations of God's miracle-working power through the "signs and wonders" performed by Moses prior to and during the exodus.

This assumption will be made explicit in a later warning passage, 6:1-8, which contains numerous allusions to the same period in the history of God's people, Israel's wilderness wanderings during the exodus. Both in Moses's and in Jesus's days, God's people received striking manifestations of God's power; and at both junctures, people were urged not to harden their hearts but to be receptive toward God's power being at work in front of their very eyes. And just as the psalmist called people back to trust in God's power, so the author of Hebrews issues a renewed call for God's people not to harden their hearts in view of the miraculous signs and wonders performed by Jesus and the apostles in the early days of the Christian movement. The substructure of the author's theology is therefore *God's recurring revelation in salvation history and our continuing need to be receptive toward that revelation, lest divine judgment ensue*.

Following the warning against falling away from "the living God" and being hardened by "the deceitfulness of sin" (3:13), the author affirms that his readers "have come to share in Christ" *if* they hold firm to their initial "confidence" (*hypostasis*; translated "assurance" at 11:1 ESV). At this, the author reiterates the initial verse in the OT Psalms quote (3:15; cf. vv. 7-8; Ps. 95:7-8). He reinforces his warning by using the generation of Israelites in the wilderness as an illustration. Let's ponder this analogy in a bit more depth. The wilderness generation was part of God's people Israel. They were God's chosen people. They had been delivered from bondage in Egypt. They had witnessed the signs and wonders performed by Moses. They had seen abundant evidence of the miracle-working power of God and received tangible expressions of his faithful provision—both manna and water—throughout their forty years of wandering in the wilderness.

And yet, because of their sinful rebellion and their hardened hearts toward their covenant-keeping God, they had failed to enter the promised land! This was the basis for the psalmist's exhortation to his contemporaries, and this is likewise the analogy appropriated and invoked by the author of Hebrews to his audience. Unlike Israel, his readers must not fall away from the living God by yielding to their sinful, unbelieving hearts. While they are ethnically Israelites, they must exercise faith in God if they are to enter his rest. This phrase—"enter my rest"—is the note on which the Psalm 95 quote ends in 3:11 and is the point the author drives home in verses 18 and 19. He will continue to explore the vital implications of this scriptural analogy in chapter 4.

In terms of biblical theology, “rest” is a theme that surfaces repeatedly in Scripture.⁸

First, it occurs in the creation narrative when God “rests” on the final, seventh day of creation (Gen. 2:2-3; the Hebrew term is *shabbat*, “Sabbath”).

Second, it recurs in the Ten Commandments, where the Israelites are commanded to “remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy” by emulating God’s creation example and refraining from work on the seventh day of the week (Exod. 20:8-11; reiterated in Deut. 5:12-14; and cited at 4:4).

Third, the book of Joshua ends on a note of “rest” as well. While the unbelieving generation of Israelites, including Moses, failed to enter the land God had promised to Abraham, Joshua his successor embarked on the conquest of the promised land: “Thus the LORD gave to Israel all the land that he swore to give to their fathers. And they took possession of it, and they settled there. And the LORD gave them *rest* on every side” (Josh. 21:43-44). At the end of Joshua’s life, the inspired writer could sum up that “the LORD had given *rest* to Israel from all their surrounding enemies” (Josh. 23:1). We read that “not one word of all the good promises that the LORD had made to the house of Israel failed; all came to pass” (Josh. 21:45). Joshua assembled all the tribes of Israel and charged them to worship the Lord only; he made a covenant with the Lord at Shechem; and the patriarch Joseph’s bones were brought from Egypt and reburied on a plot of land he had bought there (Josh. 24; cf. Heb. 11:22).

And yet, as the subsequent history of Israel reveals, starting with the book of Judges, the rest Joshua brings is anything but permanent. During the period of the judges, “everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judg. 21:25), and even though God later (reluctantly) gave Israel a king (first Saul, then David, Solomon, and others), the nation fell into disobedience, sin, and even idolatry, and foreign nations such as the Philistines repeatedly subdued the Israelites. Eventually, both the northern kingdom (Israel) and the southern one (Judah) succumbed to the Assyrians and Babylonians, respectively, and were taken into exile.

