

Introduction to Hebrews

Recipients

The fact that they are Jews¹ seems readily apparent in the many allusions and quotations of the OT text. The author appeals to the authority of the OT (1:1; 2:2-3), the Levitical Priesthood (7:11-12) and Sacrificial System (10:1) to which the recipients were strongly rooted.

They were second generation believers. That is to say that they themselves had not seen or heard Jesus personally but were told about him by those who had (2:3).

The recipients were Christians who had endured initial persecution (10:32-34²) but not to the point of martyrdom (12:4). They demonstrated the fruit of their salvation in the work and love they showed God through the continual help they extended to his people (6:10).

Not a few describe the recipients as adherents to a non-conformist group of Jews not unlike the Essenes or the community at Qumran. The potential reference to the practice of ceremonial washings beyond those prescribed by the law typified such communities (6:2).

The Destination

While no destination is identified explicitly in the letter to the Hebrews, much argument has been made to demonstrate that the recipients of the letter were not residents of Jerusalem. The following examples seem to support this idea:

- There were no eyewitnesses of Jesus' ministry in the church, including the writer himself (2:3). This would be odd for even the latest possible date for the writing of Hebrews³ would amply allow for those who saw/heard Jesus to still be living.
- All allusions to the sacrificial system seem to point to a literary understanding rather than first-hand knowledge. The writer only uses references to the tabernacle rather than the temple. By contrast, Stephen in his defense (in Jerusalem) of the Gospel made a careful delineation between the tabernacle and the temple. F.F. Bruce points out that if the recipients were contemporary residents of Jerusalem, the absence of any reference to the temple seems out of place.⁴
- The author commends the recipients for the "help" they had shown and continue to show "his people" (6:10). If the help here denotes a material gift for the poor, the saints in

¹ More specifically perhaps, "Hellenized Jews" due to the fact that all OT quotations are from the LXX rather than the Hebrew or Aramaic texts.

² Hebrews 10:32-34 (NASB95) ³² But remember the former days, when, after being enlightened, you endured a great conflict of sufferings, ³³ partly by being made a public spectacle through reproaches and tribulations, and partly by becoming sharers with those who were so treated. ³⁴ For you showed sympathy to the prisoners and accepted joyfully the seizure of your property, knowing that you have for yourselves a better possession and a lasting one.

³ Hebrews likely predates the persecution of the church under Nero (AD 65) and assuredly predates the fall of Jerusalem (AD 70)

⁴ F.F. Bruce "The Epistle to the Hebrews" (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) p.10-11

Jerusalem were historically the recipients of such gifts rather than the benefactors (Rom 15:25-26; 2Cor 8:1-4). However, it should be noted that a broader view of service can easily be argued. Heb 10:32-35 describes the types of service that have been rendered toward the saints in the past – that they had stood by fellow believers in the midst of persecution and sympathized with those in prison. While 6:10 might include “material giving” it may not be an exclusive understanding of the word “help” in this context.

- The church the epistle addresses is described as not having “resisted to the point of shedding blood in [their] striving against sin” (12:4). If this is to be taken literally, which it should, then this would describe a people who had been relatively unscathed by the same persecutions suffered by the church in Jerusalem in which many believers had given their lives.
- The LXX is used exclusively in OT quotations. This does not seem typical of Jews in Palestine who would have favored the Hebraic text.

Many other guesses have been made relating to the destination of Hebrews. A popular theory argues Rome as the destination based upon the reference to “those from Italy” (13:24) sending greetings to the recipients in their homeland. In the end, the destination of this letter is at best a guess. This lack of clarity does not seem to affect the understanding of the point of the letter.

The Message of Hebrews

Overview –

Hebrews, in the words of W.L. Lane, is written to a people experiencing a crisis of faith and a failure of nerve.⁵ The recipients are 2nd generation Jewish believers (2:3) who have come joyfully to faith in Christ and have stood their ground in the face of initial persecution (10:32-34). However, a new crisis has caused them to begin to question their faith and potentially revert to OT Judaism. The author exhorts them both positively and negatively to persevere. Positively, the author points out the absolute supremacy of Christ as compared to the Old Covenant in that the believer can draw near to God with a pure heart (10:19-22) and that he will be richly rewarded for his faith rewarded (10:35-36). Negatively, he warns them of the judgment of God that awaits those who turn away from such a great salvation (10:26-27).

Literary Themes in Hebrews

Foreshadowing –

The author uses vivid examples of OT rituals and historical figures as foreshadowing the person and ministry of Christ. The Law, Moses, Melchizidek, the Levitical priesthood and the sacrificial system all represented a “shadow of the good things that are coming – not the realities themselves” (10:1). The people of God in the OT lived in an age of anticipation – the recipients of the letter to the Hebrews in an age of fulfillment.

The finality of the gospel –

⁵ W.L. Lane, “*Hebrews*” *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments* (Downers Grove, Indiana: IVP 1997) p.443

Because Jesus is the Great High Priest who entered heaven itself in the true tabernacle offering his own divine blood unblemished by sin (9:11-12) who lives perpetually, there is no longer a need for further sacrifices to be made. There is no other offering for sin beyond the perfect offering of Christ himself (10:18). By his “once for all” sacrifice he has perfected for all time those who have been sanctified (10:14). Therefore, any attempt at seeking additional means of propitiation is likened to “trampling Christ under foot” (10:26, 29).

The Superior Quality of Life Experienced in Faith –

OT Law	Faith in Christ
Annual reminder of sin (10:3)	One sacrifice made for all time (10:12)
Guilty conscience (9:9; 10:2)	Cleansed conscience (10:14, 22)
Toiling in dead ritual (9:10)	Rest from work (4:10)
Stand far away in fear (12:18-21)	Draw near in confidence (4:16; 10:22)
Looking forward to the promise (11:39)	Received the promise (11:40)
Obedience motivated by fear (2:2)	Obedience motivated by gratitude (13:15)

The Necessity of Suffering –

Christ took on a human nature (2:14), learning obedience through what he suffered (2:10; 5:8). The Hebrews, in turn, should be willing to bear the reproach of Christ that they might reach maturity (6:1) through the discipline (training) of endurance (12:3,7,11)

The Promise of Reward –

If the Hebrews endured and held fast to their faith, they would receive great reward (10:35-36).