

The Book of Hebrews

Study Guide

LESSON
ONE

THE BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE OF HEBREWS



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STUDY GUIDE

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How to use this lesson and study guide

- **Before you watch the lesson**
 - **Preparation** — Complete any recommended readings.
 - **Schedule breaks** — Review the outline and the time codes to determine where to begin and end your viewing session. IIM lessons are densely packed with information, so you may want to schedule breaks. Breaks should be scheduled at major divisions in the outline.
- **While you are watching the lesson**
 - **Notes** — Use the Notes section to follow the lesson and to take additional notes. Many of the main ideas are already summarized in the notes, but make sure to supplement these with your own notes. You should also add supporting details that will help you to remember, describe, and defend the main ideas.
 - **Pause/replay portions of the lesson** — You may find it helpful to pause or replay the video at certain points in order to write additional notes, review difficult concepts, or discuss points of interest.
- **After you watch the lesson**
 - **Review Questions** — Questions on the basic content of the lesson. Answer review questions in the space provided. Review questions should be completed individually rather than in a group.
 - **Application Questions** — Questions relating the content of the lesson to Christian living, theology, and ministry. Application questions are appropriate for written assignments or as topics for group discussions. For written assignments, it is recommended that answers not exceed one page in length.

Outline

- I. Introduction (0:20)
- II. Background (1:56)
 - A. Authorship (2:17)
 - 1. Identity (2:40)
 - 2. Profile (8:28)
 - B. Original Audience (14:07)
 - 1. Jewish (15:01)
 - 2. Hellenistic (15:50)
 - 3. Immature (16:46)
 - 4. Persecuted (19:03)
 - 5. Near Apostasy (23:03)
 - C. Date (24:45)
- III. Purpose (27:38)
 - A. Intensity of Exhortations (31:24)
 - 1. Frequency (31:57)
 - 2. Rhetorical Style (33:54)
 - B. Goal of Exhortations (38:39)
 - 1. Reject Local Teachings (39:21)
 - 2. Remain Faithful to Jesus (48:46)
- IV. Conclusion (54:30)

Notes

I. Introduction

II. Background

A. Authorship

1. Identity

The author of Hebrews never identified himself.

In *The History of the Church*, Eusebius (quoting Origen) wrote: “But as to who wrote the epistle [of Hebrews], God knows the truth of the matter.”

Hebrews was omitted from both the Marcionite Canon (A.D. 144) and Muratorian Canon (A.D. 170).

By the end of the patristic period the majority of influential interpreters acknowledged the canonicity of Hebrews.

During the medieval period, most scholars attributed Hebrews to the apostle Paul.

Today, the majority of interpreters reject Pauline authorship for three reasons:

- Anonymity: Paul always named himself in his epistles.
- Themes: The book of Hebrews emphasizes subjects that don't receive much, if any, attention in Paul's letters.
- Generation: The writer of Hebrews distanced himself from the first generation of Jesus' followers.

2. Profile

- Hellenistic Jew:
 - Knowledge of the Old Testament

 - Sophisticated Greek

- Passionate Intellectual:
 - Complex theological arguments

 - Devotion and passion for the Christian Faith and fellow Christians (Hebrews 10:33-34; 12:1-2).

B. Original Audience

The author wrote to a specific audience with whom he was personally familiar (Hebrews 13:19-24).

1. Jewish

The author referred to the Old Testament Israelites as “*our* forefathers.” (Hebrews 1:1).

2. Hellenistic

Hebrews contains theological teachings that were common among Jews living outside of Palestine.

3. Immature

The author of Hebrews expected church leaders to teach his book to their congregations (Luke 4:16, Acts 13:15, 1 Timothy 4:13).

The original audience may have remained theologically immature because they didn't respect their leaders (Hebrews 5:11; 13:17).

4. Persecuted

They had faced persecution in the past, some were suffering in the present, and some would suffer in the future (Hebrews 10:32-35; 12:3-4; 13:3).

5. Near Apostasy

Some were in danger of turning away from Christ entirely (Hebrews 10:26-27).

