

# “His Son”

## The First in a Series on the Epistle to the Hebrews

*Texts: Hebrews 1:1-4; Psalm 2:1-12*

---

**W**e begin a new series on the Book of Hebrews. Hebrews is an epistle which exalts Jesus Christ, who is superior to Israel’s prophets, superior to the angels, superior to Moses, superior to Aaron and the priests of Israel, and because of whom life in the New Covenant is vastly superior to that under the Old.

As John Calvin contends, the purpose of this epistle is to explain the offices of Christ and demonstrate how Jesus has fulfilled all the ceremonies of the Jewish law. As we will see, this is an epistle which was written to Greek-speaking Jewish Christians, some of whom were abandoning their Christian faith and returning to Judaism. Because Hebrews addresses all of these issues, the Epistle to the Hebrews speaks powerfully to us today. There are people all around us who come to believe that Jesus is the Christ, but who eventually give up their profession of faith and return to whatever it was that they believed before. There are also people in our churches who believe all the right things on an intellectual level, but who never do seem to put their profession of faith into action. There are even those who for a time profess the Reformation doctrine of justification *sola fide*, but who abandon that confession and convert to Romanism or Orthodoxy. The Epistle to the Hebrews is a warning and an exhortation to all of us, not to abandon our faith in Jesus Christ. Not only is Jesus vastly superior to anything or anyone else we might imagine, but to walk away from Christ is to come under his judgment.

As we begin this series, I ask all of you to take some time in the next few weeks and read through this epistle in its entirety, and then do so throughout this series. It is important to keep the big picture before us, so we don’t bog down in the details. Hebrews is not an easy book to study because it presupposes that its reader is quite familiar the Old Testament. Yet because Hebrews is so thoroughly grounded in the Old Testament, it is a vital book for us to know and study. Hebrews explains to us how we are to understand the Old Testament. Hebrews is also direct and pointed in its language and its rather stern warnings need to be applied to the right people in the right ways. The bruised reeds and smoldering wicks among us need to realize that struggling with the assurance of one’s salvation is not something which characterizes apostasy—a theme which is addressed in this letter. Apostates give up on their profession in Christ—they don’t worry about not having assurance of their salvation, something they never truly had in the first place. And we need to understand the warnings we find within, and then heed them.

In addressing the superiority of Jesus, the author sets forth the uniqueness of our Lord as the Son of God, the second person of the Holy Trinity. But Christ’s deity is not discussed in the abstract, but in the context of his role as the mediator of a new and better covenant, a covenant which was foretold by all of Israel’s prophets (especially Jeremiah). Christ’s mediatorial work in which he represents us before our heavenly father, ties together the rich redemptive themes of priesthood, sacrifice, and covenant—all of which are prominent in this epistle.

**B**efore we get started with the opening verses of this book, it is important to deal with the critical questions of who wrote this book and when, to whom was it written and why, as well as identifying the issues with which the original recipients of this letter were struggling, and which prompted someone to write this epistle and offer the kind of sophisticated arguments about the supremacy of Christ raised throughout. But the “who,” the “where and when,” and the “why” questions are especially difficult with The Book of Hebrews.

One of the remarkable facts about the Book of Hebrews is that no one knows who wrote it, no one knows when it was written, and no one knows to whom it was originally addressed. Yet, it was widely accepted soon after it was written, and there were only minor quibbles in the church about whether or not Hebrews was canonical—quite unusual for a book whose author was unknown. Based upon its contents, we do know that this epistle was written to a group of Greek-speaking Jews (known as Hellenistic Jews), who were probably more at home in the lukewarm Judaism found in the synagogues throughout the cities of Greco-Roman world, than they would have been in the more strict (legalistic) Judaism in the area around Jerusalem where the temple was located. But more on the original audience in a bit.

