

# Hebrews

Mary Healy



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Mary Healy, Hebrews

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Most Reverend Earl Boyea, Bishop of Lansing

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## Editors' Preface

The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord. . . . All the preaching of the Church should be nourished and governed by Sacred Scripture. For in the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven meets His children with great love and speaks with them; and the power and goodness in the word of God is so great that it stands as the support and energy of the Church, the strength of faith for her sons and daughters, the food of the soul, a pure and perennial fountain of spiritual life.

Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum* 21

Were not our hearts burning within us while he spoke to us on the way and opened the scriptures to us?

Luke 24:32

The Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture aims to serve the ministry of the Word of God in the life and mission of the Church. Since Vatican Council II, there has been an increasing hunger among Catholics to study Scripture in depth and in a way that reveals its relationship to liturgy, evangelization, catechesis, theology, and personal and communal life. This series responds to that desire by providing accessible yet substantive commentary on each book of the New Testament, drawn from the best of contemporary biblical scholarship as well as the rich treasury of the Church's tradition. These volumes seek to offer scholarship illumined by faith, in the conviction that the ultimate aim of biblical interpretation is to discover what God has revealed and is still speaking

through the sacred text. Central to our approach are the principles taught by Vatican II: first, the use of historical and literary methods to discern what the biblical authors intended to express; second, prayerful theological reflection to understand the sacred text “in accord with the same Spirit by whom it was written”—that is, in light of the content and unity of the whole Scripture, the living tradition of the Church, and the analogy of faith (*Dei Verbum* 12).

The Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture is written for those engaged in or training for pastoral ministry and others interested in studying Scripture to understand their faith more deeply, to nourish their spiritual life, or to share the good news with others. With this in mind, the authors focus on the meaning of the text for faith and life rather than on the technical questions that occupy scholars, and they explain the Bible in ordinary language that does not require translation for preaching and catechesis. Although this series is written from the perspective of Catholic faith, its authors draw on the interpretation of Protestant and Orthodox scholars and hope these volumes will serve Christians of other traditions as well.

A variety of features are designed to make the commentary as useful as possible. Each volume includes the biblical text of the New American Bible, Revised Edition (NABRE), the translation approved for liturgical use in the United States. In order to serve readers who use other translations, the most important differences between the NABRE and other widely used translations (RSV, NRSV, JB, NJB, and NIV) are noted and explained. Each unit of the biblical text is followed by a list of references to relevant Scripture passages, Catechism sections, and uses in the Roman Lectionary. The exegesis that follows aims to explain in a clear and engaging way the meaning of the text in its original historical context as well as its perennial meaning for Christians. Reflection and Application sections help readers apply Scripture to Christian life today by responding to questions that the text raises, offering spiritual interpretations drawn from Christian tradition or providing suggestions for the use of the biblical text in catechesis, preaching, or other forms of pastoral ministry.

Interspersed throughout the commentary are Biblical Background sidebars that present historical, literary, or theological information, and Living Tradition sidebars that offer pertinent material from the postbiblical Christian tradition, including quotations from Church documents and from the writings of saints and Church Fathers. The Biblical Background sidebars are indicated by a photo of urns that were excavated in Jerusalem, signifying the importance of historical study in understanding the sacred text. The Living Tradition sidebars are indicated by an image of Eadwine, a twelfth-century monk and scribe, signifying

the growth in the Church's understanding that comes by the grace of the Holy Spirit as believers study and ponder the word of God in their hearts (see *Dei Verbum* 8).

Maps and a glossary are included in each volume for easy reference. The glossary explains key terms from the biblical text as well as theological or exegetical terms, which are marked in the commentary with a cross (†). A list of suggested resources, an index of pastoral topics, and an index of sidebars are included to enhance the usefulness of these volumes. Further resources, including questions for reflection or discussion, can be found at the series website, [www.CatholicScriptureCommentary.com](http://www.CatholicScriptureCommentary.com).

It is our desire and prayer that these volumes be of service so that more and more “the word of the Lord may speed forward and be glorified” (2 Thess 3:1) in the Church and throughout the world.

Peter S. Williamson  
Mary Healy  
Kevin Perrotta

### **Note to Readers**

The New American Bible, Revised Edition differs slightly from most English translations in its verse numbering of Psalms and certain other parts of the Old Testament. For instance, Ps 51:4 in the NABRE is Ps 51:2 in other translations; Mal 3:19 in the NABRE is Mal 4:1 in other translations. Readers who use different translations are advised to keep this in mind when looking up Old Testament cross-references given in the commentary.

The NABRE (2011) was a revision of the NAB Old Testament only; thus where this commentary cites the New Testament it will refer to the NAB rather than the NABRE.

# Abbreviations

|            |   |
|------------|---|
| †          | indicates that the definition of a term appears in the glossary   |
| ACCS 10    | Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament 10, <i>Hebrews</i> , edited by Erik M. Heen and Philip D. W. Krey (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005)              |
| ANF        | <i>Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325</i> , edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing, 1885) |
| c.         | circa   |
| Catechism  | <i>Catechism of the Catholic Church</i> , 2nd ed. (New York: Doubleday, 2003)   |
| cf.        | compare   |
| ESV        | English Standard Version  |
| JB         | Jerusalem Bible   |
| KJV        | King James Version  |
| Lectionary | <i>The Lectionary for Mass</i> , 1988/2000 USA ed. (Washington, DC: Confraternity of Christian Doctrine)  |
| LXX        | <sup>1</sup> Septuagint   |
| NAB        | New American Bible  |
| NABRE      | New American Bible, Revised Edition (2011)  |
| NIV        | New International Version   |
| NJB        | New Jerusalem Bible   |
| NPNF       | <i>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers</i> , edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing, 1890)   |
| NRSV       | New Revised Standard Version  |
| NT         | New Testament   |
| OT         | Old Testament   |
| RSV        | Revised Standard Version  |
| RSV-CE     | Catholic Edition of the Revised Standard Version (Ignatius Bible)   |
| v(v).      | verse(s)  |



## Books of the Old Testament

|         |              |
|---------|--------------|
| Gen     | Genesis      |
| Exod    | Exodus       |
| Lev     | Leviticus    |
| Num     | Numbers      |
| Deut    | Deuteronomy  |
| Josh    | Joshua       |
| Judg    | Judges       |
| Ruth    | Ruth         |
| 1 Sam   | 1 Samuel     |
| 2 Sam   | 2 Samuel     |
| 1 Kings | 1 Kings      |
| 2 Kings | 2 Kings      |
| 1 Chron | 1 Chronicles |
| 2 Chron | 2 Chronicles |
| Ezra    | Ezra         |
| Neh     | Nehemiah     |

|        |               |
|--------|---------------|
| Tob    | Tobit         |
| Jdt    | Judith        |
| Esther | Esther        |
| 1 Macc | 1 Maccabees   |
| 2 Macc | 2 Maccabees   |
| Job    | Job           |
| Ps     | Psalms/Psalms |
| Prov   | Proverbs      |
| Eccles | Ecclesiastes  |
| Song   | Song of Songs |
| Wis    | Wisdom        |
| Sir    | Sirach        |
| Isa    | Isaiah        |
| Jer    | Jeremiah      |
| Lam    | Lamentations  |
| Bar    | Baruch        |

|       |           |
|-------|-----------|
| Ezek  | Ezekiel   |
| Dan   | Daniel    |
| Hosea | Hosea     |
| Joel  | Joel      |
| Amos  | Amos      |
| Obad  | Obadiah   |
| Jon   | Jonah     |
| Mic   | Micah     |
| Nah   | Nahum     |
| Hab   | Habakkuk  |
| Zeph  | Zephaniah |
| Hag   | Haggai    |
| Zech  | Zechariah |
| Mal   | Malachi   |

