

Lesson One: Hebrews 1–2**Hebrews: The Perfection and Finality of Christianity
An Introduction to Hebrews**

No New Testament book has more unanswered questions than Hebrews. Questions about author, date and destination all remain open. Our studies will deal primarily with the message rather than such background questions.

“The Word of Exhortation” (13:22)

The nature of the message is indicated toward the end when it is called a “word of exhortation.” The strong exhortations scattered through the book (2:1–4; chs. 3, 4; 5:11–6:20; 10:19–39; etc.) are a key to the conditions behind Hebrews. It was written to Christians under trial, on the verge of apostasy. In my view, the type of appeal made to them indicates “Hebrew” Christians.

A sketch of changes in the position of Jewish Christians will help. Paul’s experience at Ephesus (Acts 19:8f) is an example of the experience of Jewish Christians in many places. The initial inclination was to maintain association with the synagogues (cf. Acts 21:20–26). But the almost wholesale rejection of the Christ by Jewish people (discussed by Paul in Romans 9–11) and increasing Jewish hostility toward the gospel (Acts 13:42–52; 14:1–7, 19; 17:1–9, 13; 18: 4–6; 19:8–10; 20:19; 21:27–31; 22:22; 23:9f, 12–15; 25:2f; 28:23–28) forced the Christians to separate from the synagogues. The growing intensity of the conflict put great pressure on Christians. The writer urges his readers not to cast away the boldness they had manifested in the past (Heb. 10:32–39 cf. 12:1–13).

Explanations with Regard to Christianity the Ground of “the Word of Exhortation”

The exhortations and warnings are mingled with explanations of Christianity, involving a running comparison between Christianity and Judaism. Christianity is shown to be “better” than the old way as the goal and fulfillment to which the Old Testament pointed. The recipients were evidently Hebrew Christians being tempted to abandon Christianity and perhaps to go back to the old way, likely because of the persecutions Christianity had brought upon them.

A. B. Bruce calls this book “the first apology for Christianity,” which is shown to be the final and ultimate revelation from God—as Charles R. Erdman put it, “the perfect and therefore the final religion.” Repeatedly the author draws upon the Old Testament for testimony to its own incompleteness (7:11; 8:7f). But he then demonstrates that the vacuums left at the end of the Old Testament have been entirely filled in Christ. God’s revelation in Christ is his final word.

The consequences of apostasy from Christ are set forth with all their severity (2:1–4; 6:1–8; 10:26–31; 12:25–29).

Call for Separation (Heb. 13:10–14; cf. Acts 19:8f)

The call for separation from Judaism at the end of the book may remind many of Paul’s separation of the disciples from the synagogue at Ephesus.

(6)

God's Final Revelation **Hebrews 1:1–2:4**

God's Final Word Spoken Through His Son (1:1–4)

1. God's word in the past not the final word (1f). Describe the way in which God had spoken in the past.
2. A son the ultimate messenger (2). How is this point illustrated in Matthew 21:37?
3. Description indicating the ultimate in revelation (2–4). How is the Son described? List each descriptive clause and consider the meaning of each.¹
4. What is the effect of this description in its context, and standing as it does in the first sentence of this book?

¹ Cf. Psalm 2:7f, Daniel 7:13, and Matthew 28:18 for "heir of all things"; John 1:1–3 & Col. 1:16 for "through whom he made the worlds."

For "the glory of God" compare the word glory as applied to the heavenly bodies (1 Cor. 15:40f). Reference to God in all his attributes (cf. Rom. 1:23, everlasting power and divinity; 1 Tim. 6:16, light unapproachable). KJV has "brightness" for effulgence; NASB, "radiance." Greek *apaugasma* is "radiance, effulgence ... used of light shining from a luminous body (*apo*, from, and *auge*, brightness)" (Vine). The Son is the shining forth or manifestation of the glory of God whom no one can see (1 Tim. 6:16).

Two important Greek terms lie behind "the very image of his substance." Grk *charakter* was the instrument used for engraving or carving; then the impression stamped on something by means of a stamp or die, which is an exact reproduction of the original in every respect. Grk *hupostasis* is "substantial nature, essence, actual being, reality" (Arndt & Gingrich); "that in virtue of which a thing is what it is, the essence of any being" (Westcott). Thus the Son is distinct from the Father, but bears his nature as "the exact representation of his nature" (NASB), with every attribute of deity, all that is of the essence of deity.

Not only was he the agent of creation, but he also upholds all things "by the word of his power." Thus divine utterance both created (11:3) and sustains the world. Grk *phero* is primarily to bear or carry; hence the Son is not viewed as an Atlas passively supporting dead weight, but as carrying forward the universe to its goals. He accomplishes it "by the word of his power." The natural laws governing the universe are therefore expressions of the divine will.

