

I. Hebrews for Non-Jews

August 29/30/31, 2017

Hebrews chapters 1 to 13

Aim: To introduce the epistle to the Hebrews to a modern, Gentile audience.

A. Genre

Schreiner: The epistle to the Hebrews is elegantly written and structured. The quality of the writing might provoke us to think it is a literary essay, especially since the writing doesn't begin as a typical epistle by introducing the author and the recipients. Chapter 13, however, makes clear that the letter is an epistle, concluding with features (benediction, news, greetings, grace benediction) typical of letters. When we think of the warning passages that pervade the letter, calling Hebrews an essay doesn't fit. The admonitions have a practical and urgent tone that don't fit with an essay. Hebrews, then, is a sermon, an exhortation, in epistolary form. The author urgently exhorts the readers to hold fast to their faith, to persevere to the end.

Bruce: The Epistle to the Hebrews differs from most of the New Testament epistles in that, while it ends like a letter, it does not begin like one; it lacks the customary opening salutation containing the names of the writer and of the people addressed. Yet not only in the personal notes at the end but throughout its length, it is clearly addressed to a particular community in which the writer takes a special interest. It is not an epistle in the strict sense of the term. Its literary character is defined for us by the author himself: it is a 'word of exhortation,' as he puts it in 13:22. A 'word of exhortation' is a form of sermon or homily, as is made plain in Acts 13:15.

B. Author

Phillips: When we consider the authorship of Hebrews, we must first observe that the answer is not stated in the letter itself. There is no opening greeting, nor do the closing remarks identify the writer. There is, however, no shortage of candidates for this worthy honor.

Bruce: If we do not know for certain to whom the epistle was sent, neither do we know by whom it was sent. If Clement of Rome had any inkling of the author's identity, he gives us no indication of it. But we can be quite sure that he himself was not the author, although it has been suggested at various times that he was.

1. History

Phillips: Throughout church history there has been a strong impulse to name the apostle Paul as the author of Hebrews. There seem to be two main reasons for this, the first of which is that much of the letter's content sounds Pauline. Hebrews 13:23 refers to Timothy, one of Paul's protégés, and chapter 10's theme of joy amidst suffering strongly reminds us of Paul. Therefore, it is argued, the author of Hebrews must at least have been a member of the Pauline circle. The second reason to support Paul has to do with the canonicity of the book. The inclusion of Hebrews in the Bible was not without controversy, and arguments for Paul's authorship naturally strengthened its case dramatically.

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a) Eastern Church

Bruce: The Alexandrian belief that Paul was the author influenced the judgment of eastern Christianity, and ultimately, from the middle of the fourth century, of western Christianity too. Clement of Alexandria said that it was written by Paul for Hebrews in the Hebrew language, but that Luke translated it and published it for the Greeks; thus he endeavored to account for the similarity in style between Hebrews and the Lukan writings. (As for the absence of the Pauline superscription, he accounted for that by saying that ‘in writing for Hebrews who had conceived a prejudice against him and suspected him, he very prudently did not put them off at the outset by setting down his name.’)

Schreiner: The authorship of Hebrews is a fascinating issue that continues to interest Christians today. Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-215 AD) thought the letter was written by Paul in Hebrew and then translated into Greek by Luke. Origen (c. 195-253 AD) said the thoughts are Pauline but suggested someone else made short notes and wrote up what the apostle taught and said. Origen passed on the tradition that either Luke or Clement of Rome was the writer, but he remained noncommittal on the identity of the author. Origen wrote, “But who wrote the epistle, truly only God knows.” As time passed, however, the notion that Paul was the author gained credence, and by the third century Pauline authorship was accepted in the East.

Bruce: Origen, a generation later, knowing as he did Hebrew in addition to Greek, probably realized that the Greek of the epistle bore no sign of having been translated from Hebrew. Origen writes: ‘For my part, if I may state my opinion, I should say that the thoughts are the apostle’s, but that the style and composition are the work of someone who called to mind the apostle’s teaching and wrote short notes, as it were, on what his master said. If any church, then, regards this epistle as Paul’s, let it be commended on this score; for it was not for nothing that men of old have handed it down to us as Paul’s. But as to who actually wrote the epistle, God knows the truth of the matter.’

b) Western Church

Schreiner: The situation in the West was different. Tertullian (c. 155-220 AD) suggested that Barnabas was the author, which indicates there was no inclination in the early centuries in the West to ascribe the letter to Paul. Identifying the author as Barnabas is interesting since Barnabas was a Levite (Acts 4:36), which could explain the interest in and knowledge of priestly matters in Hebrews. Pauline authorship, however, finally triumphed in the West due to the influence of Jerome and Augustine. Pauline authorship reigned as the view of the church until the time of the Reformation.

Bruce: Although the Pauline authorship was resisted in the west until late in the fourth century, the only positive ascription of authorship to come down to us from the west during that period is Tertullian. He names Barnabas as the author of the epistle, not as though he were expressing a private judgment of his own, but as though this were a commonly agreed ascription in his circle.

Bruce: It was Jerome and Augustine who swayed opinion in the west toward accepting Hebrews as a Pauline epistle—not that they were convinced that it was so on grounds of literary criticism but rather because they were ‘moved’ (to quote Augustine) ‘by the prestige of the eastern churches which include this epistle too among the canonical writings.’ From then on the Pauline ascription became traditional in the west as in the east, although commentators of critical judgment continued to speak of Clement of Rome or Luke as translator or editor of the epistle.

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Thus Thomas Aquinas says that ‘Luke, who was an excellent advocate (*prolocutor*) translated it from Hebrew into that elegant Greek.’

c) Reformation

Schreiner: Luther rejected Pauline authorship, believing that 2:3 proves the book could not have come from Paul. Luther had a novel but brilliant guess regarding authorship, proposing that the book was written by Apollos. Hebrews is beautifully written and has an Alexandrian feel, fitting with Apollos’s eloquence and Alexandrian roots (Acts 18:24). Calvin also agreed that Paul wasn’t the writer based on 2:3, suggesting that either Luke or Clement of Rome penned the letter.

Bruce: But with the reopening of traditional questions in the age of the Reformation, fresh attention was directed to the authorship of Hebrews. Erasmus regarded the style of the epistle as excluding Pauline authorship, although he conceded it was inspired by the mind of Paul. Calvin thought of Luke or Clement of Rome as the author, not merely translator or editor; while Luther was apparently the first to make the brilliant guess that the author was Apollos—a guess which has commended itself to many since his day. The Alexandrian characteristics of the thought, style, and vocabulary of the epistle have been thought to speak in favor of Apollos’s authorship.

Bruce: Among other attempts, mention should certainly be made of the argument that the epistle was written by Priscilla and Aquila, with Priscilla as the dominant partner. Their quality as teachers is attested by the instruction which they gave to Apollos; they were closely associated with Timothy; they were host and hostess to a house church in Rome (if the salutations in Rom. 16:3-16) are intended for Rome); the transition back and forth between ‘we’ and ‘I’ would be suitable for a married couple; the disappearance of the author’s name from the memory of the church could be explained by an antifeminist tendency.

Phillips: With Paul ruled out, other candidates are drawn from his circle and include Luke, Silas, and Priscilla. Most persuasive are the arguments in favor of Barnabas and Apollos. Hebrews 13:22 describes the letter as a ‘word of exhortation.’ And Barnabas’ name means ‘son of exhortation.’ Not only was Barnabas a close associate of Paul, but as a Levite he would likely have had the kind of interest in the Jewish priesthood that shows up in Hebrews. An even more intriguing suggestion was made by Martin Luther in favor of Paul’s sometime associate Apollos. Acts 18:24 identifies him as ‘an eloquent man, competent in the Scriptures,’ which qualifies him to write such an extraordinary epistle. Furthermore, Apollos hailed from Alexandria, and Hebrews shows an interest in theological themes known to have been popular there.

2. Not Paul

Bruce: A case can be made out for several of the suggested names because they have left no other writings by which we could judge whether Hebrews is written in their style or not. Paul is in the opposite case; it is because we have other indubitable writings from his pen that we can say confidently with Calvin: ‘The manner of teaching and the style sufficiently show that Paul was not the author, and the writer himself confesses in the second chapter that he was one of the disciples of the apostles, which is wholly different from the way in which Paul spoke of himself.’ What Paul and the author of Hebrews have in common is the basic apostolic teaching; but when we come to distinctive features we may say with certainty that the thought of the epistle is not Paul’s, the language is not Paul’s, and the technique of Old Testament quotation is not Paul’s. In brief, ‘I can adduce no reason to show that Paul was its author.’ So Calvin wisely sums up.

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Schreiner: Pauline authorship should be rejected despite the attempts, both ancient and modern, to mount a defense. First, in Paul's 13 letters he identifies himself by name, thus the absence of a name in Hebrews renders it doubtful that Paul wrote the letter. Second, the polished Greek style of Hebrews doesn't accord with what we find in the Pauline letters. Third, the writer separates himself from the original eyewitnesses in 2:3. Paul, by way of contrast, emphasizes repeatedly his authority as an apostle of Jesus Christ and refuses to put himself in a subordinate position to the apostles and eyewitnesses. This last reason, in particular, rules out the notion that Paul was the author.