As for authorship (the “who”), I’ll spare you the details of the scholarly debate which surrounds Hebrews, but the bottom line is that no one knows who wrote this epistle. A number of people throughout the centuries have suggested that Paul wrote it, but I remain unconvinced. I agree with Calvin’s assessment that “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 totally different from the way in which Paul spoke of himself.”<sup>1</sup> There are many words used in this epistle not found anywhere else in the New Testament, and its structure is that of a homily—a written sermon with a personal greeting at the end. This is not characteristic of what we know about Paul. Coupled with the fact that Hebrews takes up the themes of priesthood and sacrifice, which are not addressed in the known letters of Paul, I think it unlikely Paul wrote this epistle.<sup>2</sup>

Although those who argue that Paul is the author appeal to the fact that the author mentions the circumstances surrounding Timothy’s release from prison in Hebrews 13:23, (Timothy was a known companion and friend of Paul), this doesn’t prove that Paul wrote this epistle, but it does lend support to the fact that whoever did write it was in Paul’s circle of associates (i.e., Barnabas, Luke, Apollos). The church fathers, by and large, could not agree as to who wrote Hebrews. While some suggested Paul, others argued for Luke (because of the epistle’s refined Greek style, unlike Paul’s, but much like that of Luke-Acts). Still others argued for Barnabas (Paul’s well-known associate), and even several felt that Clement (a second generation Christian leader who wrote a letter from Rome that is published in the writings of the Church Fathers) was the book’s author. But the fathers were agreed that even though the epistle did not have Paul’s name attached to it, it came out of the Pauline circle—which is why the epistle was so widely accepted by the church, even though no one knew who had actually written it.<sup>3</sup>

Apparently, Martin Luther was the first to suggest that Apollos had written the letter,<sup>4</sup> a view that is now probably the majority position among Christian scholars. Apollos has several things going for him, namely that in Acts 18:24, Luke says of him, “*now a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was an eloquent man, competent in the Scriptures.*” This information is important, because Apollos was from Alexandria, a center of Hellenistic Judaism, and according to some, the Epistle to the Hebrews reflects the kind of rhetoric, style, and manner of argumentation reflected in writings of Philo of

---

<sup>1</sup> Calvin, Hebrews and I and II Peter, trans., W. B. Johnston (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 1.

<sup>2</sup> W. L. Lane, “Hebrews,” in Dictionary of the Later New Testament & Its Developments, eds., Martin and Davids (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 444.

<sup>3</sup> See the discussion in Carson, Moo, and Morris, An Introduction to the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 394-397.

<sup>4</sup> F. F. Bruce, The Epistle to the Hebrews, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 17-18.

Alexandria (A Jewish philosopher). This is an interesting suggestion, but at the end of the day, all we can say for sure is only God knows who wrote this epistle.<sup>5</sup>

That said, we do know that the author knew Timothy, and according to Hebrews 2:3-4, the author states that he never actually heard Jesus preach in person. [The Gospel] “*was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.*” So, the author was not an eyewitness to the ministry of Jesus, but he says he knew those who were. He probably knows those to whom he is writing, based upon the warmth of his closing exhortation which, sadly, must be delivered in writing and not in person. “*I appeal to you, brothers, bear with my word of exhortation, for I have written to you briefly*” (Hebrews 13:22). So without knowing who wrote this epistle, and without a specific destination mentioned, we not only don’t know who wrote it, also we don’t know to which church exactly, it is addressed.

But from the contents of the letter, we know a great deal about those to whom it was sent. In the first six verses of chapter 13, the author makes a series of exhortations which seem to fit best in an urban setting. Christians are to be hospitable to strangers (v. 2, “Christian travelers”), they are to remember Christians who have been imprisoned, or received ill-treatment at the hands of the authorities (v. 3). They are to be concerned about the sanctity of marriage and sexual purity (v. 4), and they are to be content with what they have and they are to avoid the pitfalls of materialism (vv. 5-6). And then there is the comment made in 13:14, “*for here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come,*” which seems to exhort the struggling congregation to consider that the city in which they live, no matter how large or important it may be, will not last. All this points to a small church in the middle of a large city.

There are also a couple of references to the household of God (Hebrews 3:6, 10:21) which lead some commentators to conclude that this was a church meeting in someone’s house, (as the people who lived there were a “household,” so too the church which met there was part of God’s household), and that due to the pressures under which the group found themselves, its members began to neglect church attendance. This seems to be the case in Hebrews 10:23-25, where the author writes, “*let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.*”

So, these circumstances could apply to any number of cities in the first century. Some feel Rome is most likely, others see cities such as Alexandria (especially if Apollos is the author) as a likely destination. We just don’t know. But we do know a great deal about those who will read this epistle. Greek speaking Jews were committed to the authority of the Old Testament—this is why the author constantly appeals to the LXX, showing that the superiority of Christ is not just a New Testament message. In fact, the superiority of Jesus is found throughout the Old Testament if only you know where to look. The author addresses the role of angels in giving the Old Testament revelation, and he addresses the importance assigned to Moses by the Hellenists who focus upon him, and not Abraham—all important points of known emphasis among of Hellenistic Jews. His main point—Jesus is superior to all of them.

