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LESSON NOTES

A TREATISE CALLED HEBREWS
Rationale & Background

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WHY STUDY HEBREWS

We are starting a new curriculum next Lord's Day. For those who have been working within the *Gospel Project* or the *Bible Studies for Life* or other *Lifeway* curricula, you have probably noticed a lot of "skipping around." While such topic-focused lessons may work well in some contexts, I and other Bible study folk at Carrollwood Baptist have yearned for straightforward Bible study, where the full text is fully honored, its entire context entirely respected. Too frequently, context was an afterthought. And, too often our previous curricula have left out key passages—either because they were too difficult, or too contentious, or because they would be "too much" to cover on one Lord's Day.

A QUESTION TO GET YOU THINKING:

WHY IS JESUS THE CHRIST THE PERFECT MANIFESTATION OF FATHER GOD?

HEBREWS—THE CHALLENGE OF SEASONED BELIEVERS

For example, we love to equate "church attendance" with righteousness; and when we do so, we dispute the Lord God Himself as sole judge. *It's not good to tug on superman's cape.*

MINDBYTE NO. 1:

WHAT PART OF A "CHURCHED" BACKGROUND COULD BE MORE A CURSE THAN A BLESSING?

YOU DON'T TUG ON SUPERMAN'S CAPE



When

we create rules about manners, for example, and enforce them as if they were matters of Godly morality, we're on the brink of spiritual idiocy, if not blasphemy. We love our rules, and when given rules for living and being by the Lord God Himself, we often worship the rules—instead of the Rule-Giver. It's our seasoning which spoils God's recipe for our lives.

The early church was dominated by seasoned believers, those believers whose heritage was either traditionally Jewish (e.g., Peter or John), or traditionally Hellenistic (e.g., Stephen). Their filter for understanding Messiah came from their culture,

their traditions, and their delimited understanding of Scripture. After all, they did not have access to the written word which became what we now call the *New Testament*.

Don't forget, however, a significant minority of the early church was comprised of God-fearers—Gentiles who were in various stages of becoming believers as a proselyte, or Gentiles whose previous life was pagan. Diana the love god, or Jupiter the politically correct god of Rome were the deity intelligentsia. As the years went by, the church began to be populated more by people with a pagan, secular background rather than the culture generated by pre-Christ believers.

Whether pagans, God-fearing Gentiles, faithful Jews, or unfaithful Jews, it was those with a Hebrew heritage who suffered the most from adopting Jesus not as the Messiah, but as their Sovereign Lord. The book of Hebrews is an attempt to call back those believers who were leaving, those believers who failed to grow, and those who were just afraid of losing everything. Most everything which they had counted on—was now gone.

It is this context which helps us understand Hebrews as a whole. They were indeed losing everything which they knew to be true. But, how do we understand this? Imagine the Nazis won World War II (e.g., [The Man in the High Castle](#)). As an American citizen with 300+ years of heritage, how would you react to losing the title to your home? Or, being required to learn and speak German; and, Americanized English is no longer the "king's English." Or, everyone is required to give lip service, at least, to the occult practices of the Nazi Party. Would there not be pressure to stay with what is comfortable—to worship in secret, to wish for the "old days," or to put your hand over your heart, when "sig heil!" was the correct response?



MINDBYTE NO. 2:

WITH WHAT PART OF ACCEPTING JESUS THE CHRIST THEN WOULD YOU HAVE MOST DIFFICULTY ACCEPTING?

- ✂ LORDSHIP?
- ✂ EQUALITY WITH "JEHOVAH?"
- ✂ NO MORE PRIESTS?
- ✂ NO MORE SACRIFICES?
- ✂ ACCEPTING PAGANS IN THE CONGREGATION?

And so it was for the early Christians, especially those with a Hebrew heritage. Their widows could not go to the temple for sustenance. Old business relationships were now kaput. The Way was spiritually deafening. Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ expected complete submission. There was no middle ground. How can I understand the Lord God Jehovah—the One who is, has been and

shall always be—as a man from Nazareth of all places? He's not even from Jerusalem! Even though sometimes in a cloud by day or a pillar of fire by night, or in the holy of holies, we were taught nonetheless God is far away. How can this Jesus of Nazareth be the Christ, the Son of God, yes even, the Lord God Himself?

Let's see over the next 13 weeks how the writer of Hebrews answered the challenge of seasoned believers...

A NOTE OF ENCOURAGEMENT

The success of any Bible study is entirely dependent upon three entities: you, your teacher and Holy Spirit. Therefore, He exhorts you to study—do your homework; encourage your teacher by prayer and active participation; most importantly, continually pray to Father God for Holy Spirit to guide us as we learn what He taught the writers of Scripture 1900+ years ago.