Phillips: There are many indications that Paul almost certainly did not write Hebrews. First, in all of Paul's other letters he identifies himself, blatantly asserting his apostolic authority. The write of Hebrews does not identify himself, although some speculate that because of Jewish hostility Paul may have wanted to remain anonymous. More telling is the nature of the Greek in Hebrews, which is of a high literary style in contrast to Paul's more common Greek. The structure of Hebrews, with its interspersed exhortations, contrasts with Paul's tendency to save practical applications for the letter's end. Most conclusive is the statement of 2:3, which says the author's message 'was attested to us by those who had heard.' In other words, the writer received his message from those who heard it firsthand from Jesus. This is the very thing Paul always denies in his letters, insisting that he received his revelation directly from the Lord and not from the other apostles (see Gal. 1:12).

3. God Knows

Schreiner: Lukan authorship is possible. The linguistic evidence is not decisive, and the differences between Hebrews and Acts call into question Lukan authorship. Barnabas is an attractive choice since he was a Levite. And the book has an interest in all things Levitical. Similarly, Luther's guess that the author was Apollos is appealing, for Apollos's eloquence accords with the letter's elegance, and his Alexandrian background fits with the character of the letter. Many scholars have seen an affinity between Hebrews and Platonic/Philonic thought, and Alexandria was a fertile center for such thought. But we come face-to-face here with the paucity of evidence in assigning an author. All the theories are guesses, though some are fascinating and alluring to be sure. We don't really know who wrote Hebrews. Origen's words about the author still ring true today: 'God only knows.'

Bruce: The author was a second-generation Christian, well versed in the study of the Septuagint, which he interpreted according to a creative exegetical principle. He had a copious vocabulary and was the master of a fine rhetorical style, completely different from Paul's; we might well describe him as 'a learned man... mighty in the Scriptures' (the description of Apollos in Acts 18:24). He was a Hellenist who inherited the outlook of those Hellenists described in Acts 6-8; 11:19ff., the associates of Stephen and Philip, pioneers in the Gentile mission. 'But as to actually wrote the epistle, God knows the truth of the matter.' Even today we have not got far beyond Origen's confession of ignorance.

Phillips: So who wrote Hebrews? In the end, we must agree with the ancient scholar Origen, who concluded, 'Who wrote the epistle is known to God alone.' All we can say with confidence is that it came from an apostolic figure who was likely a colleague of the apostle Paul. It did not please the Holy Spirit to have us know the human author's identity, so we must content ourselves with knowing that the letter is the Word of God.

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MacArthur: This epistle was written by an unknown author. Some say it was by Paul, some say by Apollos, some say by Peter, some say by this, that, or another person. Due to differences in style, vocabulary, and pattern of personal reference in the epistles known to be his, I do not believe it was written by Paul. As to the exact human authorship, I stand with one of the great teachers of the early church by the name of Origen, who said simply, ‘No one knows.’

C. Audience

1. Jewish Christians

Phillips: Also important is the identity of the recipients. The title ‘To the Hebrews’ is not in the text, although it is found in all the earliest manuscripts. This, along with the letter’s content, argues persuasively that these were Jewish Christians who were under pressure to renounce the faith and return to Judaism.

Hughes: A consensus exists regarding the general identity of the recipients: they were a group of Jewish Christians who had never seen Jesus in person, yet had believed. Their conversion had brought them hardship and persecution with the result that some had slipped back into Judaism. And thus the purpose for writing was to encourage them to not fall away, but to press on (cp. 2:1ff.; 3:12ff.; 6:4ff.; 10:26ff.; and 12:15ff.).

Bruce: The document was known and quoted before the end of the first century, but not under its traditional title ‘To (the) Hebrews.’ This title goes back to the last quarter of the second century, if not earlier, and from that time on it is the regular designation for the work in New Testament manuscripts and Christian writers. But what precisely was understood by the term ‘Hebrews’ we cannot say; the title may simply have reflected the editor’s impression (shared, no doubt, with other readers) that the people addressed were Jews or, more probably, Jewish Christians. There are a few places in the New Testament where the term ‘Hebrews’ is used of a distinct class of Jews or Jewish Christians, as opposed to those who are called ‘Hellenists’ (cp. Acts 6:1; 2 Cor. 11:22; Phil. 3:5); but it is unlikely that this distinctive usage is reflected in the traditional title of our epistle. Indeed, if we think in terms of the Hebrew-Hellenist division, we should naturally classify this epistle as a Hellenistic document. If the title ‘To (the) Hebrews’ is an editorial label attached to the work for convenient reference, and not an original designation, we should not be greatly influenced by it in endeavoring to establish the identity of the addressees. This must be established, as far as possible, on the basis of internal evidence.

Bruce: No doubt it was natural for second-century readers, like many others since their day, to think of the addressees as Jews or Jewish Christians. The whole argument is conducted against a background of Old Testament allusion; considerable familiarity with the Levitical ritual, and interest in it, are presupposed. Yet all this in itself does not require either the author or the people addressed to be Jewish; we have known Gentile Christians who were thoroughly familiar with the Old Testament, accepted it as sacred and authoritative Scripture, and manifested a lively interest in the details of the Mosaic tabernacle and the Levitical offerings, in which they found a remarkably full adumbration of the gospel. From our author’s point of view deliberate disobedience to the living God was practical apostasy against Him, whether those guilty of it were Jewish or Gentile by birth.

Bruce: The author’s insistence that the old covenant has been antiquated is expressed with a moral earnestness and driven home repeatedly in a manner which would be pointless if his

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readers were not especially disposed to live under that covenant, but which would be very much to the point if they were still trying to live under it, or imagined that, having passed beyond it, they could revert to it. Again, our author's appeals to the Old Testament scriptures reflect his confidence that his readers, even if their loyalty to the gospel is wearing thin, will recognize their authority. This they would indeed do if they were Jews; they had recognized the authority of those scriptures before they became Christians, and if they relapsed from Christianity into Judaism they would continue to recognize their authority. Converts to Christianity from paganism, on the other hand, adopted the Old Testament as their sacred book along with the Christian faith; if they were tempted to give up their Christian faith, the Old Testament would go with it.

Bruce: The addressees appear, then, to have been a group of Jewish Christians who had never seen or heard Jesus in person, but learned of Him (as the writer of the epistle also did) from some who had themselves listened to Him (cp. 2:3ff.). Since their conversion they had been exposed to persecution—particularly at one stage shortly after the beginning of their Christian career (10:32)—but while they had had to endure public abuse, imprisonment, and the looting of their property, they had not yet been called upon to die for their faith (12:4). They had given practical evidence of their faith by serving their fellow-Christians and especially by caring for those of their number who suffered most in the time of persecution (6:10; 10:34). Yet their Christian development had been arrested; instead of pressing ahead they were inclined to come to a full stop in their spiritual progress, if not indeed to slip back to a stage which they had left (5:11-14). Very probably they were reluctant to sever their last ties with a religion which enjoyed the protection of Roman law and face the risks of irrevocable commitment to the Christian way. The writer, who has known them, or known about them, for a considerable time, and feels a pastoral concern for their welfare, warns them against falling back, for this may result in falling away from their Christian faith altogether; he encourages them with the assurance that they have everything to lose if they fall back, but everything to gain if they press on (2:1-4; 3:12-4:1; 6:4-8; 10:26-39; 12:15-29).

Bruce: We may infer from the epistle that they were Hellenists; they knew the Old Testament in the Greek version. It is implied, too, that their knowledge of the ancient sacrificial ritual of Israel was derived from the reading of the Old Testament and not from firsthand contact with the temple services in Jerusalem. Perhaps they formed a 'house church' within the wider fellowship of a city church, and were tending to neglect the bonds of fellowship which bound them to other Christians outside their own inner circle.

Schreiner: To whom was the letter written? It has been common to think it was written to a Jewish community since the readers, given the content of the letter, were tempted to revert to the sacrificial system from Judaism, perhaps to avoid persecution or to obtain assurance of forgiveness. The presence of God-fearers in synagogues and Gentile proselytes who converted to Judaism indicates that Gentiles may have found Judaism alluring as well. Indeed, the readers were possibly a combination of Jews and Gentiles. Still, I side with the dominant view that the letter was written to Jewish Christians. The title of the book 'to the Hebrews' suggests that an address to Jewish readers is an old interpretation. Certainly the title doesn't resolve the question of addressees, but it is an ancient witness for the letter being addressed to Jewish Christians. At the end of the day, we can't rule out that the letter was intended for Gentiles rather than Jews or included both Jews and Gentiles. Still, the title of the letter and its contents (with the focus on the Mosaic law and the Levitical priesthood) render it more likely that the book was addressed to

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Jewish readers who wanted to revert to Judaism. Fortunately, the interpretation of the letter doesn't depend on the recipients.

2. Jewish Christians and Non-Christians

a) *Hebrew Christians*

MacArthur: There are no references to Gentiles in the book. Problems between Gentiles and Jews in the church are not mentioned or reflected here, indicating almost certainly that the congregation being addressed was strictly Jewish. To these suffering Jewish believers—and some unbelievers—are revealed the merits of the Lord Jesus Christ and the new covenant, in contrast to the old covenant, under which they had so long lived and worshiped. Also addressed in the letter are unbelievers, who evidently were a part of this Jewish community. Unlike many Jews in Palestine, these never had the opportunity to meet Jesus. Anything they may have known about Him was secondhand (2:3-4).

