

Introduction to the "Letter to the Hebrews": The Who, What, and Why of the Sermon (Part 1)

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Hebrews, Authorship, Septuagint, Rhetoric, Progymnasmata, Hellenistic Judaism, Sermon, Discipleship

Abstract

This source serves as an introduction to the "Letter to the Hebrews," exploring its authorship, literary style, and cultural contexts. The lecture demonstrates that while traditional Pauline authorship is highly unlikely, the sermon was written by an exceptionally well-educated, Hellenistic Jewish Christian associated with Paul's circle. Through close examination of the text's advanced Greek syntax, oral-rhetorical patterns, and reliance on the Septuagint, the presenter highlights how the preacher crafted a powerful spoken sermon. Ultimately, Hebrews emerges as a rich theological and ethical masterpiece that seamlessly integrates Jewish scriptures with Greco-Roman philosophical, educational, and athletic traditions.

Outline

I. Introduction to the Letter to the Hebrews

- A. Common perceptions of the text as inaccessible or mysterious due to complex Old Testament interpretations and Levitical descriptions
- B. Distinctive canonical value in shaping Christian theology and discipleship

II. Distinctive Theological Contributions of Hebrews

- A. Pre-existent Christology: theological reflection on the activity of the Son prior to the incarnation
- B. Re-conceptualization of the atonement, the significance of Jesus' crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension
- C. Unique hermeneutic of the Old Testament: reading scriptures as addressed to, about, or placed on the lips of the Son
- D. Ethical resources: teaching on active faith (chapter 11), cosmology, and navigating visible reality
- E. Interpretation of suffering as an opportunity to withstand hardships in obedience to God

III. Summons to Full-Bodied Discipleship

- A. Summons to gratitude: recognizing how divine grace establishes reciprocal obligations to serve and honor God
- B. Call to despise shame: overcoming concern for worldly approval to live for the applause of heaven
- C. Focus on supportive Christian community: fostering group solidarity to enable individual perseverance in a privatized world

IV. The Mystery of Authorship

- A. Historical and traditional assumptions of Pauline authorship

1. Anonymity of the text from beginning to end
2. Early inclusion in the Pauline corpus (placed directly after Romans in Papyrus 46, c. 200 AD)
3. Association of Timothy in Hebrews 13:23 as a co-traveler of Paul
4. Title attribution in the King James Version

B. Arguments against Pauline authorship

1. Conversion experience: Author describes being converted by the preaching of eyewitnesses (Hebrews 2:3-4), whereas Paul claimed direct revelation (Galatians 1:11-17)
2. Rhetorical style: Artistry and elaborate ornamentation run counter to Paul's explicit philosophy of plain preaching (1 Corinthians 2:1-5)
3. Canonical debates: Early church uncertainty and disputes in Eastern and Western churches until the late fourth century

C. Alternative candidates in the Pauline circle

1. Barnabas: A Levite (Tertullian's view), fitting the text's detailed Levitical interests
2. Apollos: Described as a skilled speaker (Acts 18:24) with notable rhetorical talent
3. Prisca (Priscilla): Modern nomination, but highly unlikely due to the author's use of a masculine Greek participle (Hebrews 11:32) and personal relationships with the audience

D. Epistemological limit: Origen's classic conclusion that 'God knows' who wrote the epistle

V. Character and Education of the Preacher

A. Advanced mastery of the Greek language

1. Sophisticated hypotactic syntax (complex subordinating clauses) compared to Mark's paratactic syntax
2. Extensive use of participles, genitive absolutes, and future participles

B. Formal rhetorical training at the pre-gymnasium level (progymnasmata)

1. Mastery of preliminary composition patterns for the elaboration of a theme
2. Direct application of schoolbook rhetorical structures in Hebrews 12:5-11:
 - a. Introduction to topic/thesis (Hebrews 12:5a)
 - b. Thesis from Proverbs quotation (Hebrews 12:5b)
 - c. Supporting rationale (Hebrews 12:6)
 - d. Restatement of the thesis (Hebrews 12:7a)
 - e. Confirmation of rationale through shared parenting experience (Hebrews 12:7b)
 - f. Argument from the contrary (Hebrews 12:8)
 - g. Argument from analogy comparing biological and divine parents (Hebrews 12:9-10)
 - h. Conclusion utilizing a modified educational maxim on bitter roots and sweet fruit (Hebrews 12:11)

VI. Genre and Form: Hebrews as a Spoken Sermon

A. Absence of standard epistolary openings (no sender, addressee, or greetings)

B. Highly stylized, beautiful spoken prologue (Hebrews 1:1-4)

1. Alliteration: Five P-sounds in the first twelve Greek words of Hebrews 1:1
2. Internal rhymes: Stylistic cadence devices (homo-arcton and homo-teleuton) in Hebrews 1:3
3. Antithesis: Balanced contrast between how God formerly spoke and how He speaks now

C. Focus on spoken delivery: Constant references throughout the text to speaking and hearing rather than reading

VII. Cultural Location of the Preacher and Audience

A. Hellenistic Jewish Christian identity: grounded in a Jewish environment within the Greco-Roman world

B. Pervasive engagement with the Greek Old Testament (Septuagint/LXX)

1. Strategic capitalization on distance/nuances introduced by translation
 - a. Psalm 8: Ambiguity of the Greek word for 'little' (temporal 'little bit of time' vs. Hebrew spatial distance) used to support the incarnation
 - b. Psalm 40 / Hebrews 10: Greek translation 'a body you have prepared for me' (vs. Hebrew 'ears you have dug') used to argue for Christ's physical offering
2. Reliance on shared sacred scriptures as the ultimate source of authority for the audience
3. Diverse hermeneutical strategies:
 - a. Christological readings: scriptures spoken to, about, or by the Son
 - b. Typological interpretation: Moses, the Levitical priesthood, and rituals as shadows pointing to Jesus
 - c. Moral interpretation: Old Testament figures as positive and negative ethical exemplars

C. Active incorporation of Greco-Roman cultural life

1. Pedagogical wisdom: The Greek maxim 'he suffered, he learned' (epaphen, emaphen) in Hebrews 5:8
2. Metaphors of educational levels: Metaphor of milk vs. solid food to shame/motivate spiritual maturity (analogous to Stoic philosopher Epictetus)
3. Cardinal virtues: Discernment of the noble and base (Hebrews 5:14) reflecting classic definitions of wisdom
4. Philosophical portrayal of death: Portraying Jesus' triumph to free humans from fear of death (Hebrews 2:14-15) in ways reminiscent of Seneca's portrayal of Socrates
5. Athletic imagery: The stadium race, cloud of spectators, and boxing/wrestling to bloodshed (Hebrews 12:1-4)