

God Has Spoken
“A Definitive Word”

Introduction: Today the letter of Hebrews (several weeks/months, up to Advent)

Uniqueness of Hebrews—first of what are called the General Epistles (Hebrews-3rd John) and the first of non-Pauline

- But more than a letter—a sermon
- Gareth Cockerill helpful here

“Hebrews is best understood as an example of the kind of homily or sermon, typical of the synagogue and thus used in early Christian worship,”

— It includes BOTH EXPOSITION and EXHORTATION!

And I appeal to you, brethren, bear with the word of exhortation, for I have written to you in few words. Hebrews 13:22 NKJV

IMPORTANT UNDERSTANDING—to best understand and then ultimately apply any biblical text, one must as carefully and accurately as possible seek to understand the **cultural context, time of writing, recipients of letter** and their **unique situation, author** and **authorial intent, general themes** of the book/letter, and **first reader understanding** of the text.

Few minutes to do just that!

A. **Cultural Backdrop (2-fold—Greek/Hebrew audience)**

1. **Greek philosophical thought**

- a. **Plato** (500 years prior)—spoke of real, unreal, seen and unseen—“somewhere a world of perfect forms, ideas, patterns—everything in this world is an imperfect copy.” **NOTE:** This world but a copy of an “unchangeable and eternal pattern.”
- b. **Philo** (borrowed from Plato)—(God) “shaped an ideal world when he prepared to create the visible world.”
- c. **Cicero**—“all we enjoy is shadows and sketches.”
- d. **Thinkers of that day**—“somewhere a real world of which this world is only a pale shadow. We can only guess and grope. In the unseen world are the real things, the perfect things, the world as God conceived it.

(ILL) Cardinal priest John Henry Newman (1890)

Statue: "Ab umbris et imaginibus ad veritatem"

"Away from the shadows and semblances to the truth."

e. The message of the Hebrews author to Greek people

Now this is the main point of the things we are saying: We have such a High Priest, who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, 2 a Minister of the sanctuary and of the true tabernacle which the Lord erected, and not man. 3 For every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices. Therefore it is necessary that this One also have something to offer. 4 For if He were on earth, He would not be a priest, since there are priests who offer the gifts according to the law; 5 who serve the copy and shadow of the heavenly things, as Moses was divinely instructed when he was about to make the tabernacle. For He said, "See that you make all things according to the pattern shown you on the mountain." Hebrews 8:1-5 NKJV

2. Hebrew Backdrop

a. Dangerous to come near to God

So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: "For I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved." Genesis 32:30 NKJV

- b. Day of Atonement—High Priest only—1 time a year and could not linger
- c. So God gave covenant—could have access IF they obeyed
- d. Sin interrupted access to God
- e. System of Levitical priesthood/sacrifices instituted to take away barrier (had to be repeated and guilt never removed)

- Priest imperfect
- Sacrifice flawed

f. Humanity needed perfect Priest/perfect sacrifice

- Jesus was born (priest)

Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. 15 For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. 16 Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need. Hebrews 4:14-16 NKJV

For such a High Priest was fitting for us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and has become higher than the heavens; 27 who does not need daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the people's, for this He did once for all when He offered up Himself. 28 For the law appoints as high priests men who have weakness, but the word of the oath, which came after the law, appoints the Son who has been perfected forever. Hebrews 7:26-28 NKJV

— Sacrifice

For the law, having a shadow of the good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with these same sacrifices, which they offer continually year by year, make those who approach perfect. 2 For then would they not have ceased to be offered? For the worshipers, once purified, would have had no more consciousness of sins. 3 But in those sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. 4 For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins. Hebrews 10:1-4 NKJV

By that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. 11 And every priest stands ministering daily and offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. 12 But this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God. Hebrews 10:10-12 NKJV

To the Greek—Jesus brings you from shadows to reality

To the Hebrews—Jesus is perfect Priest/Perfect sacrifice—He is that way to access with God

B. The acceptance of Hebrews

1. Not mentioned in Muratorian Fragment Canon (170)
2. Clement & Origen (Alexandrian Scholars) knew it, loved it, but agreed it was disputed as scripture
3. Tertullian & Eusebius—ranked among disputed books
4. Athanasius—middle of 4th century definitely accepted it
5. Even Luther was skeptical

C. When was it written?

1. 2nd generation Christians

How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard Him. Hebrews 2:3 NKJV

2. Not new to faith

For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. Hebrews 5:12 NKJV

But recall the former days in which, after you were illuminated, you endured a great struggle with sufferings. Hebrews 10:32 NKJV

3. Those to look back to

Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct. Hebrews 13:7 NKJV

4. It is clear their leaders had been persecuted (see previous verse)

5. Also clear they had not suffered persecution yet

You have not yet resisted to bloodshed, striving against sin. Hebrews 12:4 NKJV

6. Had experienced some mild forms

But recall the former days in which, after you were illuminated, you endured a great struggle with sufferings: 33 partly while you were made a spectacle both by reproaches and tribulations, and partly while you became companions of those who were so treated; 34 for you had compassion on me in my chains, and joyfully accepted the plundering of your goods, knowing that you have a better and an enduring possession for yourselves in heaven. Hebrews 10:32-34 NKJV

7. Whole letter points to potential persecution on horizon

NOTE: Clear that Hebrews written between two persecutions

— Nero AD 64—many killed

— Domitian AD 85

— Hebrews written somewhere in between—probably closer to Domitian AD 80

To whom was it written?