Fourth, it is for this reason that the writer of Psalm 95 can exhort his fellow Israelites not to harden their hearts “today” (i.e., in his day) as the unbelieving

8. See esp. Jon C. Laansma, “*I Will Give You Rest*”: *The Rest Motif in the New Testament with Special Reference to Mt. 11 and Heb. 3-4*, WUNT 2/98 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997), who offers the contours of a biblical theology of “rest,” placing both passages referred to in the title against the background of two OT themes: rest as related to the promised land and as tied to the OT theme of Sabbath. Cf. Judith Hoch Wray, *Rest as a Theological Metaphor in the Epistle to the Hebrews and the Gospel of Truth: Early Christian Homiletics of Rest*, SBLDS 166 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988).

wilderness generation did, and why he can say that Israel did not, in fact, enter the rest that God had promised and that the nation initially appeared to enter in the days of Joshua.

Fifth, there is therefore a rest that God's people can enter following the coming of Christ—namely, salvation from sin on account of Jesus's atoning sacrifice. This "rest" is more overtly spiritual and not primarily tied to physical territory.

Sixth, this rest will be fully consummated and entered into when believers die and go to heaven and live forever in God's presence in the eternal state.

A Biblical Theology of Rest in Six Stages

1. God's rest from his work at creation
2. The Sabbath command in the Ten Commandments
3. Deliverance from bondage (the exodus) and rest in the promised land
4. Rest in the psalmist's day (not enjoyed by Israel in Joshua's day)
5. Salvation rest from sin through faith in Jesus's atonement
6. Final rest in heaven enjoyed by all believers

The biblical theme of "rest," therefore, is not static but dynamic and involves a prophetic dimension and redemptive-historical sequence. As the author of Hebrews puts it, "the promise of entering his rest still stands" (4:1). It is not enough to *hear* "good news," whether in the days of OT Israel or in the days of the writer's Hebrew audience; the message must be received in *faith* (4:2): "For we who have believed enter that rest" (v. 3). Remarkably, the expression "enter" refers to the present time, though doubtless the full consummation of believers' rest awaits their final entrance into God's presence in heaven.

At this, the author continues to explain the implications of the OT psalmist's message in Psalm 95, reiterating, in midrashic (commentary) fashion, that "it remains for some to enter" God's rest (4:6). This is true even at the present day from the vantage point of the writer of Hebrews (v. 6), which is why the invitation to enter God's rest "today" still stands—even in our day (v. 7)! Because Joshua failed to give God's people permanent rest, it remains for them to enter God's rest, "for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his" (v. 10). In this way, we see the above-mentioned six stages of the biblical theme of "rest" intersect.

Wrapping up his argument based on Psalm 95, the author proceeds to urge his audience, "Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may

Hebrews

Jesus as the Great High Priest and Mediator of a New Covenant (4:11–10:25)

fall by the same sort of disobedience” (4:11). In other words, learn a lesson from the negative experience of the wilderness generation. Don’t presume upon God’s mercy or your ethnic covenant membership. There’s no substitute for heartfelt trust in God. The phrase “let us strive” conveys a considerable sense of urgency and elsewhere means, literally, “hurry” or “make haste” (e.g., 2 Tim. 4:9, 21).

The ground of the author’s urgent appeal is that God’s Word is living and active (4:12). In context, this doubtless refers to Psalm 95, of which the author has just offered a skillful, extended exposition on the basis of the conviction that God’s Word still speaks today. In the present instance, the relevance of Psalm 95—specifically, the warning against unbelief in God’s good news of salvation in Christ—was not exhausted by its original application but extends to the author’s contemporary readers.

By the same token, the inference seems reasonable that the words of the author of the book of Hebrews bear relevance not only for his original audience but, as part of inspired, canonical Scripture, also continue to speak to God’s people even today. Whether Jewish or non-Jewish, those hearing God’s Word today should not harden their hearts but should receive the good news of salvation and forgiveness of sins in Jesus and so enter into God’s rest. Conversely, God’s wrath continues to rest on those who fail to receive the biblical message by faith (cf. John 5:24).

Jesus as the Great High Priest and Mediator of a New Covenant (4:11–10:25)

Jesus’s High Priesthood after the Order of Melchizedek Introduced (4:11–5:10)

As mentioned in the introduction above, 4:11–16 serves as a bridge or transition between the author’s argument in 1:1–4:16—namely, that God’s final revelation and salvation have found full expression in his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ—and his assertion that Jesus is superior to previous mediators in salvation history, whether angels, Moses, or Joshua, so that the salvation Jesus brought is infinitely greater than that brokered by the law and the sacrificial system. In the section that follows, which constitutes the bulk of the remainder of the letter, the author will elaborate on this second aspect in further detail. Jesus is greater than Aaron, as well, in his service as the great high priest and mediator of a new covenant.

Consequently, 4:14 introduces the topic—previously hinted at in the introduction (1:3) and briefly touched upon in 2:17–3:1—that will occupy the