MacArthur: Three basic groups in this Jewish community are addressed. Here is the critical basis for understanding the epistle; and here is where people often get mixed up, especially in interpreting chapters 6 and 10.

MacArthur: First of all, there was in this Jewish community a congregation of true believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. They had come out of Judaism, in which they had been born and raised. Now they were born again. They had received Jesus Christ as their personal Messiah and Savior. They had become His followers. The frequent result was tremendous hostility from their own people—ostracism from their families, persecution and suffering of many sorts, though not yet martyrdom (10:32-34; 12:4). They suffered greatly, persecuted not only by their fellow Jews, but also perhaps by Gentiles.

MacArthur: They should have anticipated as much and have been mature enough to deal with it. But they had not and they were not. They lacked full confidence in the gospel, and consequently in their Lord. They were in danger of going back into the standards and patterns of Judaism—not of losing their salvation but of confusing the gospel with Jewish ceremony and legalism and of thereby weakening their faith and testimony. They could not bring themselves to accept the clear-cut distinction between the gospel, the new covenant in Christ, and the forms, ceremonies, patterns, and methods of Judaism. They were still hung up, for example temple ritual and worship.

MacArthur: They had gone beyond Judaism in receiving Jesus Christ but, understandably, they were tempted to hang on to many of the Judaistic habits that had been so much a part of their lives. When their friends and their countrymen began to persecute them in earnest, the pressure led them to hold even tighter to some of the old Jewish traditions. They felt they had to keep a foothold in their old and familiar relationships. It was hard to make a clean break. With all that pressure, together with their weak faith and spiritual ignorance, they were in great danger of coming up with a ritualistic, ceremonial, legalistic Christianity.

MacArthur: The Holy Spirit directed this letter to them to strengthen their faith in the new covenant, to show them that they did not need the old temple (which in a few years would be completely destroyed by Titus Vespasian anyway, showing that God had brought an end to that economy; cp. Luke 21:5-6). They did not need the old Aaronic-Levitical priesthood. They did not need the old day-in, day-out, day-in, day-out sacrifices. They did not need the ceremonies. They had a new and better covenant with a new and better priesthood, a new and better

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sanctuary, and a new and better sacrifice. The pictures and symbols were to give way to reality. The book of Hebrews was written to give confidence to these floundering believers. The Lord was speaking to Christians and telling them to hold to the better covenant and the better priesthood, and not go back into the patterns of Judaism, either to that priesthood or to that assemblage. They must steadfastly and exclusively live in, and live out, their new relationship in Christ.

ARMINIAN ALERT

b) Intellectually Convinced Hebrew Non-Christians

MacArthur: We have all met people who have heard the truth of Jesus Christ and who are intellectually convinced that He is indeed who He claimed to be, and yet are unwilling to make a commitment of faith in Him. In the group of Hebrews to whom this epistle was written, there were such non-Christians, as there are in many groups today. These Hebrew non-Christians, intellectually convinced but spiritually uncommitted, are the object of some of the things that the writer has to say. They believed that Jesus was the Messiah, the Christ, spoken of in the Jewish Scriptures, but they had not been willing to receive Him personally as their Savior and Lord. Why? Perhaps, like those described by John, they believed in Him, but they loved the approval of men more than the approval of God (Jn. 12:42-43). They were not willing to make the sacrifice required. And so they are exhorted by the Holy Spirit to go all the way to saving faith; to go all the way to commitment to the lordship of Christ.

MacArthur: In Hebrews 6:4-6 is a warning to the merely intellectually convinced not to stop where he is. If he stops after having received full revelation, he has only one way to go. If, when a man is totally convinced that Jesus Christ is who He claimed to be, he then refuses to believe, this man is without excuse and without hope—because, though convinced of the truth of the gospel, he still will not put his trust in it. He is here warned that there is nothing else God can do. What is the greatest sin that a man can commit? The sin of rejecting Christ (cp. 10:26). If a man has heard the gospel, understands it, and is intellectually convinced of its truth, but then willfully rejects Christ, what more can God do? Nothing! When you know the truth of the gospel and reject it, the consequences are terrible and permanent. In 12:15 is still another warning. These are controversial passages, and we will deal with them in detail at the proper place.

c) Non-Convinced Hebrew Non-Christians

MacArthur: Not only does the Holy Spirit in this book speak to Christians in order to strengthen their faith and to the intellectually convinced in order to push them over the line to saving faith, but He also speaks to those who have not believed at all, to those who may not yet be convinced of any part of the gospel. He seeks to show them clearly that Jesus is in fact who He claimed to be, and this truth is the main thrust of chapter 9. These messages speak directly to unbelievers, not to Christians and not to those who are already convinced of the gospel intellectually. They are given to those who first need to know who Christ is.

MacArthur: These, then, are the three groups in view in the epistle. The key to interpreting any part of Hebrews is to understand which group is being addressed. If we do not understand that, we are bound to confuse issues. For example, the Spirit is surely not saying to believers, 'It is appointed for men to die once and after this comes the judgment' (9:27). We must always understand what group it is to whom He speaks. The primary message is addressed to believers. Periodically there are interspersed warnings to the two unbelieving groups. In a masterful way,

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in a way that could of their particular needs and their specific questions in this one supernatural masterpiece.

D. Destination

1. Various Suggestions

Schreiner: If we assume the letter was written to Jewish Christians, where were the Jews to whom the letter was addressed? Were they in Jerusalem, Palestine, Alexandria, or Rome? All of these locations make good sense. And scholars have suggested Samaria, Antioch, Corinth, Cyprus, Ephesus, Bithynia, and Pontus.

Bruce: Where did they live? We do not know. Opinions have ranged between Judea in the east and Spain in the west. Other places have been suggested: Samaria (preferably Sychar), Caesarea, Syrian Antioch, Colossae or some neighboring place in the Lycus valley, Ephesus, Cyprus (associated with ascription of authorship to Barnabas), and Corinth. A number of scholars have thought of Alexandria in Egypt as the city where the readers lived. Some Alexandrian association is evident throughout the epistle; the author is evidently acquainted with the literature of Alexandrian Judaism, like Wisdom and 4 Maccabees, and especially the writings of Philo. But this speaks more for his association with the city than with theirs. Alexandria has much which could be urged in its favor; but there is one great obstacle in the way of thinking the epistle was sent there. That is that precisely in Alexandria the belief in its Pauline authorship first arose, and it is difficult to suppose that the Christians of the city to which the epistle was sent so quickly forgot who sent it to them and ascribed it to another.

MacArthur: We do not know the exact location of this group of Hebrews. They were perhaps somewhere near Greece. We do know that this community had been evangelized by apostles and prophets (2:3-4). Evidently this church had been founded fairly soon after Christ's ascension. By the time the letter was written, a small congregation of believers already existed there.

2. Suggestion: Jerusalem/Palestine

Phillips: As to their location, the two main options are Palestine and Rome. Those who argue for a Palestinian audience point out that Christians are known to have suffered at the hands of their fellow Jews, and also point to the detailed references to the Jewish temple ritual. Opposing this theory is the fact that all of the Old Testament citations in Hebrews are from the Septuagint, the Greek version common in that time, which was not used in Palestine as much as elsewhere. Also opposing a Palestinian background is the statement that the recipients of the letter had only heard of Jesus secondhand (see Hebrews 2:3).

Bruce: If their knowledge of the Jewish ritual was not derived from firsthand contact with the temple services, then Jerusalem seems to be excluded. They may, of course, have had an earlier association with the Jerusalem church; we recall the large exodus of Hellenistic believers from Jerusalem in the persecution which followed the death of Stephen. Those Hellenists scattered in many directions, carrying the gospel wherever they went; one can easily think of the readers of this epistle as one of the communities of new believers founded at that time. Even so, Jerusalem has not been without its advocates as the place to which the epistle was sent (e.g., Sir William Ramsay).

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Bruce: But the religious situation in Jerusalem was dominated by the temple, to which no explicit reference is made by our author. When an earlier leader of his school, Stephen, addressed himself to the situation in Jerusalem, the temple occupied a prominent place in his polemic—the temple, moreover, in express distinction from the moveable tabernacle of earlier days. Our author has much to say about the tabernacle, but not about the temple. The priesthood and ritual associated with the tabernacle, of course, were in principle those associated with the temple too; but what we find in the epistle is literary allusion to the former and not, as might have been expected in an exhortation addressed to Jerusalem, contemporary allusion to the latter. Even at the latest reasonable date for the epistle, there would still have been a few members of the Jerusalem church who had seen and heard Jesus for themselves and did not have to depend on the testimony of others.

3. Suggestion: Rome

Phillips: Scholarly consensus has recently shifted in the direction of Rome. Clement of Rome, writing around 95 AD, shows close familiarity with Hebrews, and the books of Acts and Romans speak of a large Jewish church in Rome from early on. The Jewish Christians there were persecuted in 49 AD under the emperor Claudius, and then again in the 60s under Nero. What we know of the former of these persecutions seems to fit the description of 10:32-34 and 12:4 (in that Claudius' persecution involved loss of property and imprisonment, but not bloodshed), and the anticipation of violence fits the latter, with Nero's notorious violence against Christians. Finally, there is the statement of Hebrews 13:24, 'Those who come from Italy send you greetings.' It could be that a pastor now in Rome was writing to Jewish believers in Palestine. But the more natural reason for Italian Christians to send their greetings is that the readers were themselves from Italy.