"When he had made purification of sins" alludes to his office as high priest (cf. Lev. 16:30 with Heb. 9:24–27).

He then "sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high," which indicates "the exaltation and supremacy of Christ (F. F. Bruce), and also, according

Note continued next page

Superiority of the Son to Angels (1:4–14)

1. Verse 4 is transitional, completing the description of the Son, while also setting forth the thesis to be established in the following verses. What is that thesis?

2. How is this thesis proved in verses 5–14?

3. Now give close attention to details in verses 5–14. Observe the contrast between Christ and the angels. What is the position assigned to each?²

Conclusion: Greater Attention to be Paid to the Son (2:1–4)

1. “Therefore” introduces a conclusion drawn from the presentation in Chapter 1.³ What is that conclusion?

2. The conclusion is reinforced by reference to just recompense under the law (2–3). At the same time this reference shows the reason for the elaborate comparison between Christ and the angels. Explain “the word spoken through angels” by drawing upon Acts 7:38 & Galatians 3:19.

3. How did God remove all excuse for unbelief and “neglect” of the great salvation? (4).

to Hebrews 10:10–14, the sufficiency and finality of his offering. It is his session to the throne (cf. 1 Cor. 15:25f).

Finally, the superiority of the Son to angels is pointed out in a transition to the next major development.

Thus the first sentence makes references to three offices held by the Son. As God’s final spokesman he is a prophet; but he is also a priest and a king.

² Do not miss how much is actually being said about the greatness of the Son. Angels are creatures of such dignity a Jew and an inspired apostle bows before them (Rev. 19:10; 22:8f). But the Son is greater.

³ Grk *dia touto*: “for this cause; for this reason; therefore; on this account; since this is so” (Grimm-Thayer).

(8)

**Purpose of the Incarnation: The Great Salvation Accomplished by
Sufferings and Death
Hebrews 2:5–18**

The writer has shown that the Son is better than the angels (ch. 1). But at one time he was made a little lower than the angels. He was made flesh, and lived and died as a man. As the emphasis of Chapter One was upon the deity of Jesus, the emphasis in Chapter Two now falls upon the humanity of Jesus.

The great stumbling block to men, both Jews and Greeks, was the crucifixion of Jesus (1 Cor. 1:23). In the present passage the incarnation and death of Jesus are discussed and presented as something entirely appropriate and fitting in God's plan to bring man to glory.

Question: What are the purposes of the suffering and death of Jesus, according to the present passage?

The Great Salvation Defined as Dominion Over the World (5–8)

The present passage seems to be connected to the previous one as an elaboration and explanation of the great salvation mentioned in v. 3. This great salvation is explained as an attainment of the position of lordship to which man was originally destined. Observe that salvation and dominion over the world are connected not only in vv. 3 & 5, but also in v. 10 where the idea of being brought to glory is quickly exchanged for the idea of salvation.

1. The world to come was not subjected to angels, but to whom? (5, as explained by the following verses).

2a. The one to whom the world to come was subjected is brought out by the quotation of Psalm 8:4–6 (6–8a). Who, according to this psalm, was destined to have dominion over the world?⁴

2b. Consider: Is the psalm a direct prophesy of Jesus Christ, or does it apply to man generally and then to Jesus (in v. 9) only as one who became a man?

3. What application of the psalm is made with regard to the extent of the dominion assigned to man? (8b).

4. When, however, it comes to the realization of the divine intention, what is the sad reality that is observed? (8c).

⁴ Read the whole of Psalm 8, which is a celebration of God's original appointment in Genesis 1:26–28.

Man's High Destiny Realized Through Jesus Christ (9–13)

1a. First what is not seen (8c); then what is seen or beheld (9). Notice the adaptation of language from Psalm 8. In what way does a passage originally celebrating the high destiny of man find special application to Jesus Christ?

1b. What is taught with regard to how man's destiny is to be realized?

2a. The sufferings and death of the Christ worthy of God (10). What is meant by the writer when he says what God did was becoming to him?

2b. Consider the importance of that idea in a book written to Jewish Christians.

2c. What is the ultimate purpose of God with regard to man? (Compare the language with Psalm 8 quoted in 6–8a).

2d. What was the divine means of accomplishing that purpose?

2e. Use context to explain what is meant by calling Jesus "the author (otherwise translated captain, leader, pioneer, and the like) of their salvation."

3. Verse 10 is further elaborated by reference to the common kinship of sanctifier and sanctified (vv. 11–13).

3a. How is "he that sanctifieth and they that are sanctified" explained in later passages? (10:10, 14, 29; 13:12).

3b. Explain "all of one" from context, drawing upon the reference to Jesus as God's son (ch. 1) and to others as "many sons" (2:10), and also the kinship brought out in the quotations from Psalm 22:22 and Isaiah 8:17f.