## Books of the New Testament

|         |                 |
|---------|-----------------|
| Matt    | Matthew         |
| Mark    | Mark            |
| Luke    | Luke            |
| John    | John            |
| Acts    | Acts            |
| Rom     | Romans          |
| 1 Cor   | 1 Corinthians   |
| 2 Cor   | 2 Corinthians   |
| Gal     | Galatians       |
| Eph     | Ephesians       |
| Phil    | Philippians     |
| Col     | Colossians      |
| 1 Thess | 1 Thessalonians |
| 2 Thess | 2 Thessalonians |

|        |            |
|--------|------------|
| 1 Tim  | 1 Timothy  |
| 2 Tim  | 2 Timothy  |
| Titus  | Titus      |
| Philem | Philemon   |
| Heb    | Hebrews    |
| James  | James      |
| 1 Pet  | 1 Peter    |
| 2 Pet  | 2 Peter    |
| 1 John | 1 John     |
| 2 John | 2 John     |
| 3 John | 3 John     |
| Jude   | Jude       |
| Rev    | Revelation |

# Introduction

What is the meaning of Christ's death on the cross? And what does it have to do with us? Of all the books of the New Testament, the Letter to the Hebrews offers the most profound and penetrating exploration of this mystery that lies at the heart of Christian faith. Yet Hebrews is in many respects the enigma of the New Testament. The author has left us no byline and few clues as to his identity. This "letter" is actually a homily within a letter, written to unspecified addressees in an unidentified setting at an unknown time. Not surprisingly, it was one of the last books to be universally accepted as part of the New Testament canon. But the early Church recognized this book as a magnificent reflection, inspired by the Holy Spirit, on Christ's <sup>†</sup>paschal mystery as the culmination of God's plan of salvation, the fulfillment of all that was hidden in the words, deeds, and rites of the old covenant.

For readers today, Hebrews presents special challenges. Its vocabulary is difficult, its structure complex, its logic not always easy to follow. The thought world of Hebrews, with its intense interest in priesthood, <sup>†</sup>tabernacle, ritual purity, and blood sacrifice, is foreign to most people of the twenty-first century. Many Catholics are familiar only with the short passages that appear in the Sunday lectionary, extracted from the context into which they are so carefully woven. Yet the effort to engage this biblical book in detail and understand it as a carefully constructed whole yields rich rewards. Hebrews is no abstract, dry treatise of theological speculation. It is a window opening onto the event at the center of all history, the act of love in which Christ died for us. The more one studies this letter, the more one finds that it illuminates and transforms our understanding of who God is, what he has done for us, and how we are to live as Christians today.

The purpose of this commentary is to make Hebrews accessible to readers by unpacking the meaning of each passage in light of the whole letter and especially in light of the Old Testament figures and prophecies that for the author are the indispensable background for understanding the fulfillment of God's plan in Christ. In keeping with the aims of the Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture, the goal is not merely to describe what Hebrews says about divine realities but also to understand *the realities themselves* in light of what Hebrews says about them. This commentary reads Hebrews from the heart of the Church, drawing from the insights of contemporary biblical scholars as well as Church Fathers, saints, and Church documents.

## Who Wrote Hebrews?

Hebrews is the only book of the New Testament that is formally anonymous; that is, neither the letter itself nor a heading above it in the earliest manuscripts names an author. But this does not preclude our making some educated guesses. Taking a brief look at the various hypotheses that have been proposed can sharpen our understanding of the letter's audience, purpose, and historical setting.

### *Is Paul the Author?*

Hebrews has traditionally been grouped with the Letters of Paul, although Church Fathers from early on recognized that it does not readily fit this categorization. The question of authorship had immense importance for the early Church because it was tied to the question of which books belonged to the New Testament canon (which was not settled until the late fourth century). The Church regarded only "apostolic" writings—those written by an apostle or a close associate of an apostle—as canonical. Was Hebrews apostolic?

The Western Fathers were reluctant to ascribe Hebrews to Paul. The Eastern Fathers were more inclined to accept Pauline authorship, at least in a broad sense. St. Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–215) claimed that Paul originally wrote the letter in the Hebrew language, and then Luke translated and published it in Greek. To explain why Paul does not name himself as in all his other letters, Clement opined that "in sending it to the Hebrews, who were prejudiced and suspicious of him, he wisely did not wish to repel them at the very beginning by giving his name."<sup>1</sup> Origen (184–253) noted that Hebrews resembles the theology of Paul at many

1. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.14.2. Clement also quotes his predecessor Pantaenus (died c. 200) as ascribing Hebrews to Paul.

points, but that its Greek diction is more elegant and polished than the apostle's. He concluded that Hebrews expresses the thought of Paul, but as written down by someone else, presumably a student of Paul's who remembered his teachings.<sup>2</sup>

Through the influence of St. Jerome (c. 347–420) and St. Augustine (354–430), the Western Church came to accept the Eastern view, assuming some form of Pauline authorship while still classifying Hebrews separately from the other thirteen Letters of Paul.<sup>3</sup> Thus by the late fourth century the churches universally came to recognize Hebrews as apostolic and canonical, but without formally settling the question of authorship.

What are the reasons for doubting Paul's authorship?

First, the thirteen Pauline Letters explicitly identify Paul as the author (always as the very first word in the epistle), whereas Hebrews names no author. Further, Hebrews lacks Paul's characteristic greeting, "grace and peace," which appears in all thirteen letters, and it contains none of his typical autobiographical remarks.<sup>4</sup>

Second, the vocabulary and style are markedly different from Paul's. Many of Paul's favorite expressions are absent, such as "the gospel," "Christ Jesus," "chosen," "fulfill," "build up," and "justify." Whereas Paul, in his zeal to get his point across, often disregards fine points of grammar or style, sometimes shifting abruptly from one topic to another or breaking off in midsentence, Hebrews is a polished, finely crafted work of literary art. Some, like Clement, hypothesize that Paul authored an original Hebrew-language version that someone else then translated into Greek, but this is unconvincing, given Hebrews' many striking Greek expressions and wordplays that work only in Greek.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, in several places the argument depends on a turn of phrase that does not exist in the Hebrew Old Testament but is present in the Greek 'Septuagint'.<sup>6</sup>

Third, Hebrews quotes Scripture in a way different from Paul. Whereas Paul usually introduces quotations with "it is written" or "scripture says," Hebrews emphasizes Scripture as God's *speech* in the present: God says (1:5) or Christ says (2:11–13) or the Spirit says (3:7; 10:15).

2. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.25.11–13.

3. Both Jerome (*Epistle* 129.3) and Augustine (*Forgiveness of Sins* 1.50) acknowledge Hebrews as belonging in some sense to the Pauline Letters but withhold judgment on the question of authorship. See F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, rev. ed., New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 17.

4. See Luke Timothy Johnson, *Hebrews: A Commentary*, New Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 40.

5. See George Milligan, *The Theology of the Epistle to the Hebrews: With a Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1899), 17.

6. A prominent example is the reflection in Heb 10:5 on a quotation from Ps 40:7 (Ps 39:7 LXX), "a body you prepared for me," whereas the Hebrew text reads, "you opened my ears."

Fourth, the theology of Hebrews, though having many points of contact with that of Paul, is strikingly unique. Only Hebrews refers to Christ as “high priest.” Whereas Paul often speaks of redemption as our being “justified by faith,” Hebrews uses terms taken from the sacrificial rites of the temple: we are “cleansed,” “sprinkled clean,” “made perfect.” Whereas Paul speaks of the law of Moses primarily as a moral code, Hebrews focuses on its ritual prescriptions. Whereas Christ’s resurrection is central to Paul’s theology, Hebrews mentions the resurrection only obliquely and focuses instead on Jesus’ exaltation at the right hand of God.