Hughes: Many contemporary scholars tentatively propose that the letter was written to a small house-church of beleaguered Jewish Christians living in Rome in the mid-sixties before the destruction of the Jerusalem temple. Hebrews was written to a group of Jewish Christians whose world was falling apart. Their Italian locus is most probable because in the closing paragraph of Hebrews the author conveys the greetings of several Italian Christians who were with him (13:24), thus supporting the idea that the harried little church was on Italian soil—very likely in or around Rome.

Schreiner: The most important clue for determining the location of the recipients comes from the letter itself, for the author closes the letter with the words, 'Those who are from Italy greet you' (13:24). If is possible, of course, that he wrote *from* Italy, and those with the author in Italy send their greetings. But it seems more probable that he wrote *to* those in Italy (cp. Acts 18:2), i.e., to Rome itself, so that those absent from Italy sent their greetings back to Rome. If this is the case, then Hebrews was written to Jewish Christians in Rome. A Roman destination also fits with 1 Clement, for Clement wrote from Rome and knew the contents of Hebrews. His knowledge of Hebrews makes sense if the letter was directed to Rome.

Schreiner: What we know from the letter is that the readers had experienced persecution in their early days as believers (10:32-34), but they, apparently, had not suffered martyrdom (12:4). They were probably tempted to return to Judaism, perhaps to avoid persecution. Since Judaism was a legal religion under Roman law, it would afford protection from Roman imperial power. If Hebrews was written to Rome, then it was composed before Nero lashed out against

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Christians, putting many to death. The author's bracing words about staying true to Christ prepared the readers for what was to come.

Bruce: The first place where, according to our extant literature, the Epistle to the Hebrews appears to have been known is in Rome. For Clement of Rome shows clear evidence of his acquaintance with it in the letter which he wrote on behalf of the Roman church to the Corinthian church, c. 96 AD. Unfortunately, he drops no hint about its authorship; he was writing for his contemporaries, not for us. But the Roman church, and the west in general, took a long time before they consented to regard it as one of the Pauline letters; their resistance to the belief in its Pauline authorship springs in all probability from an original positive knowledge that it was not written by Paul. No certain inference in this regard can be drawn from the greetings which the writer sends his readers from 'those from Italy' (13:24). 'Those from Italy' may have lived in Italy or outside Italy, so far as the language is concerned; and while the message is most easily construed in agreement with a Roman destination for the letter, it would not necessarily exclude Rome (or some other place in Italy) as the place where it was written. Certainty on the destination of the epistle is unattainable in the present state of our knowledge, and fortunately its exegesis is for the most part independent of this question.

E. Date

1. Timothy

Bruce: When was it written? In the absence of any clear evidence for the identity of the recipients or the author, the date of the epistle is also uncertain. A first-century date is required by the external evidence (the near-quotation of the epistle by Clement of Rome c. 96 AD) and by the internal evidence, according to which the author and, probably, his readers came to know the gospel from people who themselves had listened to the teaching of Jesus (2:3). If Timothy, whose release is announced in 13:23 is (as seems likely) Paul's junior colleague of that name, a date within his active lifetime is indicated, but as we do not know when Timothy was born (he was considerably younger than Paul, and may not have been out of his teens when Paul co-opted him as a fellow-missionary in 49 AD) or when he died, this does not help us to fix a more precise date.

Schreiner: No date was inscribed on the letter, and no historical referent in the letter gives us a definite date. Timothy was still alive (13:23) when the letter was written, and thus the letter was written in the first century. Since the author mentions the second generation of Christians (2:3), Timothy (13:23), and the death of some Christian leaders (13:7), the document was not written in the 30s or 40s. Furthermore, 5:12 indicates that the believers had been Christians for a while. The earliest date usually assigned is in the 60s.

2. Temple

Phillips: If Rome were the location of the audience, then the letter would have been written shortly before 64 AD, when Nero's persecution broke out. Under almost all theories, Hebrews was written prior to 70 AD, when Jerusalem and its temple were destroyed by the Romans. Not only does Hebrews speak of the temple rituals as a present reality, but it is hard to imagine its writer passing up such an opportunity as the fall of Jerusalem to prove the passing away of the old covenant religion.

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Bruce: Another line of approach to its dating is to ask how it stands in relation to the destruction of the Jerusalem temple and the cessation of the cultus in 70 AD. True, there is no overt reference to the temple; the ritual details which figure in the epistle are mostly taken from the Old Testament account of the tabernacle. Yet in principle the tabernacle and the temple were one; the ritual of the former was the ritual of the latter. And our author writes as if the ritual were still being enacted (cp. 10:1ff.). If in fact the sacrificial order had come to a full stop by the time our author wrote (as it did in the summer of 70 AD), the knowledge of this fact would probably have modified his wording here. In short, there are several passages which, while they do not demand a date before 70 AD, would have special point if in fact the Jerusalem temple was still standing and the cultus was still going on; while there is no passage which suggests that sanctuary and cultus were by now things of the past.

Schreiner: Some date the book to the decades after 70 AD, but there are reasons that suggest a date in the 60s, before 70 AD. The author refers often to the tabernacle and ritual carried out there. In fact, he uses the present tense to describe the cultic system, indicating, perhaps, that the temple was still standing when he wrote. Against this, however, is the fact that 1 Clement also uses the present tense when referring to the temple, and he wrote in 96 AD, well after the time when the temple was destroyed (70 AD). One of the fundamental arguments of the book is that Jesus' sacrifice is definitive and final so that the sacrifices of the old covenant belong to a former era. The author probably refers to the rituals of the tabernacle rather than the temple worship of his day because he draws literarily from the account of the tabernacle in the Pentateuch. The destruction of the temple in AD 70 would demonstrate conclusively (in accord with Jesus' prophecy; cp. Mt. 24) that temple sacrifices were no longer valid. Hence, it is improbable that the author would have failed to mention the destruction of the temple, suggesting that he wrote in the 60's before the temple was destroyed. A more definite date than this can't be assigned due to lack of evidence.

MacArthur: The letter had to have been written after Christ's ascension, which was about 30 AD, and before the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, since the temple must still have been standing. I believe it was probably written close to 70, perhaps as early as 65 AD.

3. Trouble

Bruce: If the words in 12:4, 'you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood,' are to be taken literally (as is most probable), they would mean that the community addressed had not yet been called upon to suffer death for the faith, whatever lesser forms of persecution it had endured. This would seem to rule out the Jerusalem church; and if the epistle were sent to Rome, it would have to be dated before the Neronian persecution of 65 AD (the minor persecution of 10:32-34 could be placed in Rome about 49 AD). If, however, the language of 12:4 is figurative (in the sense that 'unto blood' does not imply the actual shedding of their blood)—and this seems a less natural way to take it—then the field is much more wide open. The view tentatively adopted in this commentary is that the epistle was written before, but not long before, the outbreak of persecution in Rome in 65 AD.

F. Canon

Phillips: The final matter of background to consider is the place of Hebrews in the New Testament canon. The early church's basic test of canonicity was proof of apostolicity. This did not mean that a book had to be written by an apostle, as shown by the ready inclusion of Mark,

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Luke, Acts, and other books. It was sufficient for the author to be an associated of an apostle, so long as the teaching was apostolic in character. We should not think, however, that it was the church that created the canon, since really it was exactly the opposite. The canon—that is, the apostolic teaching of the New Testament writings—created the church.

Bruce: Canonicity and authorship are in principle quite distinct, but in the early Christian centuries, as a practical issue, the canonicity of New Testament books and their apostolic authorship were frequently involved with each other, and nowhere more so than in relation to this epistle. Augustine and Jerome followed Alexandrian precedent in recognizing Hebrews as one of Paul's epistles not so much because they were convinced on internal evidence that it was by him (in point of fact they entertained private doubts on the matter), as because the ascription of apostolic authorship safeguarded its canonical status.

Bruce: Hebrews may be said to have first received some sort of canonical status when it was incorporated by a second-century editor (at Alexandria, in all probability) into a copy of the *corpus Paulinum*. From that time forth its status was not questioned in Alexandria. Origen did not doubt its scriptural merit, whatever reservations he might cherish about its authorship. Later, Eusebius of Caesarea included it among the 'acknowledged' books, although he knew of the doubts about it in the west. Athanasius of Alexandria, in 367 reckoned it as a matter of course among the 'fourteen epistles of the apostle Paul' when enumerating the books of the New Testament.

Bruce: It was otherwise in the west. Some histories of the New Testament canon have not made it sufficiently plain that for a book to be known and quoted is not tantamount to its being received as canonical. This distinction is well illustrated by the history of the Epistle to the Hebrews in the west. So far as extant records go, it was known and quoted in the west some decades before it was known in the east, but the west was slow in according it canonical status. Clement of Rome knows it so well that he weaves its language into his own, but there is no suggestion in his letter that Hebrews is regarded as canonical or apostolic. Irenaeus did not treat it as apostolic or canonical; his position is noteworthy in view of his Asian provenance. Tertullian personally thought highly of it and was disposed to accord it near-apostolic authority, although he accepted Barnabas as its author. Ultimately, however, the Alexandrian position on canonicity and authorship alike triumphed in the west, and the epistle was included in the Canon by the Synod of Hippo (393 AD) and by the Third (397 AD) and Sixth (419 AD) Synods of Carthage.