C. Date

The earliest (*terminus a quo*) and latest (*terminus ad quem*) possible dates for this book can be established rather firmly:

- Earliest possible date: After Paul's death, around A.D. 65

- Latest possible date: Before the destruction of the temple, A.D. 70

III. Purpose

The author of Hebrews wrote to exhort his audience to reject local Jewish teachings and to remain faithful to Jesus.

The author of Hebrews urged his audience to receive his book as a word of exhortation (Hebrews 13:22).

A. Intensity of Exhortations

1. Frequency

The frequency of the author's exhortations helps us understand the urgency of his message.

The author used the hortatory subjunctive — a Greek verbal form used to urge or implore (Hebrews 4:14, 16; 12:12-16).

The author also exhorted his audience by using imperatives.

2. Rhetorical Style

Hebrews employs many literary devices that were associated with persuasive oratory or urgent debate in the first century:

- *synkrisis*, a detailed comparison between two or more things (Hebrews 7:11-28).
- *exempla*, lists of illustrations or examples that follow one after the other (Hebrews 11).
- *qol wahomer*, “light to heavy”: because the simple premise is true, then the more difficult must also be true (Hebrews 10:28-29).

B. Goal of Exhortations

1. Reject Local Teachings

To avoid suffering, the audience of Hebrews was tempted to accept teachings that were contrary to the Christian faith.

The author of Hebrews dealt with erroneous beliefs and practices that developed outside of mainstream Judaism (Hebrews 13:9).

The Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran helps us understand many of the exhortations in Hebrews against local Jewish teachings.

- Eating ceremonial foods (Hebrews 13:9)
- Assortment of basic teachings (Hebrews 6:1-2)
- Powers and roles of good and evils angels
- False teaching about Melchizedek

2. **Remain Faithful to Jesus**

The author of Hebrews called his audience to remain faithful to Jesus by organizing his exhortations into five major divisions:

- The supremacy of Christ over angelic revelations (Hebrews 1:1-2:18)
- Jesus above Moses' authority (Hebrews 3:1-4:13)

- Jesus as the supreme Royal Priest after the order of Melchizedek (Hebrews 4:14-7:28)
- The supremacy of the new covenant in Jesus (Hebrews 8:1-11:40)
- The exercise of practical perseverance (Hebrews 12:1-13:25)

IV. Conclusion

Review Questions

1. Why do the majority of interpreters believe that Paul was not the author of the book of Hebrews?
2. Describe five characteristics of Hebrews' original audience and provide biblical support for each characteristic.

3. What are the possible dates for the composition of the book of Hebrews? Describe the scriptural and historical evidence surrounding these dates.

4. What literary devices or methods did the author of Hebrews use to express and reveal his exhortations to his audience?

5. The author of Hebrews had specific goals in mind for his exhortations to his audience. List and explain the author's goals and how he expected his audience to respond to his exhortations.

Application Questions

1. In regard to the authorship of Hebrews, Origen said, “But as to who wrote the epistle, God knows the truth of the matter.” Does the anonymity of the book affect your confidence in its content? Explain your answer.
2. According to Hebrews 5:12, the original audience of Hebrews was immature. What are some areas in your spiritual life that need doctrinal progress?
3. The original audience was persecuted for following Christ. Have you been persecuted for your faith in Christ? How does the author's message encourage you?
4. The author wrote to exhort struggling Christians to reject false doctrine and remain faithful to Jesus. What false teachings are you facing? What has been your strategy to remain faithful to Christ?
5. The author of Hebrews communicated his message with a sense of urgency. How can you communicate and live out the gospel with the same sense of urgency as found in Hebrews?
6. The book of Hebrews is highly rhetorical. How can you implement this technique when exhorting Christians with biblical truth?
7. Name some Christians you know who have persevered in the face of trials and did not fall away from Christ. What are some things they did that are worthy of imitating?
8. What ministries are you currently engaged in, and how are they encouraging and helping Christians to remain faithful to Jesus?
9. What is the most significant thing you learned in this lesson?