It should be noted, however, that these differences are not contradictions. Hebrews and Paul agree on the essential content of Christian revelation: Jesus Christ is the image of God through whom the world was created (Heb 1:1–3; 1 Cor 8:6; Col 1:15–16), the savior who took on our human flesh (Heb 2:14–16; Rom 8:3), who died for our sins once and for all (Heb 9:26; Rom 6:9–10), who humbled himself and then was brought back from the dead and glorified at God’s right hand (Heb 2:9; 13:20; Phil 2:8–9); he is the mediator of the new covenant (Heb 9:15; 1 Cor 11:25) who continues to intercede for us (Heb 7:25; Rom 8:34), who empowers us to practice faith, hope, and love (Heb 10:22–24; 1 Cor 13:13), and who will come again to complete the work of salvation (Heb 9:28; 1 Cor 1:7; Titus 2:13).<sup>7</sup>

Finally, perhaps the strongest objection to Pauline authorship is that the author of Hebrews counts himself among those who had received the gospel secondhand; he says the good news was “announced originally through the Lord, [and] was confirmed for us by those who had heard” (Heb 2:3). This is in sharp contrast with Paul, who considered the chief credential of his apostleship to be the fact that he had received the gospel directly from the risen Lord: “I did not receive it from a human being, nor was I taught it, but it came through a revelation of Jesus Christ” (Gal 1:12).

### *Who Else Might Have Written Hebrews?*

Other candidates that have been proposed include Luke, Barnabas, Silas, Apollos, Priscilla, and Clement of Rome. But each of these suggestions runs into problems. Luke’s writing is only superficially similar to Hebrews, and it is highly unlikely that the author of Hebrews was a Gentile, as Luke was. There is no evidence that Barnabas was a writer, or even an eloquent preacher (see Acts 14:12). It is doubtful that either he or Silas, leaders in the early Jerusalem church (Acts 4:36; 15:22), would have had the advanced training in Greek rhetoric that

7. See Milligan, *Hebrews*, 199.

the author of Hebrews evidently had. The Priscilla theory runs into difficulties at Hebrews 11:32, where the author refers to himself using a masculine participle. Clement lacks the theological profundity of Hebrews and views the priesthood and the relationship of the Old and New Testaments differently.

Among these guesses, Apollos has perhaps the greatest claim to plausibility. Luke tells us that Apollos was a Jew from Alexandria, “an eloquent speaker, . . . an authority on the scriptures . . . with ardent spirit,” who spoke “boldly” (Acts 18:24–26)—all qualities that match the Letter to the Hebrews. Alexandria was home to the kind of Jewish Platonism exemplified by the first-century philosopher Philo, to which Hebrews has some resemblances. Apollos argued vigorously from the Scriptures that the Messiah is Jesus (Acts 18:28), which is just what Hebrews does. Apollos was known to Paul yet independent of him (1 Cor 3:4) and was likely acquainted with Timothy, who is mentioned in Hebrews 13:23 (1 Cor 16:10–12). Hebrews’ unusual reference to “baptisms” in the plural (Heb 6:2) could be explained by Apollos at first knowing only the baptism of John, then being more fully instructed in Christian baptism (Acts 18:25–26). But despite all these intriguing points of contact, the Apollos theory remains speculative. The complete absence of any confirming tradition counts against it. Unfortunately, we have no known writings of Apollos with which to compare Hebrews, as we have for Paul and Clement.

Despite our natural curiosity, and despite nearly two millennia of diligent scholarly detective work, the writer to the Hebrews has managed to keep his desired anonymity. We are not really any closer to an answer than was Origen, who famously wrote in the third century, “As to who actually wrote the epistle, God knows the truth of the matter.”<sup>8</sup>

## Destination

Hebrews ends like a letter (13:22–25), but it does not begin like one.<sup>9</sup> It lacks the customary greeting of an ancient letter, naming the sender, the recipients, and their location. But the heading “To the Hebrews” appears above it on the oldest surviving copy, dating to around AD 200,<sup>10</sup> and nearly all subsequent copies. This label was probably added by an early scribe because the letter was

8. Quoted from Origen’s homilies on Hebrews (which have not survived) in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.25.14.

9. Bruce, *Hebrews*, 3. This is the reverse of the Letter of James, which begins but does not end like a letter. Likewise, the First Letter of John lacks both an epistolary beginning and ending.

10. This priceless artifact of early Christianity, Papyrus 46, contains the Letters of Paul, with Hebrews placed between Romans and 1 Corinthians. Today most of the Hebrews portion is housed in the University of Michigan library.

evidently written for a community of Jewish Christians. However, it is unlikely that they were “Hebrews” in the usual New Testament sense (Acts 6:1; Phil 3:5)—that is, Jewish Christians who spoke Hebrew (or <sup>†</sup>Aramaic) as opposed to “<sup>†</sup>Hellenists,” Jewish Christians who were raised outside Palestine and whose mother tongue was Greek. This letter was clearly written for those who used the <sup>†</sup>Septuagint and who could appreciate sophisticated Greek rhetoric and figures of speech. Ironically, the Letter to the Hebrews could more accurately be called the Homily to the Hellenists.

A few hints about the identity of the recipients can be gleaned from the letter. They were Jewish Christians who formed a definite community or local church (see 13:17). Some scholars have proposed that they were Gentiles, but this suggestion is unconvincing, given the Jewish premises on which the whole argument is based and the intimate familiarity with Jewish rituals and customs that is assumed throughout.<sup>11</sup> Others have suggested that they had been influenced by the Essenes, the Jewish sect that produced the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran, which is possible but not provable.<sup>12</sup> Although they had been Christian for some years (10:32), they had not yet come to the maturity that could be expected; they needed “milk, [and] not solid food” (5:12–14). However, they were generous and hospitable (6:10). In the past they had experienced severe persecution (10:32–34), but not to the point of martyrdom (12:4). Most significantly for the author, they had become slack in their Christian commitment and were in danger of falling away from Christ (2:1; 3:12; 4:11; 10:35; 13:9). They seem to have been tempted to revert to the Old Testament way of relating to God, centered on the temple sacrifices.

As for the location of the community, the two best possibilities are Jerusalem or Rome. Other proposals include Alexandria, Caesarea, Antioch, Ephesus, and Colossae.

### *Jerusalem?*

Some scholars have focused on Jerusalem or another locale in Palestine as the most likely place to find the deep attachment to the Jewish sacrificial rites that Hebrews presumes. It is also the most likely site for a fully Jewish church, rather than the mixed Jewish-Gentile churches that Paul had founded throughout the empire.

On the other hand, it is hard to imagine how a Hellenist like the author of Hebrews could write to the mother church at Jerusalem with as much authority

11. See Bruce, *Hebrews*, 5–6.

12. *Ibid.*, 7–8.



Fig. 1. Possible locations of the community addressed in Hebrews

as he does (see 5:12; 13:17). It is even harder to see why he would write in Greek.<sup>13</sup> Besides, the Jerusalem church did in fact have members who had “resisted to the point of shedding blood” (12:4): namely, Stephen and James (Acts 7:58–60; 12:2). Even several decades after Jesus’ ascension, it also surely had members who had heard the gospel from the Lord in person and not only through the testimony of others (see 2:3). Finally, Hebrews assumes knowledge of the sacrificial rites but not firsthand familiarity with the temple (in contrast, for instance, to Stephen’s speech in Acts 7); it says much about the wilderness tabernacle but never actually mentions the temple.

### *Rome?*

The majority of scholars locate the community in Rome or elsewhere in Italy. This would make good sense of the note at the end of the letter: “Those from Italy send you greetings” (13:24). This note could mean the author is writing *from* Italy, but more naturally it means he is writing *to* Italy from some other place where there are Italian Christians who want to greet their compatriots. The earliest known quotation from Hebrews appears in the letter known as

13. The letter seems to be addressed to a Greek-speaking church, but according to Acts 6, Hebrews and Hellenists were closely intermingled in the Jerusalem church.



*1 Clement*, which comes from Rome. The Roman church did experience horrific persecution under Emperor Nero in AD 64. However, the remark that “you have not yet resisted to the shedding of blood” would hardly fit those who had lived through that bloodbath; thus it is likely that *Hebrews* was written to Rome only if it was written prior to AD 64. The “great contest of suffering” (10:32) could then refer to bitter opposition from fellow Jews or to the expulsion of Jews from Rome by Emperor Claudius in AD 49 (see Acts 18:2), which may have been due to inter-Jewish strife over the spread of Christianity.<sup>14</sup>

On the other hand, the Roman church was a mixed Jewish-Gentile community, whereas *Hebrews* seems to be addressed to a purely Jewish church. It is possible, however, that there was a smaller Jewish Christian community at Rome, perhaps founded by the “travelers from Rome” who were among the crowd when the Spirit descended at Pentecost, who heard Peter’s speech and were baptized (Acts 2:10, 41). In the end, Rome remains the best hypothesis but far from proven.