Bruce: 'O *felix culpa*' says W. F. Howard, suggesting that we owe the presence of Hebrews in the New Testament to 'the mistaken critical judgment of the ancient church.' But one may wonder whether, in fact, the intrinsic merit of the epistle would not ultimately have won a place in the canon for it even had the name of Paul never been associated with it. At least, when the question was reopened in the Reformation, the uncertainty about its authorship did not reflect on its canonical recognition. Luther, indeed, gave it what might be called deuterocanonical status, but this was not on account of its non-Pauline authorship but rather because of his personal estimate of its quality, for he reckoned that some 'wood, straw, or hay' might be found mingled with the 'gold, silver, and precious stones' which were built into its fabric. Calvin, on the other hand, while he was perfectly sure that Paul was in no sense its author, set a high value on its authority. 'I class it without hesitation among the apostolic writings,' he said; 'I do not doubt that it has been through the craft of Satan that any have been led to dispute its authority. There is, indeed, no book in Holy Scripture which speaks so clearly of the priesthood of Christ, which

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so highly exalts the virtue and dignity of that only true sacrifice which He offered by His death, which so abundantly deals with the use of ceremonies as well as their abrogation, and, in a word, so fully explains that Christ is the end of the Law. Let us therefore not allow the Church of God or ourselves to be deprived of so great a benefit, but firmly defend the possession of it.’

Bruce: The canonical quality of the epistle, having thus been so clearly and properly distinguished from the question of authorship, continues, as is most justly due, to be acknowledged by the church.

G. Purpose

Hughes: Their Christianity had not been a worldly advantage. Rather, it set them up for persecution and the loss of property and privilege, and now could possibly even cost them their lives. We know they had already paid a price for their initial commitment to Christ (10:32-34). This description of their earlier sufferings fits well into the picture of the hardships that came to Jewish Christians under Claudius in 49 AD. Suetonius’ *Life of the Deified Claudius* records that ‘There were riots in the Jewish quarters at the instigation of Chrestus. As a result, Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome’ (25.4). ‘Chrestus,’ historians believe, is a reference to Christ, and the riots and expulsion occurred when Jewish Christians were banished from the synagogue by the Jewish establishment.

Hughes: Now, as the author of Hebrews writes, fifteen years have gone by since the Claudian persecution, and a new persecution looms. No one has been killed yet, but 12:4 raises the possibility that martyrdom may soon come. The circumstances accord well with the Neronian persecution that would come with the great fire of Rome in 64 AD. The historian Tacitus records that Nero made the Christians scapegoats to remove suspicion from himself (*Annals of Rome*, 15:44). In the year 64 AD martyrdom became an aspect of the Christian experience in Rome. There were several house-churches in the city, and the group addressed in Hebrews had not yet been affected by the emperor’s actions. But the threat of death and arrest was real.

Hughes: The writer of Hebrews was writing to admonish and encourage his friends, a small group of Jewish Christians who were scared stiff! Some had begun to avoid contact with outsiders. Some had even withdrawn from the worshiping community altogether (10:25). The author feared there might be those who, if arrested, would succumb to the conditions of release—a public denial of Christ (6:6; 10:29).

Phillips: The purpose of Hebrews is made clear by its content. The writer warns Christians not to fall back from faith in Christ in the midst of trials and exhorts them instead to press on to full maturity. The letter should not be thought of as a theological treatise, but as a sermon written by a pastor to a congregation from which he is separated. The writer describes it as ‘my word of exhortation’ (13:22). His method is to point out the supremacy of Christ over everything to which the readers might be tempted to turn: He is superior to angels, to Moses and the prophets, to Aaron and the Levitical priests, to the blood sacrifices of the old covenant, and to the tabernacle and temple themselves. Since Jesus is the only true messenger, the true prophet, the true priest, and the true sacrifice, to renounce Him is to lose salvation altogether. Therefore, the readers must hold fast to Jesus Christ. The author’s plea is summed up in Hebrews 10:23: ‘Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful.’

Schreiner: Readers are immediately struck by the distinctive message and style of Hebrews, for it is different from anything else we read in the NT. By different I don’t mean contradictory, for

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it fits well with Pauline theology. Still the theology is played in a different octave and a different key. The author isn't attempting to amaze us with his theological sophistication, his understanding of the relationship between the old covenant and the new, his reading of the Levitical and Melchizedekian priesthoods, and his construal of old and new covenant sacrifices. He writes for a practical reason, which becomes evident when we observe the warning passages that permeate the letter. What must be observed is how pervasive the warnings are in Hebrews (2:1-4; 3:12-4:13; 5:11-6:12; 10:26-39; 12:25-29). Here we find the main purpose of the letter. It is imperative to understand that the warnings, with all their diversity, essentially make the same point. Hence the purpose of the letter becomes clear, for the warnings urge readers not to fall away. They must not turn away from Jesus and the new covenant and revert to the Mosaic law and the old covenant. The same message could be formulated positively. The readers are called on to persevere, to hold on, and to keep believing until the end. If they fall away, the author insists, they will face destruction and damnation.

Schreiner: Some think Jesus' priesthood and sacrifice are the main point of the letter (cp. 8:1), while others see the main point as the exhortation. The strength of both positions can be acknowledged, for the priesthood and the sacrifice of Christ certainly pervade the letter. Still, to say that Christ's priesthood and sacrifice are central makes the letter too abstract and academic, and it misses the pastoral thrust of the work, for the theology of the book, the priesthood and sacrifice of Christ, serves the exhortation. The author's point is that since the work of Christ is so great, it would be folly to turn away from Him. The main point in the theology of the letter (8:1), then, provides a foundation for the central purpose of the letter: don't fall away.

Schreiner: Why were the readers tempted to fall away? We have several clues that aren't mutually exclusive. The readers were persecuted and discriminated against for their faith (10:32-34). Perhaps such persecution accounts for their moral lethargy and temptation to renounce their commitment to Jesus Christ (cp. 5:11-6:12). Judaism was a legal religion in the empire, and hence identification with the Jewish cult could spare them from further distress and from the shame and dishonor attached to a new religion. At the same time, they may have pined for the concrete picture of forgiveness obtained through the Levitical cult. Perhaps they had lost the assurance of cleansing through Christ's blood, which would explain why the author emphasizes the boldness to enter God's presence through Christ's sacrifice.

MacArthur: Keep in mind that the idea of a new covenant was not easy for Jews to accept. Even after they accepted the new, it was hard for them to make a clean break with the old. The Gentiles did not have that problem, of course, since they had never been a part of the old. But the Jews always had a divine religion. For centuries they had known a divinely appointed place of worship and a divinely revealed way of worshiping. It was not an easy thing for a Jew to forsake completely all his heritage, especially when he knew that much of it, at least, was God-given. Even after a Jew received the Lord Jesus Christ this was difficult. He had a traditional desire to retain some of the forms and the ceremonies that had been a part of his life since earliest childhood. Part of the purpose of the book of Hebrews, therefore, was to confront that born-again Jew with the fact that he could, and should, let go of all his Judaistic trappings. But since the temple was still standing and the priests still ministered in it, this was especially hard to do. Letting go became easier after the temple was destroyed in 70 AD.

MacArthur: throughout Hebrews these immature, but beloved, Christians are told to keep their confidence in Christ, the mediator of a better covenant and their new great High Priest. They are reminded that they were losing nothing for which they were not getting something infinitely

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better. They had been deprived of an earthly temple but were going to get a heavenly one. They had been deprived of an earthly priesthood but they now had a heavenly Priest. They had been deprived of the old pattern of sacrifices but now they had one final sacrifice.

H. Theology

Bruce: The form in which the Old Testament is quoted throughout the epistle is regularly that of the Septuagint version. To our author, the Old Testament is a divine oracle from first to last; not only passages which in their original setting are the direct utterance of God (e.g., Ps. 110:4), but others are treated as spoken by God—like the words of Moses in Dt. 32:43 (1:6) and the words of the psalmists concerning the messengers of God (Ps. 104:4, quoted in 1:7), addressed to a royal bridegroom (Ps. 45:6ff., quoted in 1:8ff.), or addressed to God (Ps. 102:25-27, quoted in 1:10-12). Hebrews 3:7 introduces a quotation from Psalm 95:7-11 with the words ‘as the Holy Spirit says’—words which apply not only to the divine utterance quoted in Ps. 95:8ff., but to the psalmist’s cry which precedes them: ‘If only you would listen to his voice today!’ (Ps. 95:7b).

