

## THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS

Hebrews stands alone among the New Testament epistles in its style and approach, and it is the only New Testament book whose authorship remains a real mystery. This profound work builds a case for the superiority of Christ through a cumulative argument in which Christ is presented as “better” in every respect.

### Author

Despite many suggestions, the author of Hebrews remains unknown. Clement of Alexandria (c. A.D. 150–215) named Paul as the author but argued that Luke translated the book into Greek. Origen (c. A.D. 185–253) concluded that the thoughts were those of Paul but that the phraseology and composition were those of someone who was recalling the apostle’s teaching (e.g., Clement of Rome or Luke). Many others have been proposed as the possible author: Barnabas (suggested by Tertullian), Apollos (by Luther), Philip the evangelist (by William Ramsay), and Priscilla and Aquila (by Adolf von Harnack). Origen’s famous remark still stands: “Who the author of the epistle is, God only knows.”

### Date

The place of writing is unknown, but a reasonable estimate of the date can be made. Hebrews was quoted c. A.D. 95 by Clement of Rome, but its failure to mention the cessation of the Old Testament sacrificial system with the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 indicates that it was written prior to that date. Timothy was still alive (12:23), persecution was mounting, and the old Jewish system was about to be removed (12:26, 27). All of this suggests a date between A.D. 64 and 68.

The recipients of this work were believers (3:1) who had come to faith through the testimony of eyewitnesses to Christ (2:3). They had endured hardships because of their stand for the gospel (10:32–34), but were in danger of drifting away. The repeated arguments regarding the superiority of Christ and His sacrifice over Moses and the Old Testament sacrificial system indicate that the recipients were probably Jewish Christians in danger of lapsing back into the Jewish religion.

### Themes and Literary Structure

The author calls his book a “word of exhortation” (13:22), leading many to view it more as a written sermon than a letter. Hebrews is actually an extended exposition of numerous Old Testament passages.

The basic theme of Hebrews is found in the word “better,” describing the superiority of Christ in His Person and work (1:4; 6:9; 7:7, 19, 22; 8:6; 9:23; 10:34; 11:16, 35, 40; 12:24). The words “perfect” and “heavenly” are also prominent. He offers a better revelation, position, priesthood, covenant, sacrifice, and power.

Hebrews presents Christ as the divine-human Prophet, Priest, and King. His deity (1:3, 8) and humanity (2:9, 14, 17, 18) are asserted with equal force, and over twenty titles are used to describe His attributes and accomplishments (e.g., “heir of all things,” “Apostle and High Priest,” “Mediator,” and “Author and Finisher of *our* faith”).

## Outline of Hebrews

### Christ Better Than Old Testament Economy, Chapters 1–10

- A. Christ Is Superior to Prophets, Chapter 1:1–3
- B. Christ Is Superior to Angels, Chapters 1:4–2:18
  - 1. Deity of Christ, Chapter 1:4–14
  - 2. Humanity of Christ, Chapter 2:1–18
  - 3. *1st Danger Signal: Peril of Drifting, Chapters 2:1–4*
- C. Christ Is Superior to Moses, Chapters 3:1–4:2
  - 1. *2nd Danger Signal: Peril of Doubting, Chapters 3:7–4:2*
- D. Christ Is Superior to Joshua, Chapter 4:3–13
- E. Christ Is Superior to Levitical Priesthood, Chapters 4:14–7:28
  - 1. Our Great High Priest, Chapter 4:14–16
  - 2. Definition of a Priest, Chapters 5:1–10
  - 3. *3rd Danger Signal: Peril of Dull Hearing, Chapter 5:11–14*
  - 4. *4th Danger Signal: Peril of Departing, Chapter 6:1–20*
  - 3. Christ Our High Priest after Order of Melchizedek, Chapter 7:1–28
    - a. Christ Is Perpetual Priest, Chapter 7:1–3
    - b. Christ Is Perfect Priest, Chapter 7:4–22
    - c. Christ in His Person Is Perpetual and Perfect Priest, Chapter 7:23–28
- F. Christ as Our High Priest Ministers in Superior Sanctuary by Better Covenant Built upon Better Promises, Chapters 8:1–10:39
  - 1. True Tabernacle, Chapter 8:1–5
  - 2. New Covenant, Better than the Old, Chapter 8:6–13
  - 3. New Sanctuary, Better than the Old, Chapter 9:1–10
  - 4. Superior Sacrifice, Chapters 9:11–10:18
  - 5. Encouragement, Chapter 10:19–25
  - 6. *5th Danger Signal: Peril of Despising, Chapter 10:26–39*

### II. Christ Brings Better Benefits and Duties, Chapters 11–13

- A. Faith, Chapter 11:1–40
- B. Hope, Chapter 12:1–29
  - 1. The Christian Race, Chapter 12:1–2
  - 2. Believers Are Now in Contest and Conflict, Chapter 12:3–14
  - 3. *6th Danger Signal: Peril of Denying, Chapter 12:15–29*
- C. Love, Chapter 13:1–25
  - 1. Secret Life of Believers, Chapter 13:1–6
  - 2. Social Life of Believers, Chapter 13:7–14
  - 3. Spiritual Life of Believers, Chapter 13:15–19
  - 4. Benediction, Chapter 13:20–25

## The Superiority of Christ

The first chapter of Hebrews is one of the most important Christological passages in Scripture (see also John 1:1; Phil. 2:6–11; and Col. 1:15–20). Christ's superiority over the Old Testament prophets and over the angels is portrayed through seven character affirmations and seven Scripture quotations.

### Christ's Superiority

#### Jesus is Greater Than the Prophets

1:1-3

##### Seven character affirmations:

Heir of all things (v. 2)  
 Creator (v. 2)  
 Manifested of God's Being (v. 3)  
 Perfect representation of God (v. 3)  
 Sustainer of all things (v. 3)  
 Savior (v. 3)  
 Exalted Lord (v. 3)

#### Jesus is Greater Than the Angels

1:4-14

##### Seven Scripture quotations:

Psalms 2:7 (v. 5)  
 2 Samuel 7:14 (v. 3)  
 Deuteronomy 32:43 or Psalm 97:7 (v. 6)  
 Psalm 104:4 (v. 7)  
 Psalm 45:6, 7 (vv. 8, 9)  
 Psalm 102:25-27 (vv. 10-12)  
 Psalm 110:1 (v. 13)

## The Works of Faith

The faith that the readers must maintain is defined in Hebrews 11:1–3 and illustrated in 11:4–40. The triumphs and accomplishments of faith in the lives of Old Testament believers should encourage Christians to look “unto Jesus, the author and finisher of *our* faith” (12:2).

## The Hall of Fame of Faith

The hall of fame of the Scriptures is located in Hebrews 11 and records those who willingly took God at His word even when there was nothing to cling to but His promise.

<u>Person</u>	<u>Scripture Reference</u>
Abel	Genesis 4
Enoch	Genesis 5
Noah	Genesis 6
Abraham	Genesis 12
Jonah	Genesis 17
Isaac	Genesis 27
Jacob	Genesis 48
Joseph	Genesis 50
Moses' parents	Exodus 2
Moses	Exodus 2
Rahab	Joshua 2, 6
Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah	Joshua 4, 6, 13, 11
David, Samuel, and the prophets	1 Samuel