

New Testament Literature: The Book of Hebrews

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Session 27

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Abstract

In Lecture 27 of the New Testament History and Literature series, Dr. Dave Mathewson introduces the Book of Hebrews as a unique "word of exhortation" aimed at second-generation Jewish Christians facing persecution. He explores the enigma of anonymous authorship and explains how the text systematically demonstrates the ultimate superiority of Jesus over Old Testament institutions and figures. Central to the lecture is Christ's identity as the supreme High Priest according to the order of Melchizedek, fulfilling the promises of the New Covenant where the Old Covenant could only point forward. Ultimately, Mathewson emphasizes that believers must press on in faithful obedience rather than retreating to obsolete shadows.

Outline

I. Introduction and Context of the General Epistles

- A. Course Announcements and Scope
 - 1. Third exam schedule (Ephesians through Titus)
 - 2. Exclusion of Hebrews from the third exam
- B. Transition to the General/Catholic Epistles
 - 1. Definition of "General" or "Catholic" as broad readership
 - 2. Contrast with Paul's letters to specific local churches
 - 3. Distinct classification of Revelation

II. Background, Authorship, and Setting of Hebrews

- A. Anonymous Nature of the Work
 - 1. Lack of explicit author identification in opening verses
 - 2. Absence of traditional first-century letter opening
 - 3. Opening focus on God's final revelation through His Son (Hebrews 1:1–2)
- B. Historical Proposals for Authorship
 - 1. Early church association with Paul
 - 2. Modern scholarly consensus rejecting Pauline authorship

3. Alternative candidates (Apollos, Barnabas, Luke)

C. Readership and Geographic Location

1. Early church tradition associating the location with Rome
2. Audience familiarity with Old Testament sacrificial system
3. Profile of the addressees (F.F. Bruce summary)
 - a. Second-generation Jewish Christians who had not seen Jesus in person
 - b. Experience with persecution, imprisonment, and loss of property
 - c. History of practical service to fellow believers
 - d. Arrested spiritual development facing a crisis of faith

III. Purpose, Genre, and Structural Dynamics

A. Core Purpose: Persuasion against Apostasy

1. Temptation to return to ancestral Judaism and tangible rituals
2. Warning of severe loss from retreating versus eternal gain in Christ

B. Literary Genre: A "Word of Exhortation"

1. Textual self-identification in Hebrews 13:22
2. Function as a written sermon combining exposition and exhortation

C. Alternating Structural Patterns

1. Interleaving of exposition (theological proof) and exhortation (practical warning)
2. Comparisons demonstrating Christ's superiority (angels, Moses, Joshua, tabernacle, sacrifices)
3. Threefold structural division
 - a. Chapters 1–4: Jesus as God's true final revelation
 - b. Large central section: Jesus as the superior High Priest
 - c. Final section: Partnership with Jesus and practical obedience
4. Overlapping transition sections complicating rigid outlines

IV. The Old Covenant versus the New Covenant

A. Nature and Limitations of the Old Covenant

1. Rejection of the view that the Old Covenant was inherently evil or defective
2. Inability of Old Covenant sacrifices to bring perfection or resolve sin completely
3. Restrictions on direct entry into God's presence under the Old Covenant

B. Superiority and Fulfillment in the New Covenant

1. Arrival of perfection and cleansing from sin in Christ
2. Opening of direct access to God's presence for worshippers
3. Characterization of the Old Covenant as prophetic shadows fulfilled in Jesus

V. The Historical Argument and the Priesthood of Melchizedek

A. Internal Old Testament Witness to Temporary Systems

1. Levitical/Aaronic priesthood requirements (tribe of Levi)
2. Prophetic anticipation of another priesthood in Psalm 110:4
3. Prophetic anticipation of another covenant in Jeremiah 31
4. Anticipation of true Sabbath rest in Psalm 95

B. Jesus as Messiah and High Priest

1. Messianic kingly lineage from David (tribe of Judah)
2. Resolution of tribal restrictions via the priestly order of Melchizedek
3. Combined role of Christ as Davidic King and Melchizedekian High Priest

VI. Tabernacle Imagery and Wilderness Wandering Parallel

A. Use of Wilderness Tabernacle Imagery over Jerusalem Temple

1. Focus on the portable tabernacle, Holy of Holies, and ark
2. Reflection of the audience's wilderness journey motif

B. Comparison between Readers and Exodus Generation

1. Analogy to Israel wandering between Egypt and Canaan
2. Call to press forward in faith to the promised rest