Bruce: The Old Testament writings are treated by our author as a *mashal*, a parable or mystery which awaits its explanation, and the explanation given in the pages of the epistle takes the form of messianic typology. We never find in our author the least trace of that allegorical exegesis which was to remain, alas, the specialty of the Alexandrian school and which is illustrated so abundantly in the works of Philo, a generation or so earlier than our epistle. This contrast is the more marked because of the affinities in thought and language which have otherwise been traced between our author and Philo. But Philo treats the Old Testament characters and incidents as allegories setting forth eternal principles of ethics and metaphysics, while our author treats them as types of Christ and the gospel, temporary foreshadowings of the fulfillment which has now taken place once for all. By Philo, for example, Melchizedek is allegorized as Reason; by our author he is interpreted as a type of Christ, ‘made like the Son of God’ (7:3). The historical perspective of the Old Testament is well preserved in Hebrews because our author thinks of the age of anticipation as foreshadowing the age of fulfillment; he finds it necessary to look before and after.

Bruce: The purpose of our author’s exegesis of Old Testament scripture, as of his general argument, is to establish the finality of the gospel by contrast with all that went before it (more particularly, by contrast with the Levitical cultus), as the way of perfection, the way which alone leads people to God without any barrier or interruption of access. He establishes the finality of Christianity by establishing the supremacy of Christ, in His person and in His work. As regards His person Christ is greater than all the servants and spokesmen of God who have gone before—not only greater than other human servants and spokesmen (even Moses), but greater than angels. For He is the Son of God, His agent in creating and maintaining the universe, who yet became the Son of Man and submitted to humiliation and death. He is now exalted above all the heavens, enthroned at God’s right hand, and lives forever there as His people’s representative.

Bruce: The special aspect of the person and ministry of Christ which is emphasized in this epistle is His priesthood. This epistle, in fact, is the only New Testament document which expressly calls Him a priest, although His priesthood is implied in others. This presentation of Jesus agrees with the testimony in the Gospels. In Luke 22:32 He prays for Peter, lest his faith should fail; in John 17 we hear Him pray His prayer of consecration as He offers up His life to God on His followers’ behalf, and His prayer of intercession for them that they may fulfill their witness in

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the world as He has fulfilled His. Nor is this kind of activity confined to the earthly phase; we have His assurance in Luke 12:8: ‘Everyone who acknowledges Me before men, the Son of man will also acknowledge him before the angels of God.’

Bruce: All this was appreciated by the early church. Stephen, condemned by the Sanhedrin, makes his confident appeal to the heavenly court, where he sees as his advocate ‘the Son of man standing at the right hand of God’ (Acts 7:56). To the same effect Paul challenges anyone to bring a charge against God’s elect, since ‘it is Christ Jesus who died, yes, who was raised from the dead, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us’ (Rom. 8:34). And John, while he writes to his ‘little children’ to guard against their sinning, reminds them that nevertheless, ‘if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and it is He who atones for our sins...’ (1 Jn. 2:1ff.). Here the reference to atonement implies a priestly element in the advocacy and intercession of the risen Christ. Our author then was not a complete innovator in presenting Christ as His people’s high priest, but he elaborates the priesthood of Christ in quite a distinctive manner, and does so in order to establish that in Christ and the gospel God has spoken His final and perfect word to mankind.

Bruce: Arguments of various kinds are adduced to show that the priesthood of Christ is not only superior to that of the Aaronic succession, but belongs to an entirely different order from theirs. It belongs to the new covenant foretold by Jeremiah—a new covenant marked by better promises and a better hope than the old covenant of Sinai, under which the Aaronic priests ministered. In particular, the priesthood of Christ is associated with a better sacrifice than any that went before, and is discharged in a better sanctuary than that prescribed in the Levitical cultus.

Bruce: Priesthood and sacrifice are inseparable entities. The Aaronic priests offered up sacrifices repeatedly, and our author pays particular attention to the annual sin offering presented on the nation’s behalf by the high priest on the Day of Atonement. But those animal sacrifices could not meet the real need of men and women. A sin-stained conscience is a barrier to communion with God, and the cleansing of the conscience could not be effected by such sacrifices as the Levitical cultus provided. But Christ exercises His priestly ministry on the basis of a real and efficacious sacrifice—‘His own sacrifice’ (9:26). By the will of God, fulfilled in death as in life by Christ, His people ‘have been sanctified once for all through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ’ (10:10) and have ‘freedom of access into the holy place by Jesus’ blood’ (10:19). It is His life, offered up to God, which is alternatively spoken of as His ‘body’ or His ‘blood.’ And it is thanks to the efficacy of His sacrifice in the lives of His people that the new covenant comes into being, in which God undertakes to implant His law in their hearts (as it was implanted in the heart of Christ) and to remember their sins no more.

Bruce: It is because of his concentration on the priestly aspect of Christ’s work that our author has so much to say of His death and exaltation, but so little of His resurrection. The two principal moments in the great sin offering of Old Testament times were the shedding of the victim’s blood in the court of the sanctuary and the presentation of its blood inside the sanctuary. In the antitype these two moments were seen to correspond to the death of Christ on the cross and His appearance at the right hand of God. In this pattern the resurrection, as generally proclaimed in the apostolic preaching, finds no separate place.

Bruce: The presence of God, the heavenly sanctuary, where Christ now ministers as His people’s high priest, is naturally superior to any holy place on earth, and the priesthood which is exercised in the former is naturally superior to any priesthood which is exercised in one of the later

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sanctuaries. The earthly sanctuary, where the Aaronic priests ministered, is but a material copy of ‘the true tent, pitched by the Lord, not by any human hand’ (8:2). Our author finds Old Testament authority for his view of the earthly sanctuary as a copy of the heavenly in the direction given to Moses to construct the tabernacle in all respects according to the model shown him by God on Mount Sinai (8:5). This view of the relation of the earthly and heavenly sanctuaries finds frequent expression in apocalyptic literature, not least in the New Testament book of Revelation.

Bruce: In the heavenly and eternal sanctuary where Christ ministers, His people inevitably enjoy more direct and permanent access to God through Him than would be possible in any earthly and material shrine. But just how is this heavenly and eternal sanctuary envisaged? We must not think that because our author speaks of Jesus as having ‘passed through the heavens’ and having ‘sat down at the right hand of the throne of God’ he thought of the heavenly sanctuary as being, in reverse, a glorified replica of the sanctuary on earth, established in perpetuity on some higher plane. He uses pictorial language indeed, but uses it to denote realities of the spiritual order, where men and women, inwardly purified from a polluting conscience, draw near to God to worship Him in spirit and in truth. This ‘perfection’ is the inauguration of the eschatology which is soon to be consummated. The sanctuary in which they worship God through Christ is the fellowship of the new covenant; it consists in the communion of saints.

I. Themes

1. Overall Theme

Hughes: Virtually all agree that the grand theme of this epistle is the supremacy and finality of Christ.

MacArthur: The overall theme is the superiority, or the preeminence, of Christ. He is better than anything that was before. He is better than any Old Testament person; He is better than any Old Testament institution; He is better than any Old Testament ritual; He is better than any Old Testament sacrifice; He is better than anyone and everything else. The letter begins with the general superiority of Christ to everyone and everything, a kind of a summary of the whole epistle in the first three verses. Next comes the superiority of Christ to angels, then the superiority of Christ to Moses, the superiority of Christ to Joshua, the superiority of Christ to Aaron and his priesthood, the superiority of Christ to the old covenant, the superiority of Christ’s sacrifice to old sacrifices, the superiority of Christ’s faithful people to all the faithless, and the superiority of Christ’s testimony to that of any other. This brief outline gives us the flow of the book, which above all else, teaches the total, complete, and absolute superiority of Jesus Christ.

MacArthur: In this epistle, contrast reigns. Everything presented is presented as better: a better hope, a better testament, a better promise, a better sacrifice, a better substance, a better country, a better resurrection, a better everything. Jesus Christ is presented here as the supreme Best. And we are presented as being in Him and as dwelling in a completely new dimension—the heavenlies. We read of the heavenly gift, the heavenly country, the heavenly Jerusalem, and of our names being written in the heavenlies. Everything is new. Everything is better. We don’t need the old.

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2. Important Themes

Schreiner: Hebrews picks up central themes from the Bible's story line. First, God's promises have been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. He is the Son of God, the Messiah, and the Melchizedekian high priest. The new covenant promised in the OT has been realized in Him. Believers, therefore, are forgiven of their sins through the atoning work of Jesus Christ. Second, the fulfillment in Christ has an already-but-not-yet character. The new age has been inaugurated but not consummated. So the new covenant has indeed come, but believers are not yet perfectly free from sin. Third, the OT is typological so that the institutions, events, and persons in the OT forecast what is to come. The OT sacrificial system points forward to the final and definitive atonement accomplished in Jesus Christ's sacrifice. The Davidic king and Israel as God's son point ahead to Jesus as the Messiah, the unique Son of God who fulfilled what Adam was called to be in paradise. Fourth, the earthly reflects the heavenly. The tabernacle and its furnishings on earth point to a heavenly tabernacle above, to the presence of God. The OT should be read eschatologically, typologically, and spatially.