## Date

Some scholars hold that *Hebrews* was written in the 80s or 90s, but the evidence better fits a date before the calamity of AD 70, when Roman armies utterly demolished Jerusalem and killed or enslaved hundreds of thousands of Jews. In several places the author writes of the “levitical priestly ministry as if it were still going on: “Every priest stands daily at his ministry, offering frequently those same sacrifices that can never take away sins” (10:11; see 9:6–9; 10:1–3). It is possible that this is a “literary present tense” to make the Old Testament more vivid.<sup>15</sup> However, the whole argument of *Hebrews* “is better adapted to the state of mind which would exist before, rather than after, the overthrow of Jewish national hopes and expectations in the terrible catastrophe of 70 AD.”<sup>16</sup> Moreover, the author writes that the old covenant is close to disappearing but has not yet vanished away (8:13), wording that would make less sense after AD 70.

If the Rome hypothesis is correct, then the letter was almost certainly written between the expulsion of Jews in AD 49 and the persecution under Nero in AD 64. Since the author speaks of their former sufferings as long past (10:32), a

14. The second-century Roman historian Suetonius wrote that the expulsion was due to “disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus” (*Life of Claudius* 25). “Chrestus” is probably a misspelling of “Christus,” the Latin name for Christ.

15. Clement of Rome and Justin Martyr, for instance, wrote in the present tense of temple activities long after the temple was gone.

16. Milligan, *Hebrews*, 51.

date closer to the latter is more likely. In the early to mid-60s it would not have required any special foresight to see further persecution looming on the horizon. It is also likely that the author knew of Jesus' prophecy of the destruction of the temple (Matt 24:1–2; Mark 13:1–2; Luke 19:44). Perhaps he even took note of the approaching fortieth year since the Lord's passion around AD 30 and saw a spiritual connection between that time period and the Israelites' forty years of testing in the wilderness (3:10, 17; see comments on 3:9–10).

## Literary Form and Features

Hebrews is clearly a composition intended for oral delivery.<sup>17</sup> The author himself calls it a “word of exhortation” (13:22 NRSV)—the same term used for a synagogue sermon by Paul in Acts 13:15.<sup>18</sup> Hebrews nearly always uses verbs for speaking and hearing rather than writing: “About this we have much to say . . . you have become sluggish in hearing” (5:11); “What more shall I say?” (11:32; see 6:9; 8:1). The preacher alternates between doctrine and moral exhortation in a way masterfully designed to hold listeners' attention and drives his points home with colorful metaphors and word pictures. His intention may have been that the letter be read aloud by a skilled orator in the church to which it was sent. The homily would have taken about forty-five minutes to deliver orally.

Besides containing the finest Greek in the entire Bible,<sup>19</sup> Hebrews has the richest vocabulary—1,038 different words, of which 154 are not found elsewhere in the New Testament and 10 are not found anywhere in prior Greek literature.<sup>20</sup> Hebrews also employs an impressive array of literary devices, most of which are, unfortunately, invisible to those reading it in translation. An incomplete list includes alliteration (repeating initial letters: 1:1; 4:16; 11:17), assonance (repeating vowel sounds for near-rhymes: 5:8; 6:20), anaphora (repeating a word in successive sentences: chapter 11), antithesis (contrasting opposites: 7:23–24), <sup>†</sup>chiasm (repeating elements in reverse sequence: 2:18; 13:4), paronomasia (wordplay: 5:8; 7:9; 9:16), litotes (understatement using a double negative: 6:10; 11:16), and rhetorical questions (1:5, 13–14; 2:2–3).<sup>21</sup>

17. This commentary will, accordingly, refer to “the author” and “the preacher” interchangeably.

18. The Greek phrase is the same in both passages (*logos tēs paraklēseōs*), but the NAB translates it as “message of encouragement” in Heb 13:22.

19. See Ben Witherington III, *Letters and Homilies for Jewish Christians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on Hebrews, James and Jude* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007), 39.

20. Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 12–13.

21. See Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, ed. Helmut Koester, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 20–21; Johnson, *Hebrews*, 8.

# Structure

There is little agreement on the overall structure of Hebrews; in fact, there are almost as many proposed outlines as there are commentators.<sup>22</sup> Because ancient Greek writing did not include section headings, chapter or verse numbers, or even punctuation, it is often very difficult to decide where one section ends and another begins. In fact, it is a mistake to divide sections too sharply, since our author often uses a bridge passage to serve as both the conclusion of one section and the beginning of another. Moreover, he does not develop his argument in the way we are used to, proceeding in orderly steps from A to B to C. His logic is, rather, spiral. He returns to the same themes again and again, each time with a slightly different emphasis and at a deeper level. For instance, he first introduces the revolutionary idea that Jesus is a high priest at 2:17–3:1, then returns to it at 4:14–16 and again at 5:10, and finally develops it in depth in chapters 7–10. And he continually alternates theological discourse with practical exhortations that remind readers how doctrine must be applied to life.

Like every early Christian homily, Hebrews is essentially a work of biblical interpretation. Passages from the Old Testament are the pillars on which the author builds his whole argument concerning the glorious majesty and atoning work of Christ. Seven primary reflections on biblical passages (interwoven with other quotations or allusions that amplify their meaning) provide the basic structure:<sup>23</sup>

|             |   |   |
|-------------|---|---|
| Heb 1:5–2:4 | “You are my son. . . . Sit at my right hand”      | A chain of passages framed by Ps 2:7 and Ps 110:1 |
| Heb 2:5–18  | “What is man that you are mindful of him . . . ?” | Ps 8:4–6  |
| Heb 3–4     | “Oh, that today you would hear his voice”         | Ps 95:7–11  |
| Heb 5–7     | “You are a priest forever”                        | Ps 110:4  |
| Heb 8–10    | “I will conclude a new covenant”                  | Jer 31:31–34                                      |
| Heb 11      | “My just one shall live by faith” (Heb 10:38)     | Hab 2:2–4   |
| Heb 12–13   | “Do not lose heart when reproved by him”          | Prov 3:11   |

All but the last three of these passages are from the Psalms. For Hebrews, the Psalms are pivotal in God’s unfolding revelation: originating in the time

22. Johnson (*Hebrews*, 11–15) describes three general approaches to outlining Hebrews: the topical approach, which merely lists topics in order; the ‘chiastic approach (exemplified by Albert Vanhoye), which views the composition as forming concentric circles around a central point; and the rhetorical approach (taken by Johnson), which views Hebrews as an argument structured according to the rules of classical rhetoric.

23. This structure is adapted in part from William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, Word Biblical Commentary 47A (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1991), cxiv–cxv, based on a paper by J. Walters; and Richard N. Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 156. For a more detailed outline, see “Outline of Hebrews,” which follows this introduction.

of David, they both hint at the incompleteness of what God had done earlier through Moses and point forward to God's ultimate purposes in Christ.

## Theological Themes

As a theologian the author of Hebrews is remarkably original and bold. Whereas for other New Testament authors the primary biblical prototype for our salvation is the exodus (the source of key themes like redemption, ransom, deliverance from slavery into freedom, lamb of God), Hebrews views salvation from the perspective of the Jewish solemnity of <sup>†</sup>Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, when the high priest would enter into the <sup>†</sup>Holy of Holies, making <sup>†</sup>atonement for sins by sprinkling the blood of a sacrificed bull and goat. Whereas other New Testament writings speak of Jesus as Messiah-King (like David and Solomon of old), a redeemer and lawgiver (like Moses), and the founder of a new humanity (like Adam),<sup>24</sup> Hebrews speaks of Jesus as the *high priest* (like Aaron) who offers <sup>†</sup>sacrifice to God to expiate the sins of the people.