Further Explanations of the Incarnation and Death of Jesus (14–18)

1. Why, according to v. 14, did Jesus become a man?

2. What twofold purpose of the death of Jesus is brought out in verses 14 & 15?

3a. Not to angels, but to whom does he give help? (16).

3b. Define the help given by Jesus from the previous context.

4. What additional explanation of the incarnation is brought out in verses 17f? (See 4:15 & 5:1–3 for more light on this subject).

5. "Succor" (v. 18) means help (Grk *boetheo*). How is this priestly help obtained, according to 4:16 (Grk *boetheia*)?

(10)

Lesson Two: Hebrews 3:1–4:13

**Exhortation to “Hold Fast”
and Warning Against Unbelief
Hebrews 3:1–4:13**

As we have seen, the message of this book combines (1) an argument with regard to Christianity as the perfect and therefore the final religion with (2) exhortations and warnings against apostasy, growing out of the explanations about Christianity. It was obviously written to save Christians, specifically Hebrew Christians, from apostasy. The next two lessons contain two strong motivations to “hold fast” (cf. 3:6, 14; 4:14). We must pay particular attention to the significance of the expression “hold fast” which is so characteristic of Hebrews, and to the two motivations or encouragements to do so. The argument of this section begins with a comparison.

Although the writer almost immediately digresses to exhortation and warning, the challenge to his readers with which this section begins (3:1): “Consider the Apostle and High Priest of our confession, Jesus” (3:1), is really an announcement of the doctrinal subject of the book. Take note of the way the discussion of the incarnation (Ch. 2) has led up to this subject. The incarnation was shown to be necessary to the office of Jesus as high priest (2:17f). Now the challenge: “Consider the Apostle and High Priest of our confession,”⁵ follows on the heels of this explanation and, in fact, is even a conclusion drawn from it, as pointed out in questions on the first subdivision below. Then following the lengthy exhortation and warning (3:1–4:13)—sort of a digression from the development of the doctrinal theme—the writer returns to the subject of the priesthood (4:14), and I have placed the entire body of material from 4:14 through 10:18 under one heading: “Our Great High Priest.” Except for one lengthy digression (5:11–6:20), the section 4:14–10:18 will be devoted to this subject with all its ramifications. All questions about the priesthood of Jesus, all possible challenges from unbelieving Jews, will be taken up in the discussion.

⁵ The compound verb *katanoeo* contains the simple verb (*noeo*) meaning to apply one’s mind to something: “to think upon, heed, ponder, consider” (Grimm-Thayer, 426f). The addition of the preposition *kata* makes the idea stronger: “to perceive clearly, to understand fully, consider closely” (Vine); “to consider attentively, fix one’s eyes or mind upon” (Grimm-Thayer, 334; similarly Arndt & Gingrich, 415).

Greek *apostolos* is literally “one sent.” Observe that this term is applied to Jesus as the writer prepares to compare him to Moses, who was sent by God (Ex. 3:10). “Of our confession” means: belonging to our confession; something like: the High Priest whom we confess, profess or acknowledge. Observe the way the objects of the holding fast that is the condition of a Christian’s relationship to God moves from “our boldness and the glorying of our hope” (3:6) to “the beginning of our confidence” (3:14) to “our confession” (4:14).

Jesus Greater Than Moses (3:1–6)

1a. The exhortation with which the comparison begins (1) is brought in as a conclusion derived from the previous section.⁶ What is the exhortation?

1b. From what in the previous passage is the exhortation derived?

2. What is first said about Jesus as the author introduces the comparison with Moses? (2).

3. What reason is given (in 3) for giving attention to Jesus?⁷

4. Every house has a builder, but the ultimate builder of all things is God (4), continues the argument. Then the relative positions of Moses and Christ with respect to the house of God is set forth (5–6a). How is the superiority of Jesus to Moses brought out?⁸

5a. What is the “house of God” (according to 6b)?

5b. What is the condition of being (or remaining) God’s house? (also 6b).

Quotation of Psalm 95 (3:7–11)

1. How is this quotation related to what precedes it in vv. 1–6?⁹

2. What is the substance of the warning given in this psalm?

3. Do you begin to see the reason for the comparison between Jesus and Moses? Give your thoughts.¹⁰

Application of Psalm 95 (3:12–15)

1. What application is made of Psalm 95? (12).

2. What is the antidote to the apostasy warned against? (13).

⁶ Grk *hōthen* is an adverb meaning “from where, whence, from which.” It is used literally of place and then in reasoning: “from which fact” (in 1 John 2:18) and “for which reason” (Heb. 2:17; 3:1; 7:25; 8:3; 9:18; and possibly 11:19; also Matt. 14:7; Acts 26:19) (Arndt/Gingrich, 555).