Schreiner: The OT should be read in light of the fulfillment in Jesus Christ. It does not apply in the same way to believers in Jesus Christ as it did to OT saints or even to those who lived when Jesus was on earth. Hence, one cannot depend on OT sacrifices to obtain forgiveness of sin, for such an activity denies the once-for-all sacrifice in Jesus Christ. To revert to OT sacrifices would be to march backward in salvation history. It would, in effect, deny that Jesus Christ has come. It would be a blatant rejection of His sacrifice. Practically speaking, then, a return to the OT cult would constitute a rejection of Jesus as Messiah, as the Son of God, and as the Melchizedekian priest. It would say that Moses and Joshua were greater than Jesus, that animal sacrifices were worth more than Jesus' sacrifice. It would mean returning to earth when Jesus has lifted believers to heaven, to the presence of God. The warnings are so strong in Hebrews because the readers were tempted to deny Jesus and all that He had accomplished.

a) Promise-Fulfillment

Schreiner: I understand 'promise-fulfillment' in a particular way here. It refers to predictions or promises in the OT, that, according to Hebrews, are now fulfilled. The first verses of the book signal the theme of promise and fulfillment (1:1-2). God had spoken in a variety of modes in the OT, but He has now spoken definitively and finally in His Son. The author communicates from the outset that OT revelation, which was diverse and incomplete, finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. It is clear in reading Hebrews that the entirety of the OT should be read in light of the fulfillment of Jesus. We begin with what is perhaps the favorite OT Scripture for the author: Psalm 110. According to Hebrews, the prophecy in Ps. 110:1 is clearly fulfilled in Jesus Christ, for he alludes to or quotes this verse five different times (1:2, 13; 8:1; 10:12-13; 12:2). According to Hebrews, Jesus is the Davidic son and Lord through whom the kingdom will be established. Jesus also fulfills Ps. 110:4. In Psalm 110 the one who is David's lord is also an eternal priest in the order of Melchizedek. The author of Hebrews sees this verse fulfilled in Jesus and exploits it to further his argument.

Schreiner: God's kingdom, promised in the OT, would be realized through a Davidic king. Hebrews appropriates this theme and sees it as fulfilled in Jesus Christ. When the author says the Son is the 'heir of all things' (1:2), he draws on a promise given to the anointed king of Israel (Ps. 2:8). A few verses later Hebrews actually quotes Ps. 2:7, which confirms that the writer identifies the Son and the king of the psalm to be Jesus Himself. The Messianic promise, granted to the Davidic king, finds its ultimate realization in Jesus. In the same verse (1:5)

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Hebrews also quotes 2 Sam. 7:14, which comes from the chapter where the Davidic covenant is inaugurated in which the Lord promises that David's dynasty will never end. Hebrews leaves us no doubt that Jesus is the true Son of David, that He is the Messiah, and thus the kingdom promised in the OT is realized in Him.

Schreiner: The fulfillment of the new covenant stands out in Hebrews. The author quotes Jer. 31:31-34 twice (8:8-12; 10:15-18), and it appears at the heart of his argument. The old covenant failed because Israel did not keep the covenant stipulations, and hence they were thrust into exile. The Lord promised, however, that He would make a new arrangement, a new covenant, with His people. He would implant the law within them so they could actually do what the Lord commanded. Furthermore, He would forgive the sins of His people. Interestingly, Hebrews doesn't emphasize the ability to do what the law commands. Instead, it focuses on the fact that the covenant is called 'new.' God would not make a new covenant if the old one were adequate. So the new covenant is also a 'better' covenant (7:22; 8:6). The new covenant has 'a better hope' (7:19), 'better promises' (8:6), and 'better sacrifices' (9:23), since Jesus' blood 'says better things than the blood of Abel' (12:24). The new covenant shows the believers should no longer live under the old, for the old is inferior and ineffectual. The inadequacy of the old comes to center stage when the author considers forgiveness. It doesn't make sense to revert to OT sacrifices since the repetition of such sacrifices illustrates their inability to cleanse the conscience from sin.

Schreiner: We see the promise and fulfillment theme also in terms of the rest (3:12-4:13), the land promised to the people of God. In God's covenant with the patriarchs, He promised them land (Gen. 12:1-3; 13:14-17; 15:18-21; 26:3; 28:4, 13-15; 35:12). The promise of the land is fulfilled under Joshua when Israel possessed Canaan, though the land was surrendered again when the northern kingdom was sent into exile by Assyria in 722 BC and the southern kingdom by Babylon in 586 BC. In NT times Israel was still in exile in that the Romans ruled over her. Hebrews teaches that the land promise has not been fulfilled in its fullness, but it doesn't look forward to Israel's possessing the land of Canaan. Instead, a future rest is promised to the people of God (4:1-13), a heavenly rest that is greater than any earthly rest. The patriarchs did not obtain the entirety of what God promised, living as sojourners on the earth (11:13). The promise of land, the promise of eschatological rest, will be fulfilled in the heavenly city, in the new Jerusalem which is coming (11:10, 14-16; 12:22; 13:14).

b) Already-but-Not-Yet Eschatology

Schreiner: One of the common features of NT eschatology is its already-but-not-yet character. What this means is that God's eschatological promises have been inaugurated through Jesus Christ but not consummated. Fulfillment has truly come in Jesus Christ, but the fulfillment isn't complete. Hence there is an eschatological tension that characterizes the NT witness.

Schreiner: We see eschatological tension in Jesus' reigning at the right hand of God. The reign of Jesus at God's right hand fulfills Ps. 110:1 (cp. 1:3, 13; 8:1; 10:12-13; 12:2). The last days have arrived (1:2), for the Messiah reigns as the OT has prophesied. It is striking for Christians today to realize that we have been in the last days for nearly 2000 years. As Hebrews says elsewhere, the 'end of the ages' has come through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ (9:26). But there is also eschatological reservation, for even though Jesus reigns in heaven, His enemies have not yet been completely vanquished (1:13; 10:13).

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Schreiner: The already-but-not-yet theme is also apparent with regard to salvation. On the one hand believers are waiting for Jesus to come again when He will bring salvation (9:28) and they will ‘inherit’ the salvation promised (1:14; 9:15). The fullness of the promise has not yet come to reality, but it will be realized when Jesus comes again (10:36-37). On the other hand, salvation is also the present possession of believers (2:3; 5:9; 6:9-10). Believers *are* saved and *will be* saved. Both are true, and neither truth should be denied or neglected.

Schreiner: Similarly, sanctification is an already accomplished reality; it has been definitively accomplished through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. But there is also eschatological reservation, a recognition that believers are not yet completely sanctified. They should ‘pursue...holiness’, for apart from it they will not ‘see the Lord’ (12:14). If sanctification were complete in every sense, there would be no need to pursue holiness. The urgent exhortation to holiness demonstrates that believers are not yet all they should be. Believers are already truly sanctified and set apart through Jesus Christ, and yet they await the fullness of their sanctification, the completion of Holiness that God intends for His people to enjoy.

Schreiner: The eschatological tension in Hebrews is also communicated by the warning passages (2:1-4; 3:12-4:13; 5:11-6:8, 10:26-31; 12:25-29). The readers are admonished about the terrible consequences of falling away. If they turn away from Jesus Christ, there is no hope for them. According to Jeremiah 31, beneficiaries of the new covenant have God’s law implanted in them. But if that is the case, why the need for warnings? Certainly residents of the heavenly city won’t need warnings. It seems here that we have another example of eschatological tensions. The readers are members of the new covenant, the law is written on their hearts, and they are truly partakers of the Holy Spirit. And yet they need warnings to stimulate them to persevere until the end. The warnings are not inconsequential or insignificant. Even though the readers have already received eschatological promises, they must heed the warnings to obtain eschatological promises.

Schreiner: The call to faith is also a recognition of the ‘not yet’ (10:39-11:40). Believers must continue to believe, as chapter 11 clarifies, to receive the promise, just as their ancestors believed in what God pledged to them. If the promise were visible (cp. 11:3) and the reward were given now (11:6), faith in God’s future promises would be superfluous. Faith places its confidence in what God will do in the future. Faith recognizes, then, that God hasn’t yet given everything He promised, and it reaches out to the future, believing that God will make good on everything He has said.

Schreiner: The rest promised in Hebrews is clearly eschatological (3:7-4:11). Believers must enter God’s rest, and yet at the same time it seems that 4:3 teaches that those who believe have entered God’s rest even now. The word ‘today’ (4:7) may also suggest that the rest can be entered now. Still, the rest is fundamentally an end-time reality (4:11). Believers are still exiles and sojourners (11:13), and in that respect they are like the wilderness generation (cp. 3:12-19), which was ‘on the way’ to receive God’s promise. Associated with the notion of rest is the promise of the city to come (11:10). The notion of the heavenly city is eschatological, but there is also a suggestion that believers have now ‘come’ to the heavenly Jerusalem, that they are members even now of a great heavenly assembly (12:22-23). Even though believers await the heavenly city in all its fullness and beauty, they are also currently members of it.

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c) *Typology*

Schreiner: Typology exists when there is a historical correspondence between events, institutions and persons found in the OT and the NT. Typology does not merely represent correspondence but a correspondence *intended* by God. In other words, there is a prophetic character to biblical typology. Events, institutions, and persons in which there is a typological relationship are not merely accidents of history, nor are they simply employed by God as helpful illustrations. On the contrary, the persons, events, and institutions were intended from the beginning as anticipations of what was to come.