Brief as it is, this homily-within-a-letter has made an incalculable contribution to the Christian understanding of Jesus, his <sup>†</sup>paschal mystery, and the Church. The major themes developed in Hebrews can be summarized under the following headings.

### *Jesus Our High Priest*

Among the New Testament books, Hebrews is unique in calling Christ a priest.<sup>25</sup> It is not hard to see why no other New Testament author uses this term for Christ. In a Jewish context, “priest” meant something very specific: a descendant of Aaron who offered animal sacrifices in the Jerusalem temple in accord with the Mosaic law. Obviously, Jesus fit none of those characteristics. In a Gentile context, “priest” denoted pagan priests who sacrificed to idols, even further removed from Jesus' identity and role. But through an inspired interpretation of Psalm 110, Hebrews shows how Christ is indeed high priest in a way that fulfills and infinitely surpasses the <sup>†</sup>levitical priesthood. He ministers not in the earthly temple but in God's heavenly sanctuary (8:1–2). He is the priest who uniquely offers *himself* in sacrifice—both the offerer and the offering, priest and victim. Because he perfectly fulfilled God's will and was raised up to indestructible life, his sacrifice never needs to be repeated (7:16;

24. See, for instance, Matt 27:37; John 1:41, 49; Gal 4:5; Titus 2:14; Rom 5:14; 1 Cor 15:45.

25. The Greek term is *hiereus*, used in the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew *kohen*.

9:12; 10:10). It is the single, once-for-all sacrifice that cleanses God's people of sin and makes us worthy to be in his presence forever.

### *Solidarity with Sinners*

Hebrews exalts the divinity of Christ in the highest terms possible.<sup>26</sup> He is the eternal Son through whom God created the universe, the radiance of God's glory, the heir of all things who sustains the whole universe in being (1:2–3), the divine king whose throne stands forever (1:8). Yet at the same time Hebrews emphasizes Christ's radical solidarity with those he came to save. He “had to become like his brothers in every way, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest” (2:17). He shared our human frailty, though without sin: he experienced temptation (2:18; 4:15), suffering with cries and tears (5:7–8), insult (11:26), and death (2:9). Hebrews even makes the extraordinary statement that the eternal Son “learned obedience from what he suffered” (5:8). Jesus is able to be a high priest full of *com-passion* because he has literally *suffered with* us. He comes to our side in times of trial as one who knows our human experience from within.

Because of his identity as both God and man, Jesus alone is qualified to be a priest in the fullest sense: he is the perfect mediator, able to represent God to man and man to God. He is therefore the mediator of the new and everlasting <sup>†</sup>covenant (8:8–13), which overcomes the failures of the former covenant and gives God's people access to all the blessings promised by God.

### *The Power of Christ's Death*

At the heart of the message of Hebrews is the explosive power that flows from the event at the center of all history: Jesus' self-offering on the cross. Hebrews conveys this central truth through a multipronged contrast with the Jewish sacrificial rites. Because those former rites deal only with ritual purification, they “cannot perfect the worshiper in conscience but only in matters of food and drink and various ritual washings” (9:9–10). The fact that the priests continued to perform these rites year after year (9:6) showed that they had no lasting effect. The history of Israel only confirmed that animal sacrifices were powerless to overcome the evil that perpetually rises up within the human heart (10:4).

Jesus, in contrast, offered not a helpless animal but *himself* (9:14), his own life freely laid down in obedience to God—a gift of infinitely greater value than

26. New Testament texts comparable to Heb 1 are the prologue of the Gospel of John (1:1–18) and the Christ hymn of Col 1:15–20 (see also Eph 1:20–23; Phil 2:6–11).

animal sacrifices. Through his agonizing passion and death, he offered the Father the limitless love, trust, and obedience that God deserved but had never received from humanity (10:6–7). In passing through death to divine glory, his human nature was “perfected”—transformed by divine life—and so also the human nature of the “many children” whom he is bringing to glory (2:10; 7:28; 10:14).

Hebrews affirms that by Christ’s passion those who share in him have been changed from within (10:22), radically and permanently. This means that the Christian life does not consist in acquiring a holiness we do not have, but rather in appropriating and more deeply living the holiness we have already been given (10:10). So we are invited to a relationship with God that is filled with confident hope and free from the burden of guilt and sin. Our whole life is qualified to be a priestly life, in which all our actions and sufferings are offered as “a sacrifice of praise” that is pleasing to God (13:15–16).

### *Old and New*

For Hebrews, as for the early Church in general, the deepest meaning of the Old Testament is found in Christ. Not only the prophecies but also the laws, rituals, prayers, persons, saving events, and eschatological hopes of Israel all point forward to the glorious culmination of God’s plan in Christ. This is not a matter of ignoring the literal sense of the text but of going beyond it to the ultimate intention of the divine Author. The old covenant with its great institutions of Torah and temple was a marvelous gift from God. But now in the radiant light of Christ all that belongs to the former age is seen as preparatory and provisional, an anticipation pointing forward to the full consummation.

Hebrews expresses the relation between the old and new by proclaiming in a myriad of ways that what we possess in Christ is “greater” or “more” than what came before. Jesus is worthy of more glory than Moses (3:3); he passed through a greater tabernacle (9:11); his blood speaks more eloquently than that of Abel and purifies us much more than the blood of goats and bulls (9:13–14; 12:24). We have better things related to salvation (6:9), a better covenant enacted on better promises (7:22; 8:6), a better hope, sanctuary, homeland, and resurrection (7:19; 9:24; 11:16, 35).

To say all this is not to break with the Old Testament, since as Hebrews points out, the Old Testament itself asserts its own incomplete status and foretells something better.<sup>27</sup> If Joshua had given the Israelites rest, God would not

27. See James Thompson, “The New Is Better: A Neglected Aspect of the Hermeneutics of Hebrews,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 73 (2011): 547–61.

have spoken afterward of another rest (4:8). If perfection had come through the levitical priesthood, Scripture would not have foretold another priest (7:11). If the first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no promise of a second (8:7). Before Christ came, Israel's history was something of an unfinished puzzle, an unsolved conundrum. Now, in Christ, God has fully revealed his purposes, and all history can be recognized as one great plan of salvation.

Hebrews' way of reading the Old Testament is known as <sup>†</sup>typological interpretation: the former things are understood as <sup>†</sup>types, or prototypes, that foreshadow Christ and the realities of the new covenant. This approach, which is common to all the New Testament authors, is sometimes compared with that of Philo of Alexandria, a near contemporary. But there is a radical difference between the two. Whereas Philo sees biblical characters and events as allegories representing timeless, abstract ideas, Hebrews sees them as part of a divine plan in which God's earlier deeds foreshadow his greater acts in the fullness of time.<sup>28</sup> For Hebrews, the old covenant types point both *forward* in time to Christ and *upward* to transcendent divine realities. A good illustration of the difference is the way Philo and Hebrews interpret the priest Melchizedek (see Gen 14:18–20). For Philo, Melchizedek represents Reason, an abstract ideal.<sup>29</sup> For Hebrews, Melchizedek prefigures Jesus Christ, the great high priest who has entered into God's true sanctuary in heaven.