1. General

a. Christian audience, saved a while

b. 2nd generation

c. Likely a church community in Rome

Greet all those who rule over you, and all the saints. Those from Italy greet you. Hebrews 13:25 NKJV

d. Long established church

For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. Hebrews 5:12 NKJV

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2. Mixed up Jew and Gentile

- a. Church in Rome originally Jewish
- b. Claudius kicked out (41-54)
- c. Allowed back in—mixed church
- d. Roman Christianity had Jewish flavor
 - Sacrificial system, priesthood should not be relied on for access to God (Jewish issue)
 - God-fearers (like Cornelius) attracted to Jewish way originally—loved synagogue
 - Ambrosiasta (350) “Roman Christianity was established with a Jewish bent.”
 - Gentiles converted under Judaism

e. Who wrote it?

1. Not certain—not Paul—2nd generation
2. Many suggestions
3. Barnabas a possibility—a Levite—Jews/Gentiles loved him
4. Apollos

Now I say this, that each of you says, "I am of Paul," or "I am of Apollos," or "I am of Cephas," or "I am of Christ." 1 Corinthians 1:12 NKJV

5. Priscilla (Aquila together)

f. General Situation

1. Persecution imminent (witness of faith, some did not escape—chapter 11—so look to Jesus)
2. Judaism protected by Romans—did not persecute—easy to return to Judaism
3. Christ had not returned yet

So Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many. To those who eagerly wait for Him He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation. Hebrews 9:28 NKJV

There remains therefore a rest for the people of God. 10 For he who has entered His rest has himself also ceased from his works as God did from His. Hebrews 4:9-10 NKJV

4. People in danger of shrinking back

Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching. Hebrews 10:25 NKJV

Therefore strengthen the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees. Hebrews 12:12 NKJV

5. Could even lose their salvation

For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, 5 and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, 6 if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame. Hebrews 6:4-6 NKJV

For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins. Hebrews 10:26 NKJV

Big

- g. Big—underlying problem—waning confidence in the message of Christianity
 1. Things too tough
 2. Things too confusing
 3. Maybe the message of Old Testament Judaism IS THE answer—not trust in Jesus!
 4. Don't shrink back

Therefore do not cast away your confidence, which has great reward. 36 For you have need of endurance, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise: 37 "For yet a little while, And He who is coming will come and will not tarry. 38 Now the just shall live by faith; but if anyone draws back, My soul has no pleasure in him." 39 But we are not of those who draw back to perdition, but of those who believe to the saving of the soul. Hebrews 10:35-39 NKJV

GOD HAS SPOKEN IN HIS SON!

- h. Today—so much diversity
 1. Many ways touted to God
 2. Exclusive Christianity while not persecuted—may be—certainly paying a toll
 3. Should we look another direction?
 4. Writer of Hebrews says NO!

God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, 2 has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds. Hebrews 1:1-2 NKJV

IMPORTANT: In this opening statement to this general book—the author is clarifying that the coming of Christ was the grand and ultimate revelation of God.

Echoes John:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. John 1:1-4 NKJV

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. John 1:4 NKJV

To these people, threatened by persecution, persuaded by many arguments and alternatives he writes.

Four brief truths revealed in this opening text...

I. The Revelation of Christ brought an end to the Divine Silence—GOD HAS SPOKEN!

- A. 400 years since He had
- B. Had always been a speaking God
- C. Adam and Eve
- D. Abraham
- E. Moses
- F. David
- G. Prophets
- H. Silence

Silence has broken in Christ—God has spoken!

II. The Revelation of Christ brought about Continuity and Fulfillment to the Divine Word of the Old Testament

- A. Spoken in times past
- B. Heard in these last days—same God speaking
- C. Not a new story—continuing

And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself. Luke 24:27 NKJV

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up. John 3:14 NKJV

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me. John 5:39 NKJV

D. In Hebrews

1. Great High Priest
2. Better sacrifice
3. Better covenant

III. The Revelation of Christ brought Definitive Clarity to the Divine Word

God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets. Hebrews 1:1 NKJV

- Various (poly-me-ros') times (many portions fragment)
- Various (poly-tou'-pos) ways (many manners)

A. In the Old Testament God used various methods to reveal various fragments about Himself

1. Hosea married a prostitute to reveal God's faithfulness
2. Abraham found a ram to reveal God's provision
3. Moses used rod to reveal God's power
4. 2 rams to reveal God's forgiveness and atonement
5. Flood to reveal God's judgment

B. In Christ all is clear and definitive

For it pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness should dwell. Colossians 1:19 NKJV

No more fragments, portions, or partial revelation

IV. The Revelation of Christ brought Uncompromising Exclusivity to the Divine Word

- A. His final revelation is His Son
- B. God has spoken
- C. No need for another word

Conclusion: In this series will probe into many unique contexts—many of which will seem antiquated.

1. An underlying and timeless struggle will emerge.
2. Is Christ the only way?
3. Can we shrink back in this enlightened and pluralistic culture from the truth of Christian orthodoxy?
4. Can we find new ways to God that are more palatable to culture and society?
5. Writer of Hebrews would say no!
6. God has spoken!

Finally!
Definitively!
In Christ!