Schreiner: Biblical typology is characterized by escalation. This means the fulfillment is always greater than the type. Indeed, this element of typology is absolutely crucial for Hebrews, for it is inconceivable that the readers would turn back to the type now that what God promised has become a reality, for the fulfillment is far superior to the type. We see, then, that escalation in typology fits with the main purpose of the letter: how can the readers turn away from Jesus Christ when His person and work are far superior to what was adumbrated in OT persons and institutions? Hebrews, then, reads the OT (rightly so), as forward looking. The OT itself points to a better priest, a better king, a better covenant, a better land, and better promises.

Schreiner: Typology in Hebrews centers on Jesus Christ. We see from the inception of the letter that ultimately all the types in the OT point to and climax in Him. God spoke in various ways to the prophets, but the prophets direct us to and anticipate one greater than themselves (1:1-2). Finally and supremely God has spoken in His Son. He is the greatest and final prophet. The author picks up this theme relative to Moses (3:1-6), for Moses is conceived of as the greatest prophet in the OT. The greatness of Moses as a prophet is emphasized in OT revelation. Jesus was a greater prophet than Moses, for He was not merely a servant or merely a prophet. He was God's Son.

Schreiner: The Melchizedekian priesthood of Jesus is also typological. Melchizedek was not a pre-incarnate appearance of the Son of God, for 7:3 says that Melchizedek was made like the Son of God. The wording here suggests that Jesus Christ as high priest was the goal and model of the priesthood from the beginning, and hence Melchizedek was always intended to point forward to Him. Melchizedek's role as both a priest and a king (7:1) anticipates Jesus Christ who is both a priest after Melchizedek's order and the Davidic king. The combination of the priestly and kingly offices is anticipated in Psalm 110, which identifies David's son as his lord, but also as a Melchizedekian priest who will serve forever (Ps. 110:1, 4). Hebrews, then, picks up on what the OT itself develops.

Schreiner: There is a sense in which the Levitical priests are types of Jesus as well (8:1-5). We see from 5:1-10 that the Levitical priesthood is the typological framework that anticipates Jesus' priesthood. What is emphasized, however, is the discontinuity between the two, for Jesus is a priest in the heavenly sanctuary, the true sanctuary, whereas the Levitical priests are restricted to an earthly ministry. The earthly priests are 'a copy and shadow of the heavenly things' (8:5). The earthly priests point forward to a better priest, a heavenly one. Earthly priests stand because their work is never finished (10:11), but Christ sits because His sacrifice does not need to be repeated (10:12-14), for final forgiveness has been accomplished.

Schreiner: The author picks up on the typological significance of the tabernacle and its sacrifices in 9:1-10. The animal sacrifices were a type of Jesus' greater sacrifice, and we clearly have an example of escalation since Jesus' sacrifice tore open the curtain in the temple/tabernacle

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separating human beings from God so that believers have constant access to God's presence (10:19-20). The physical washings and sacrifices of the OT (9:10, 13) anticipate a greater washing and cleansing, one that is effectual. The external washings, after all, only cleanse the body (9:13), but Jesus' blood sprinkles the conscience clean of sin and washes the body with water so that the whole person is truly cleansed (9:14; 10:22). There is also a typological relationship in terms of covenantal practices. The blood of animal sacrifices points forward to a greater and more effective sacrifice, to the blood of Jesus, which is a 'better' sacrifice (9:23-24), since it brings access to God. Jesus' once-for-all sacrifice secured forgiveness of sins forever. The law and the sacrifices therein are 'shadows' pointing to a greater reality (10:1), to a greater sacrifice. Animal sacrifices direct us to the sacrifice of Christ (10:2-10), for it is obvious that the blood of animals can't atone for sin.

Schreiner: Typology also plays an important role in the letter's warning passages. We see again here the prospective nature of typology and escalation. For instance, under the old covenant those who transgressed covenant stipulations received a 'just punishment' on earth (2:2). Such earthly punishments, however, anticipated the final judgment that would be experienced by those who drifted away from the salvation given by the Lord (2:3). In this case the punishment is escalated, for the readers are threatened with the eschatological wrath of God.

Schreiner: The author pulls on another thread regarding the rest. The wilderness generation didn't find rest, but under Joshua the people obtained the rest promised in Canaan (Jos. 22:4). God's promises regarding rest were fulfilled under Joshua (21:44-45; cp. 23:1). The author notes, however, that the rest Joshua gave to the people could hardly be ultimate (4:8). At the end of the day, the rest in Joshua is provisional, temporal, and earthly. Otherwise, the rest referred to in Psalm 95 would be extraneous (Ps. 95:11). It would be pointless to offer rest at a later period under David if earthly rest was already secured under Joshua. It follows, then, that the rest under Joshua is a type of a better rest to come, which is identified as 'a Sabbath rest' (4:9). Indeed, the name 'Joshua' here is actually the name 'Jesus.' Jesus is a new and better Joshua, and the writing of Psalm 95 after the days of Joshua signifies that a new and better rest is coming, a rest that is given by Jesus the Christ, a rest that can never be disturbed by anyone.

Schreiner: The typology of a future homeland is picked up elsewhere in the letter. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were promised the land of Canaan (11:8). Canaan becomes a type of heavenly homeland, a heavenly city that will be granted to believers (11:10, 13-16). Believers are exiles and resident aliens here, but the city to come is far better than any earthly city, for it is an enduring city (12:22; 13:14).

Schreiner: This brief foray into typology demonstrates that typology plays a significant role in Hebrews. The author often sees a typological connection between the OT and the NT, and he regularly sees an escalation between the type and its fulfillment.

d) Spatial Orientation

Schreiner: Hebrews quite frequently contrasts the earthly and the heavenly, so we have a vertical or spatial contrast. Hence, the author, in accord with the OT, works with a two-story model of the created cosmos—heaven(s) and earth (cp. Gen. 1:1; 2:1; Jer. 10:11). It also seems that the author distinguishes between the sky, the visible heavens, and heaven as God's dwelling place. Such a distinction is borne out since Jesus 'passed through the heavens' (4:14), is 'exalted above the heavens' (7:26), and has entered 'heaven itself' (9:24). The last phrase refers to the presence of God. The nature of the heavens here can't be described adequately, for God's dwelling place

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is mysterious and beyond human access. The language about a heavenly tent (8:2; 9:11, 24) and a city, however, should not be pressed to say that there is a literal tent or a literal heavenly city. Spatial imagery may be appropriated to express the inexpressible, to convey a reality that transcends our understanding in symbolic language. Hence, the reference to God's throne in the heavens points the readers to God's transcendence (1:3; 8:1-2; 10:12; 12:2).

Schreiner: According to the author, the heavenly realm is superior to the earthly. Jesus' priesthood, in contrast to the Levitical priesthood, is heavenly (8:4), and therefore Jesus' priesthood is infinitely more value than the ministry conducted by the Levitical priests. Similarly, the message conveyed from heaven, from Mount Zion, represents God's final and definitive word (1:2; 12:25). The author doesn't reject the word given through Moses and the prophets, but the heavenly message is the consummation and completion and fulfillment of what God has revealed. Hence, those who reject such a heavenly message will face sever judgment if they renounce the word proclaimed to them.

Schreiner: Believers have a 'heavenly calling' (3:1), and Jesus has 'passed through the heavens' (4:14), entering God's presence as high priest. The earthly tabernacle established by Moses is contrasted with 'the true tabernacle,' which is in heaven (8:2). The author is clearly saying that the heavenly is superior to the earthly. Similarly, the earthly priests who offer sacrifices according to the law are contrasted with Jesus, who is a heavenly priest (8:3-4). Earthly priests, then, are 'a copy and shadow of heavenly things' (8:5). Since the earthly reflects the heavenly, when Moses constructed the tabernacle, he did so according to the pattern specified by God (8:5; Ex. 25:40). The earthly is again inferior, but the argument isn't that it is inferior because it comes from the material world. Its inferiority is linked to eschatology, for the superiority of Christ's priesthood is tied to the inauguration of the new covenant in His ministry (8:7-13). The earthly tabernacle points above to 'a greater and more perfect tabernacle' in heaven (9:11), a tabernacle that is 'not of this creation.' The author isn't claiming that there is a literal tabernacle or place in heaven. He simply uses the language of the tabernacle to communicate the truth that the earthly tabernacle symbolizes God's presence in heaven. Jesus' sacrifice is better than animal sacrifices, for He entered the presence of God and cleansed the conscience of sin (9:12-14).

Schreiner: The law on earth is 'a shadow' (*Σκίαν Skian*) of the heavenly world, which is the 'actual form' (*εικονα, eikona*) of things (10:1). Similarly, Mount Sinai was terrifying when God came down on it, rocking with thunder and blazing with lightning so that those present were awe stricken (12:18-21). But believers have come to a better mountain: Mount Zion (12:22), a heavenly mountain where the 'living God' resides. Indeed, it is nothing other than 'the heavenly Jerusalem.' It follows, then, that no one will escape if they turn away from a message given from heaven (12:25), for even those who rejected the message from Sinai received an earthly judgment.

Schreiner: Believers should follow the example of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and look forward to a heavenly city instead of longing to fit into the present social order (11:13-16). They should recognize that they are exiles and resident aliens in the present world. This present earth is not their home. They long for the city that is coming (13:14).

For next time: Read Hebrews 1:1-4.