### *The Pilgrim Church*

Hebrews provides unique insights into the Church, especially around the theme of pilgrimage. A pilgrim is someone on a journey toward a sacred place. Although Hebrews never uses the word "pilgrim," it powerfully conveys a vision of God's people as pilgrims traveling toward the holy city, the heavenly Jerusalem.<sup>30</sup> In chapters 3–4 Hebrews invites Christians to identify with the Israelites journeying through the desert toward the promised land. It constantly portrays the Christian life as dynamic, a life in movement. We are to approach the throne of grace (4:16; 10:22), persevere in running the race (12:1), make straight paths (12:13), come to Mount Zion (12:22), and go to Jesus (13:13). And we are warned not to drift away (2:1), fall away (3:12), be carried away (13:9), or be weary or lame (12:12–13). The key qualities that are needed for such a journey are *faith* and *endurance*, to which we are exhorted throughout

28. Bruce, *Hebrews*, 27–28; Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis*, 153–55.

29. Philo, *Allegorical Interpretation* 3.82.

30. See Johnson, *Hebrews*, 9.

the letter but especially in chapters 11–12. Hebrews is thus a primary source of a theme that is prominent in the documents of Vatican Council II, especially *Lumen Gentium*: the Church as a pilgrim people, always in movement, having not yet arrived at our heavenly destination.<sup>31</sup>

### *Drawing Near to God*

Among the many exhortations in Hebrews, two verbs stand out: *draw near* (or approach, 4:16; 7:25; 10:22; 11:6) and *enter in* to God's presence (4:11; 6:19–20; see 10:19). These terms may not convey much to us, but for Jews steeped in Scripture they were extraordinary. The Old Testament emphasizes the radical inability of sinful human beings to draw near and enter God's holy presence. Ever since the fall, when Adam and Eve were banished from the garden where they had walked with God (Gen 3:23), sin had remained a barrier that blocked access to God (see Isa 59:2). Through Abraham, and later Moses, God initiated a relationship with his people and made his dwelling place in their midst. Yet part of the role of priests and Levites who ministered at the <sup>†</sup>sanctuary was to insure that the Israelites *not* draw too near to God (Exod 19:12; Num 1:51–53). Only the high priest would dare enter into God's presence, and he only once a year. Yet Israel's worship instilled a deep longing for God's presence, as the Psalms attest: "My soul yearns and pines / for the courts of the LORD. / My heart and flesh cry out / for the living God" (Ps 84:3; see also Ps 27:4). In light of this background, the appeals of Hebrews take on new significance. Jesus has overcome the barrier between God and man, not by diminishing the holiness of God but by removing sin from sinners. This is why we are invited to draw near with the confidence of children approaching their heavenly Father, knowing we have been totally cleansed by the blood of Jesus and may ask for whatever we need (4:16; 10:19).

### Hebrews for Today

Hebrews was written to a community of Christians who were struggling. They had had times of fervor in the past but had become discouraged in the midst of a hostile culture with the threat of further persecution. Some had stopped regularly attending the <sup>†</sup>liturgy, and some were even tempted to abandon the faith. As readers will recognize, this situation is not unlike that of the Church in the Western world today. In such times, the message of Hebrews is both

31. See sections 7, 21, 48–50.



bracing and encouraging. Hold fast to your faith in Christ! Do not throw away your confidence; it will have great reward (3:6, 14; 10:35). Do not be among those who draw back and perish (10:39). Do not grow weary, but keep your eyes fixed on Jesus, the leader and perfecter of faith (12:1–2).

More than any other book of the New Testament, Hebrews makes us aware of the unlimited efficacy of Christ's death on the cross, the once-for-all sacrifice that is continually made present to us anew in the Eucharist (13:10). In that act of love, Jesus reversed the whole history of human sin and rebellion against God. He destroyed the power of the devil and freed "those who through fear of death had been subject to slavery all their life" (2:14–15). He sanctified and "made perfect forever" those who believe in him (10:10, 14), opened the "new and living way" for us to enter into God's presence (10:20), and made us heirs of an "unshakable kingdom" (12:28). He equipped us with everything we need to do what is pleasing to God (13:21). To read and study Hebrews prayerfully is to have one's life transformed by entering into the reality of these gifts that are already ours. We are then strengthened to respond in the exemplary way that Hebrews sums up in 10:19–25: draw near to God with a sincere heart and absolute trust, hold unwaveringly to our confession in Christ, rouse one another to love and good works, participate in the liturgy and Christian fellowship, and encourage one another as the day of the Lord draws near.

# Outline of Hebrews

Prologue: God has spoken to us through the Son (1:1–4)

- I. “You are my son. . . . Sit at my right hand” (1:5–2:4)
  - A. The Son’s superiority to the angels (1:5–14)
  - B. Exhortation to pay heed (2:1–4)
- II. “What is man that you are mindful of him?” (2:5–18)
  - A. The Son’s self-abasement lower than the angels (2:5–9)
  - B. The Son’s solidarity with weak humanity (2:10–18)
- III. “Oh, that today you would hear his voice” (3:1–4:13)
  - A. Warning not to harden your hearts (3:1–19)
  - B. Exhortation to enter God’s rest (4:1–11)
  - C. God’s living and effective word (4:12–13)
- IV. “You are a priest forever” (4:14–7:28)
  - A. Jesus the compassionate high priest (4:14–16)
  - B. Jesus appointed to the order of Melchizedek (5:1–10)
  - C. Exhortation to grow to maturity (5:11–6:12)
  - D. Exhortation to trust God’s unchangeable promise and oath (6:13–20)
  - E. Melchizedek superior to Levi (7:1–10)
  - F. Jesus the high priest forever (7:11–28)
- V. “I will conclude a new covenant” (8:1–10:18)
  - A. The earthly tabernacle and the true tabernacle in heaven (8:1–6)
  - B. The failed old covenant and the promise of the new (8:7–13)
  - C. The powerless rites of the old covenant and tabernacle (9:1–10)
  - D. The power of Christ’s blood (9:11–14)
  - E. The covenant renewed and fulfilled (9:15–22)

- F. Christ's all-sufficient sacrifice in the true tabernacle (9:23–28)
- G. Christ's perfect fulfillment of God's will (10:1–10)
- H. Christ's followers made perfect forever (10:11–18)
- VI. "My just one shall live by faith" (10:19–11:40)
  - A. Exhortation to confidence, faith, and fervor (10:19–25)
  - B. Warning not to fall away (10:26–31)
  - C. Exhortation to endurance (10:32–39)
  - D. Old covenant heroes who lived by faith (11:1–40)
- VII. "Do not lose heart" (12:1–13:21)
  - A. Exhortation to endurance (12:1–13)
  - B. Warning not to be unfaithful to the grace of God (12:14–29)
  - C. Exhortation to offer sacrifices pleasing to God (13:1–19)
  - D. Blessing (13:20–21)
- Epistolary ending (13:22–25)

# God's Final Word

## Hebrews 1:1–4

Hebrews opens with a magnificent prologue (1:1–4) that elegantly sums up the key themes of the homily. In Greek the prologue is a single long sentence, containing some of the most refined Greek in the New Testament. It sets forth the plan of God in two stages: the past, in which God spoke to his people Israel in partial and piecemeal ways; and the present, in which he has spoken his final and definitive word through his Son. The Son is the center of the whole plan of salvation, the key that unlocks the meaning of all that God has done until now. In seven phrases the prologue describes the Son's divine majesty, his work of redemption, and his glorious exaltation. But surprisingly, he is not named. Every Christian reader of Hebrews knows well who is being described, but we have to wait until 2:9 for the first mention of his name, Jesus.