⁷ With regard to the superior glory of the builder to that of the house itself, compare Psalm 19:1.

⁸ Observe that the key to the comparison is the relation which each has to God’s house, meaning household. Moses was faithful in God’s house as a servant (cf. Num. 12:7). Christ was faithful, not as a servant but as a son (cf. 1:1–4), and not in but over God’s house. As a son he bears the nature of God and is identified with God the builder (cf. 4b).

⁹ Grk for “Wherefore” is *dio*: on which account.

¹⁰ Observe: God’s voice is still heard as once through Moses (7; cf. 4:1f).

(12)

3. What preventative measure can be taken against apostasy?

4. Point out the conditional nature of salvation (14).

5. How is the urgency of giving heed brought out in verse 15?

6. Refute the “once saved, always saved” theory by using this text. How especially is verse 12 effective as an answer when someone argues from the assurances given to believers in scripture?

Questions to Hammer Home the Lesson (3:16–19)

1. What purpose is served by this series of questions?¹¹

2. What is the plain fact before our eyes? (19).

Call for Diligence to Enter the Promised Rest (4:1–13)

1. Historical and Contextual Background with Regard to the Promise of Rest Remaining:

1a. In the wilderness after the escape from Egyptian bondage Israel had been promised rest in the land of Canaan (Ex. 33:14; Deut. 3:20; 12:9f; 25:19; Josh. 1:12–15).

1b. The promise was fulfilled when Israel conquered Canaan under Joshua and received rest in the land (Josh. 21:44; 22:4; 23:1).

1c. But some had fallen in the wilderness and a long time afterward a later generation was warned not to be like them (Ps. 95:7–11; cf. Num. 14:20–23, 28–33).

1d. Now we find the author of Hebrews drawing a warning from Psalm 95 for his readers in Chapter 3—a warning not to imitate the example of Israel in the wilderness.

1e. Chapter 3 closes with an assertion of the plain fact that the wilderness generation had not been “able to enter in because of unbelief” (19).

2. The Rest Remaining for the People of God (4:1–13). Observe two points intertwined in the reasoning of this section: (1) A demonstration of the fact that a rest remains. (2) The conditional nature of entrance into that rest.

2a. Connecting link with Chapter 3 (1). What is the warning that is drawn from Israel’s experience in the wilderness?

2b. What explanation of this warning is given in verse 2?

2c. How does the writer support his point that God’s rest was only for believers? (3ab; Psalm 95 with Heb. 3:16–19).

¹¹ The questions force a readers to use his mind and take heed.

2d. Yet Israel's failure to enter God's rest was not due to the lack of availability (3c). How does the writer prove that point? (4).

2e. It is becoming clear that the writer's understanding of "rest" involves more than the rest in Canaan following the conquest of Israel's enemies. He defines what God meant by his "rest" in Psalm 95 by reference to Genesis 2:2. How is God's rest defined by the coupling of these two passages?

2f. Since the wilderness generation had failed to enter God's rest, what did God then do a long time afterward? (6–7). In other words, what does the writer understand God to be doing in Psalm 95?

2g. How does the writer show (in 8) that God's promise of rest was not exhausted by the entrance into Canaan under Joshua?¹²

2h. What conclusion is drawn (in 9) from the reasoning up to this point?

2i. What further explanation of rest is given in verse 10 (cf. Rev. 14:13)?

3. *Application: The Call for Diligence (11–13).*

3a. Two points have been established: (1) A rest remains for the people of God, and: (2) It is only for the faithful. What is called for, then, in the way of application? (11).

3b. What reason is given for diligence? (12).¹³

3c. Further reason for diligence is added in verse 13. What points are made about God?

¹² Follow the author's reasoning on Psalm 95! The psalm warns a later generation not to be like the wilderness Israelites. The threat is that they may fail to enter into rest just as the wilderness generation failed. Hence Psalm 95 is taken to be an urgent call to enter into God's rest. Yet Israel was already in Canaan. Therefore, the rest spoken of in Psalm 95 is more than Canaan.

¹³ Observe the relevance of this reference to the word of God. The word of God is being heard today just as Israel heard a word from God (1:1; 2:1–4; 4:2), calling upon people to enter into rest (4:1, 2, 7). And this word is no "dead letter" unable to accomplish anything; never coming to pass; not to be taken seriously (cf. Is. 55:10f). God's word is living and energetic. When God said the wilderness generation would not enter his rest, they did not enter! His word is not to be taken lightly by unbelief and disobedience.

Furthermore, God's word is compared to a sword. It pierces to the inmost nature and being of a person, testing or judging (Grk *kritikos*) the thoughts and purposes of the heart. Israel's reaction to God's word, for example, had exposed "an evil heart of unbelief" (3:12).