BACKGROUND¹ ON THE BOOK OF HEBREWS

Author

The writer of this letter does not identify himself, but he was obviously well known to the original recipients. Though for some 1,200 years (from circa A.D. 400 to 1600) the book was commonly called "The Epistle of Paul to the Hebrews," there was no agreement in the earliest centuries regarding its authorship. Since the Reformation it has been widely recognized that Paul could not have been the writer.

Not Paul? There is no disharmony between the teaching of Hebrews and Paul's letters, but the specific emphases and writing styles are markedly different. Contrary to Paul's usual practice, the author of Hebrews nowhere identifies himself in the letter—except to indicate that he was a man.² Moreover, the statement "This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him" (2:3), indicates the author had neither been with Jesus during his earthly ministry nor received special revelation directly from the risen Lord, as had Paul (Galatians 1:11-12).

Barnabas? The earliest suggestion of authorship for Barnabas is found in Tertullian's *De Pudicitia*, 20 (circa 200), in which he quotes from "an epistle to the Hebrews under the name of Barnabas." From the letter itself it is clear the writer must have had authority in the apostolic church and was an intellectual Hebrew Christian well versed in the Hebrew Scriptures. Barnabas meets these requirements. He was a Jew of the priestly tribe of Levi (Acts 4:36) who became a close friend of Paul after the latter's conversion. Under the guidance of Holy Spirit, the church at Antioch commissioned Barnabas and Paul for the work of evangelism and sent them off on the first missionary journey (Acts 13:1-4).

Apollos? Another leading candidate for authorship is Apollos, whose name was first suggested by Martin Luther, and who is favored by many scholars today. Apollos, an Alexandrian by birth, was also a Jewish Christian with notable intellectual and oratorical abilities. Luke tells us "he was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures" (Acts 18:24). We also know Apollos was associated with Paul in the early years of the church in Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:12; 3:4-6,22).

Date

Hebrews must have been written before the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 70AD because:

- (1) Had it been written after this date, the author surely would have mentioned the Temple's destruction and the end of the Jewish sacrificial system.

¹Adapted, corrected and revised by D. Thomas Porter from Compton's Interactive NIV © 1996.

²In Hebrews 11:32, we see the Greek (λέγω, 3004) for *I speak/tell*. It translates the masculine form of a Greek verb, suggesting the author of Hebrews was male.

- (2) The Temple's destruction was one of the Christ's most alarming prophecies. The fulfillment of His prophecy would have been great evidence that the Christ was indeed who He said He was.
- (3) The author consistently uses the Greek *present* tense when speaking of the temple and the priestly activities connected with it (see 5:1-3; 7:23,27; 8:3-5; 9:6-9,13,25; 10:1,3-4,8,11; 13:10-11).

Recipients

The letter was addressed primarily to Jewish converts who were familiar with the Hebrew Scriptures and who were being tempted to revert to their pre-Christ understanding of the Lord God (Judaism) or to integrate (syncretism) those beliefs and "Judaize" (legalize) the gospel (cf., Galatians 2:14³). Some suggest these professing Jewish Christians were thinking of merging with a Jewish sect, such as the one at Qumran near the Dead Sea. Others suggest the recipients were from the "large number of priests who became obedient to the faith" (Acts 6:7).

Theme

The Sufficiency of Christ. The theme of Hebrews is the absolute supremacy and sufficiency of Jesus the Christ as revealer and as mediator of God's grace. The prologue (1:1-4) presents the Christ as Father God's full and final revelation, far surpassing the limited preliminary revelation given in the Hebrew Scriptures.

The prophecies and promises of the Hebrew Scriptures are fulfilled in the Christ's ministry and as mediator between Deity and humanity. From the Hebrew Scriptures, the Christ is shown to be superior to the ancient prophets, to angels, to Moses (the iconic mediator of the former covenant) and to Aaron and the priestly succession descended from him. Yeshua the Christ is shown to be superior even beyond the greatest priest in God's history, Melchizedek.

The Book of Better Things. Hebrews⁴ could be called "the book of better things" since the two Greek words for "better" and "superior" occur 15 times in the letter. Practical applications of this theme are given throughout the book. We're told there can be no turning back to or continuation in the old religious system, which has been superseded by the unique priesthood of the Christ, God Himself.

God's people now must look only to Him, whose atoning death, resurrection and ascension opened the way into the true, heavenly sanctuary of God's presence. Resisting temptations to give up the struggle, believers must persevere in the spiritual contest to which we have committed ourselves. Otherwise we will meet with judgment as did our forefathers who rebelled in the desert.