The prologue hints at three exalted roles of the Son that will be further explained in the letter. First, he is the *prophet* surpassing all other prophets, through whom God speaks his final and definitive word (v. 2). Second, he is a *priest* in that he accomplished the priestly ministry of cleansing God's people from sins (v. 3). Finally, he is *king* in that he takes up his throne at God's right hand, the place of highest royal authority (v. 3).<sup>1</sup> These prerogatives show that the Son is infinitely superior to the angels, the highest-ranking creatures (v. 4). For readers today who have inherited two millennia of Christian teaching, it

1. For an exposition of the inner unity of Christ's role as priest and king and his identity as firstborn Son in Hebrews, see Scott Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant: A Canonical Approach to the Fulfillment of God's Promises*, Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 278–79.

is easy to overlook how astounding these statements are. Hebrews is speaking of Jesus of Nazareth, a Jewish rabbi from Galilee who had suffered a Roman criminal execution only a few decades before—and it ascribes to him a role in the creation of the universe!<sup>2</sup>

## God Has Spoken through His Son (1:1–4)

<sup>1</sup>In times past, God spoke in partial and various ways to our ancestors through the prophets; <sup>2</sup>in these last days, he spoke to us through a son, whom he made heir of all things and through whom he created the universe,

<sup>3</sup>who is the refulgence of his glory,  
the very imprint of his being,  
and who sustains all things by his mighty word.  
When he had accomplished purification from sins,  
he took his seat at the right hand of the Majesty on high,  
<sup>4</sup>as far superior to the angels  
as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

OT: Ps 2:8; 110:1

NT: Matt 22:44; John 1:3; 2 Cor 4:4; Eph 1:20–21; Phil 2:9; Col 1:15–16

Catechism: God's one single word, 65–66, 101–4, 241; Jesus at God's right hand, 659–67

Lectionary: 1:1–6: Christmas Mass during the Day

1:1 The prologue begins with a dramatic claim: all God's **past** revelation, and indeed all history, have come to their culmination. History is now divided in two: the former age, in which **God spoke** in fragmentary and varied ways (the old <sup>†</sup>covenant), and the final time, in which he has spoken once and for all in his Son (the new covenant). In drawing this contrast, Hebrews affirms two truths that will be foundational for the whole letter. First, God's revelation of himself to his people Israel was a wonderful and unique privilege. The very fact that God, the creator of the universe, took the initiative to speak with human beings evokes awe and gratitude. But second, what God has now done in Christ infinitely surpasses what he had done before. All his previous revelation was a preliminary stage in the plan, marvelous in itself but imperfect, like a series of Rembrandt sketches that depict the subject in rough outline, only as preparation for the magnificent full-color painting.

2. Luke Timothy Johnson, *Hebrews: A Commentary*, New Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 68.

The theme of God *speaking* will run like a thread through Hebrews. When introducing biblical quotations, instead of saying “it is written,” Hebrews will invariably use phrases like “God says” or “he has promised.”<sup>3</sup> Scripture is not confined to the dusty pages of ancient manuscripts; it is a living and active word through which God continues to speak, addressing his people personally here and now (see 3:7; 4:12).

The Greek word for **ancestors** is literally “fathers,” referring to both the patriarchs of Israel and all generations of Israelite men and women, whom not only Jews but also Gentile Christians can count as their spiritual ancestors (see 1 Cor 10:1). By using this familial term, Hebrews introduces the theme of the family of God into which all believers are welcomed (see 2:11–12, 17; 12:7–9). “Our fathers” also reaffirms the continuity between the old covenant and the new: it is the same God who speaks, and the same people of God, Israel and now the Church, who are addressed by him.

Throughout salvation history God revealed himself **through the prophets**, including Abraham, Moses, and the writing prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah. But this revelation was given **in partial and various ways**. It came in a variety of forms—through oracles, dreams, visions, prophetic gestures, signs, and miracles. Each prophet had certain unique insights into God’s character and plan. Hosea, for instance, understood God’s spousal love for his people; Isaiah had a profound awareness of God’s holiness; Jeremiah foresaw the new covenant that God would establish.<sup>4</sup> But each prophet’s knowledge was incomplete; each grasped only a part of divine revelation. The Son, in contrast, *is* that revelation in its fullness. The superiority of Christ does not diminish esteem for the former covenant; in fact, it enhances it, because now we see how carefully and patiently God had been preparing his people for his final gift.

The author calls the times in which he is writing **these last days**. This does 1:2 not mean that he mistakenly thought the world was about to end and Jesus would come in glory within a few short days or years. Rather, he is drawing on the biblical theme of the “last days” (Isa 2:2; Hosea 3:5; Dan 10:14)—the time when God would decisively intervene in history to restore the fortunes of his people and bring his plan to completion. Hebrews, like the rest of the New Testament, proclaims that with the coming of Christ the last days have arrived—the final stage of salvation history, in which all God’s promises find their fulfillment.

3. See, for instance, 1:5, 6; 2:12; 3:15; 4:3; 5:5; 6:13–14; 8:8; 10:15; 12:26.

4. See William Barclay, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, rev. ed., Daily Study Bible Series (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), 13.

That Christ is **a son** places him in an entirely different category from the prophets, who were God's servants and messengers.<sup>5</sup> Hebrews wants to ensure that "son of God" is understood in the highest theological sense, since the term could mean various things in a biblical context. In the Old Testament the people of Israel collectively were designated God's son, or God's children (Exod 4:22; Deut 14:1; Hosea 11:1). The king of Israel was understood to be God's son by adoption (2 Sam 7:12–14; Ps 89:27–28). And the angels, members of the heavenly court, were called "sons of God" (Job 1:6; Ps 29:1; 89:7). But Christ's sonship is utterly unique, and Hebrews will now show how this is so in seven clauses, each spelling out a distinct aspect of the Son's nature and work.<sup>6</sup>

The first clause asserts that the Son has been **made** (or "appointed," RSV) **heir of all things**. In the ancient world as now, being a son is equivalent to being an heir (see Gal 4:7); sons could expect to inherit a share of their father's property. This phrase echoes a promise made in Psalm 2, a royal psalm that together with Psalm 110 will play a key role throughout the letter. In Psalm 2:8 God says to the king descended from David, "Ask it of me, / and I will give you the nations as your inheritance, / and, as your possession, the ends of the earth." This promise comes right after the declaration that the king is God's son (Ps 2:7). Hebrews proclaims that the promise is now superabundantly fulfilled in Jesus, who has inherited not just an earthly territory but the entire created universe. As will later become clear, Christ's followers will share in his inheritance (6:12; 9:15; see Rom 8:17), participating in his kingly rule over all creation (see Matt 25:34).

When did the Son receive this inheritance? Although the author does not say explicitly, he is probably referring to Jesus' resurrection and ascension to the Father's right hand (see v. 3). The risen Jesus has, in his humanity, been exalted as Lord over all (see Phil 2:9–11).

The second clause moves backward in time, from the end to the beginning: through him God **created the universe** (literally, "the ages"). The Son is the Omega, the heir of all things at the end, because he is the Alpha, the one through whom all things were created in the beginning.<sup>7</sup> This statement echoes Old Testament texts that depict God's Wisdom as present with him in the beginning and playing a role in the creation of all things (Prov 8:22–31; Wis 8:3–6; Sir 24:1–12). The early Church identified God's Wisdom as the preexistent Christ:

5. A similar contrast between prophets (servants) and the Son is made by Jesus in the parable of the wicked tenants (Mark 12:2–6).

6. See John P. Meier, *The Mission of Christ and His Church: Studies in Christology and Ecclesiology*, Good News Studies 30 (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1990), 75.

7. See *ibid.*, 80.

## Christ the Brightness of God's Glory

St. Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335–c. 395), like many other Church Fathers, found the prologue of Hebrews a powerful tool for combating heresies that denied the divinity of Christ. He wrote,

As the radiance of light sheds its brilliance from the whole of the sun's disk . . . so too all the glory that the Father has is shed by means of the brightness that comes from it, that is, by [Christ] the true Light. Just as the ray is from the sun—for there would be no ray if there were no sun—so the sun does not exist by itself without the ray of brightness that is shed from it. So the apostle conveyed to us the continuity and eternity of the existence that the Only Begotten has from the Father, calling the Son "the brightness of God's glory."<sup>a</sup>

a. *Against Eunomius* 8.1 (translation adapted from ACCS 10).



"All things came to be through him, / and without him nothing came to be" (John 1:3; see 1 Cor 8:6; Col 1:16).

The third clause differs from the others in that it speaks not of Christ's work in the created realm, but of his eternal divine nature. He is the **refulgence** (or "radiance," NIV) of God's **glory** and **the very imprint of his being**. Again Hebrews is borrowing language from the book of Wisdom (see Wis 7:26). God's "glory" is the visible manifestation of his awesome majesty. During the exodus it took the form of a luminous cloud, the sign of God's presence in the midst of his people (Exod 16:10; 24:17–18). At Christ's transfiguration it was manifest in the light radiating from his face, again in the midst of a cloud (Matt 17:2–5). Hebrews affirms that the Son *is* the radiance that shines forth eternally from the inner being of God; he is God made visible.