Who wrote Hebrews? We don’t know. When was it written? Because we don’t know who or where, we don’t know when Hebrews was written either, although given that the epistle is absolutely silent about the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70, this letter was very likely written before the Roman army ravaged

---

<sup>5</sup> Cited in Bruce, Hebrews, 20.

Jerusalem and destroyed both the city and its temple. After all, if you were writing an epistle to refute the claims of Jewish superiority to Christianity, the best argument you would have had would be the destruction of the temple—the sign of God’s judgment on Israel. But the destruction of Jerusalem is not even mentioned, which is a strong indication that Hebrews had been written prior to that event.

Why was this epistle written? We can certainly deduce something about the matter of “why” from the issues addressed in the epistle. The writer seems to know these people, and is aware of their particular circumstances. The church seems to be struggling, as the opening words of Hebrews 2 indicate that some were departing from the faith. *“Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?”* Some were losing interest in the gospel. Some were neglecting their salvation.

And then some of those in the church are also said to be “dulling of hearing” in a spiritual sense (5:11). In Hebrews 5:12, we read, *“for though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food.”* Christian maturity is an issue in this church, as many people have never moved beyond their basic profession of faith in Christ to flesh out the ramifications of following Jesus in such a difficult situation as their own: persecution from the pagans and from the government, and having friends and family urge you to give up on Christianity and return to the synagogue.

In light of this temptation to renounce Christ, there are also several strong warnings in this epistle about the possibility of falling away (chapters 6 and 10). Those who are truly Christ’s will heed these warnings. The long list of martyrs in Hebrews 11 supports the conclusion that Christians in this church found themselves under intense persecution, probably from their friends and family who remained behind in the synagogues, or even from the governing authorities. Judaism was a legal religion in much of the Greco-Roman world, and as Christianity and Judaism began to go their separate ways, Christians increasingly found themselves as a persecuted minority. The author reminds them and us, that Jesus endured the shame of the cross for us and in our place. Jesus is not only superior to all things, but our Lord is fully acquainted with suffering and persecution.

In all likelihood, since it was so difficult to be a Christian under such circumstances, a number in this congregation had just given up and left the church and returned to the synagogue. It was just easier to do so. But then this raises the question of their eternal standing before Christ, and whether or not they were truly Christians, and whether they could be restored. These were tough times in this unidentified congregation, and despite the direct warnings not to fall away from faith in Christ, in demonstrating Christ’s absolute superiority over angels, Moses, and the priesthood, the author is encouraging these beloved saints to persevere to the end. To put it another way, he is giving them a reason to persevere.

This, then, is the reason why this epistle was written and this a point we will consider a number of times as we proceed in the coming weeks.

**W**ith this background in mind, we now turn to the opening section of this epistle (the first four verses) in which the author sets forth the superiority of Jesus Christ as God’s supreme and final revelation of himself.

The name of the author of this epistle might not be known to us, but in the first four verses, he makes his purpose in writing this letter crystal clear. *“Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir*

*of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.”* Jesus Christ is the supreme revelation of God. In Jesus Christ, God has spoken once and for all, finally and definitively.

Opening with the common ground that Christians and Jews share (the Old Testament), the author emphasizes the fact that God has spoken. It is God who reveals himself to us, it is not we who discover God. Indeed, if God had not spoken we would know little about him—for while the knowledge of God we all derive from nature (general revelation) is sufficient to leave us without excuse, it is insufficient to tell us that God is triune, that Jesus is his son, and that God has done all those things necessary for us to be saved from the guilt and tyranny of sin. From nature we know that God exists. From Scripture we know who God is, and that he has revealed himself through the person of Jesus Christ.

The author immediately divides God’s revelation into two stages. In the past (*at many times and in many ways*) God spoke through the prophets (i.e., the Old Testament). But in the present (*in these last days*) God speaks to us through Jesus Christ, his son. In making this distinction, the author uses an expression taken from the LXX, “the last days,” or the “final days” as a reference to that coming age of salvation predicted throughout the Old Testament in which God’s redeemer would at long last appear and bring about the final deliverance of God’s people.<sup>6</sup> With the coming of Jesus Christ, the world has entered the final phase of its history, exactly as predicted throughout the Old Testament. With the coming of Jesus, we are now living in the last days, and have been since the time of the apostles.

Having divided redemptive history into two periods which correspond to the Old Testament era and the New Testament era (the latter being characterized by God speaking through his son who is superior to anything in the Old Covenant), the author now makes his case as to why all of those believe that God has spoken through the prophets, should also believe that God has now spoken through his son, Jesus. He lists seven things about Jesus Christ, emphasizing different aspects of his supremacy over all things.<sup>7</sup>

First, Jesus Christ is “*the heir of all things.*” This is an echo from Psalm 2:8 (part of our Old Testament lesson this morning). The author will explain this fact in more detail in Hebrews 2:5-9, as Jesus will put all things under his feet—meaning he rules over all things. But the point here is that Jesus is that one of whom the Psalmist was speaking when he wrote of the coming son, that God “*will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession.*” Jesus is superior to Moses and the prophets because he is God’s son, all created things are his, and are ordained for his glory and purposes.

Second, Jesus is the creator of all things. It is Jesus “*through whom also [God] created the world.*” This echoes the assertion found in the prologue of John’s gospel (John 1:3), where John states, “*all things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made,*” as well as Paul’s affirmation in Colossians 1:16, “*for by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him.*” Jesus is the supreme revelation of God because he has created all things. Therefore, he is greater than all the prophets. In fact, all the Old Testament prophets bear witness to Jesus.

---

<sup>6</sup> William L. Lane, Hebrews 1-8, Word Bible Commentary, Vol. 47a (Dallas: Word Books, 1991), 10-11.

<sup>7</sup> Bruce, Hebrews, 46.

Third, Jesus is *the radiance of the glory of God*. Jesus Christ is superior to Moses because Jesus is everything that God is, and because he possesses both the wisdom and glory of the father. Closely related is a fourth point, that Jesus is *the exact imprint of his nature*. In Greek, we read that Jesus is the *charakter* of God, a term used only here in the New Testament, and stronger than the term *eikon* (image), which is used elsewhere of Jesus.<sup>8</sup> These two statements affirm that God himself is revealed in the person of Jesus. Therefore, Jesus is superior to everything and everyone else, just as God is superior.

Fifth, the author points out that not only did Jesus create all things, but he also sustains them. “*He upholds the universe by the word of his power.*” Jesus is superior because it is he who holds the universe together and directs everything so that it reaches its appointed goal.

Sixth, Jesus demonstrates his superiority to the priests of Israel because “*after making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.*” Unlike Israel’s priests who must continue to offer sacrifices to unto God, Jesus’ sacrifice was so superior to the of the Aaronic priests and Levites, in that once it was offered, the sins of God’s people were forgiven, enabling Jesus to take his place at the father’s right hand because his sacrificial work on behalf of God’s people was completed. And seventh, having completed this work, it is now clear to all that Jesus has “*become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.*” Moses does not sit at God’s right hand. Melchizadek, Aaron, and the priests of Israel do not sit at God’s right hand. Neither do angels—who instead serve God and worship. But the Son is so superior to them all, that he sits at the right hand of God—a symbolic reference to possessing the authority of God, since God does not have a right or a left hand. In all seven of these ways, Jesus is superior to everything and everyone else. God has spoken and when he did, he revealed that Jesus Christ is “his son.”

**W**hat do the opening words of this epistle say to us today?

The main theme running throughout the Book of Hebrews is the absolute superiority of Jesus Christ. Based upon the seven facts just set forth, Jesus is superior to angels. He is superior to Moses. He is a superior to all human priests. And since Jesus Christ is superior to all things, why would anyone abandon him and return to something inferior? The synagogue? The pagan temple? The worship of Caesar? To return to these things after professing faith in Christ is to do as the author states in Hebrews 6:6—it amounts to “*crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt.*” Apostasy is indeed a most serious thing. It amounts to a denial that Jesus is superior to all things, and it is a denial that the death and suffering of Jesus are necessary if we are to be saved from our sins.

For those whose faith in Jesus is being eclipsed by other things (the cares of this world), we must consider that Jesus Christ is superior to all things—including all those things of the world we care about more than him—because Jesus created all these things, he sustains all these things, and he directs all these things to his divinely ordained purposes. If Jesus is superior to everything we care about, how can we neglect that one who gives these to us to enjoy.

Beloved, God has spoken. And when he did, he has told us that Jesus Christ is his son. And God’s son is superior to all created things. Amen.

---

<sup>8</sup> Bruce, Hebrews, 48.