The word for "very imprint"<sup>8</sup> in Greek is *charaktēr*, which refers to the impression that a stamp or seal makes on a soft surface. In the ancient world, coins were made by stamping hot metal with a die on which a portrait had been engraved; the coin would bear the exact impression (*charaktēr*) of the die. The Son, then, is the exact representation of the Father. To see Jesus is to see exactly what God is like (see John 14:9; Col 1:15). In the fullest sense of the term, Jesus has the "character" of his Father.

From this point on in the prologue, the Son is the subject of the verbs—actions that further establish his divine status. The fourth clause returns to

8. Other possible translations are "stamp" (RSV), "exact imprint" (NRSV), "exact representation" (NIV), "impress" (NJB), "perfect copy" (JB).



the idea of creation: the Son **sustains all things by his mighty word**. That is, he continues at every moment to uphold all things in existence; the universe is entirely dependent on him. In the biblical view, creation is not a onetime event that occurred eons ago, in which God set things in motion and then left the world to its own devices. Rather, God continues to lovingly sustain and care for what he has made. As God created all things not by exerting effort but simply by a word (Gen 1), so the Son continues to hold all things in existence by the power of his word.

The fifth clause speaks for the first time of the event that is at the heart of the Letter to the Hebrews: Jesus' <sup>†</sup>sacrifice of himself on the cross. Here the cross is mentioned only obliquely, in terms that call to mind the Old Testament rite in which the high priest would sprinkle "the blood of purification of sins" on the altar (Exod 30:10 <sup>†</sup>LXX; see also Lev 16:19). That Jesus **accomplished purification from sins** also hints at a theme that Hebrews will later develop in full: Jesus is the great high priest who alone has brought about the total, once-for-all cleansing from sin that the earthly priests could not achieve (Heb 9:13–14).<sup>9</sup>

The sixth clause describes the final stage of Christ's redemptive work: after his passion and resurrection he **took his seat at the right hand of the Majesty on high**. The mention of God's "right hand" alludes to Psalm 110, which along with Psalm 2 will recur like a refrain throughout Hebrews.<sup>10</sup> In Psalm 110:1 God assures the Davidic king that he will enjoy divine protection and victory over his enemies: "Sit at my right hand, / while I make your enemies your footstool." God's right hand is not, of course, a physical location but rather the position of highest honor and authority. Jesus, in his trial before the Sanhedrin, had announced that this psalm is fulfilled in himself: "From this time on the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God" (Luke 22:69). Hebrews will later show the significance of the fact that as high priest, Christ is *seated* rather than standing in the presence of God (10:11–14).

1:4 The prologue concludes by affirming the result of Jesus' enthronement: he has become **as far superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs**. This seventh and last clause introduces the theme of the next section of the letter (vv. 5–13): Jesus' superiority over the angels. But it raises two interpretive questions. First, how can the divine Son, the radiance of the Father's glory, *become* superior to the angels?<sup>11</sup> After all, they were created through him. Second, what is the name that he has inherited?

9. The same word "purification" (Greek *katharismos*) is often used in the Septuagint for the priestly work of atonement (Exod 29:36; 30:10) and ritual cleansing (Lev 14:32; see also Luke 2:22; 5:14).

10. Hebrews quotes or alludes to Ps 110 in 1:13; 5:6, 10; 6:20; 7:3, 11, 15, 17, 21; 8:1; 10:12.

11. The NAB omits the Greek participle "having become" (*genomenos*).

## What's in a Name?

### BIBLICAL BACKGROUND



In biblical tradition a name is not merely a label but the expression of a person's very identity—so much so that a change of name indicates a change in one's identity or destiny (Gen 17:5, 15; 32:29; Isa 62:2). God's name, then, is in a sense equivalent to God himself. The fact that God revealed his name to Israel, through Moses at the burning bush (Exod 3:15), was recognized as a marvelous privilege. It meant that God made himself accessible; he entered into a personal relationship with his people. The temple is the place where God's name—his very presence—dwelt among his people (Deut 12:11).

In 2 Samuel 7, a passage that is a backdrop for Hebrews 1, there is a play on the word "name." Through the prophet Nathan, God promised David "a great name" (v. 9 RSV), meaning lasting renown, and foretold that David's son would build "a house for my name" (v. 13)—that is, a temple in which God himself would be present. David then praised God by recounting how God had made "a name for himself" (v. 23 NRSV) through all the mighty deeds that he has done for Israel.

On one level, God's promise was fulfilled in the establishment of David's royal dynasty, beginning with his son Solomon, and Solomon's construction of the temple in Jerusalem (1 Kings 8:20; 9:3). But it is superabundantly fulfilled, according to Hebrews, in David's descendant Jesus, who at his ascension is enthroned as God's heir, inheriting God's own name and royal authority over the whole universe.

The first question will be answered in 2:7–9, which explains that by becoming man, the Son made himself "for a little while lower than the angels." In his incarnation he subjected himself to the lowliness and frailty of human nature; in his ascension to God's glory he has now been exalted *as man* over even the highest of heavenly beings.

The answer to the second question is based on the biblical mindset in which a name has great significance (see sidebar, "What's in a Name?"). A name is not merely a convenient label; it is the expression of a person's identity and role (Gen 27:36; Exod 2:10). Some scholars interpret the name Jesus has inherited as his title "Son" or "firstborn Son" (vv. 5–6). But it more likely refers to God's own divine name, <sup>†</sup>Yahweh, which he revealed to Moses at the burning bush (Exod 3:14–15; see also John 17:11–12). In the Greek Old Testament, "Yahweh" was translated as "the Lord."<sup>12</sup> Thus Hebrews is expressing in its own way the

12. Many English translations of the Old Testament put "the LORD" in small caps wherever it renders the Hebrew "YHWH."

Church's earliest summary of the good news: "Jesus Christ is Lord" (Phil 2:10–11; see Rom 10:9). As man, Christ "inherited" this divine title at his resurrection and ascension to God's right hand.

## Reflection and Application (1:1–4)

*God spoke to us in a Son.* As Christians, we are used to the idea that God has spoken—so much so that we can easily take it for granted. But the early Church never lost its amazement and wonder that the living God, the creator of heaven and earth, had stooped down to speak lovingly to his creatures. For first-century Jews, who regarded the age of the prophets as having ended four centuries previously (see 1 Macc 9:27), the Christian proclamation was all the more astonishing: God is speaking no longer through various messengers but now in the very person of his Son. As the Gospel of John expresses it, Jesus not only speaks the word of God, he *is* the Word of God (John 1:1)—the fullness of all that the Father has to say to us.

Two conclusions can be drawn from the fact that God has spoken to us in Jesus. First, because Jesus is alive, God continues to speak to us in him. As the Catechism says, "God, who spoke in the past, continues to converse with the Spouse of his beloved Son" (79, quoting *Dei Verbum* 8). He addresses both the Church as a whole and each of us personally: "In the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven meets his children with great love and speaks with them" (*Dei Verbum* 21). This may lead us to ask: How attentively do we listen to God's voice, especially as it comes to us in the Scriptures? Do we thirst for, study, reflect on, and treasure the word of God, as did the ancient Israelites (Ps 1:2–3; 19:8–12)?

Second, because God's word is divine, it has power. This is evident in the Gospels' portrayal of Jesus (see Luke 4:36). No one who encountered Jesus ever left his presence unchanged. They left no longer deaf, or leprous, or burdened with guilt, or dead; or they left conflicted (Matt 16:22), or pierced with conviction of sin (Luke 5:4–8), or fuming with rage because their hearts were hardened (Mark 3:1–6), or full of joy (Luke 19:37). If we keep this in mind as we study the Letter to the Hebrews, we will find it leading us into a life-transforming dialogue with the living God. Even when nothing seems to happen, if we are reading Scripture attentively and prayerfully, we are being changed. For "the word of God is living and effective, sharper than any two-edged sword, penetrating even between soul and spirit, joints and marrow, and able to discern reflections and thoughts of the heart" (Heb 4:12).