Bottom-line. The book of Hebrews is for all believers, regardless of background. And, ironically, it is only written for the believing descendants of Abraham. How can this be? Paul answered the paradox well with a succinctly powerful statement of the gospel:

*You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. **If you belong to Christ, then [all of] you are Abraham's descendants, and heirs according to the promise.** —Galatians 3:26-29*

³When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter in front of them all, "You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?" —Galatians 2:14

⁴Remember the Hebrew meaning of "Hebrews;" i.e., people without a country. The promise of sovereign territory for the chosen of Christ's people, is a foundation of hope, courage and spiritual sentience.

Hebrews 1:1-4. *Christ is the definitive revelation of Deity*. Before today, the Lord God made His character and presence known through prophets⁵ through various means and on many occasions. But today? Father God has spoken to us through His Son. Now, this Son has been appointed heir of all things—everything belongs to Him. In fact, the universe was made through the Son. The Son of God radiates Father God's glory. The Son is the exact depiction of Father God's nature and character. If you know the Son, you know the Father. In fact, it is through the Son that all things, I say again, all things, are sustained by His prevailing authority—He speaks and the universe does nothing but await His command.⁶



HEBREWS 1:1-4

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways,² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe.

³The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.

⁴So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.

When the Son of God came to earth as Jesus of Nazareth, His ministry taught us, His death atoned for sin, and His resurrection proved His divinity. Once ascended to heaven, He sat down at the right hand of the Majestic Father God in heaven itself.

In so doing, the Son of God became superior to the angels, even more authoritative than those

angels with authority (e.g., Gabriel and/or Michael, to say nothing of Satan).

- Q Why didn't Christ reveal Himself as human before 4AD? In other words, why were prophets used to communicate the wishes and will of the Lord God instead of coming to earth Himself? [Hint: valleys & mountains, order & chaos, barren deserts & lush farms.]
- Q Why did the writer declare the universe itself was made through the Christ?
- Q Why is it spiritually pragmatic to understand Jesus the Christ is the authentic representation of Father God? That is, to understand He, the Christ, is fully Deity? See Table 1, page 8.
- Q As the perfect representation of Deity, why was His purification for sins complete?
- Q To where did Jesus the Christ ascend? So?
- Q Why is His superiority to the angels an important declaration for the writer?

⁵*through the prophets*. All Hebrew Scripture writers are viewed here as prophets—their testimony was preparation for the coming of Christ; cf. "by his Son" (v. 2), a new and unique category of revelation in contrast to that of the prophets. *at many times and in various ways*. The Hebrews Scriptures' revelation was a foretaste of what was to come, a virtual movie trailer of the feature to be first shown on 4AD and completed circa 33-34AD.

⁶To understand the Chinese response to Jesus the Christ's command over the universe, see Figure 1 on page 7 of this background paper.

Hebrews 1:5-14. *Christ is superior to angels.*
Your only real encounter with the Lord God has been through prophets, whom you easily recognized as earthly, and angels whom you easily recognized as heavenly. But, Jesus the Christ is no angel, for He is superior to any angel. Here's why...

1. Father God declared no angel "a son."
But, Psalm 2:7 says, "You are my Son; today I have become your father."
And in 2 Samuel 7:14, we read the great Davidic promise, "I will be his father, and he will be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him with the rod of men, with floggings inflicted by men."
2. The Son of God is the Firstborn. The Scriptures say He is to be worshipped by the angels—"Let all God's angels worship Him." –Deuteronomy 32:43
3. The Son of God is everlasting. Psalm 45:6-7 says His throne will last forever; righteousness will be His scepter. He has been anointed with an oil of joy because the Father God loves righteousness and hates wickedness.
4. The Son of God outlasts even the earth itself. Psalm 102:25-27 tells us the heavens are the work of His hands; they may perish, but not Him. His years will never end.
5. Finally regarding angels, to what angel did Father God say, "Sit at my right hand while I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet?"

Bottom line: Are not all angels simply spirits sent by God to minister to those who inherit salvation? We serve the Son of God; angels serve Him and us, those who are Abraham's descendants—those who are heirs to the promise.

Q Why is it significant to declare no one is the Son of God except Jesus the Christ? [Hint: according to the LDS, who is the Christ's brother? According to the JW, who is the Christ? According to Islam, who is Jesus the Christ? According to Scientology, who is the Christ? According to most believers in Jesus the Christ, who is Christ? Evidence?]

HEBREWS 1:5-14

For to which of the angels did God ever say,
"You are my Son; today I have become your Father?"
[Psalm 2:7]

Or again,

"I will be his Father, and he will be my Son" [2 Samuel 7:14; 1 Chronicles 17:13]?

⁶ And again, when God brings his firstborn into the world, he says,

"Let all God's angels worship him." [Deuteronomy 32:43 & the Qumran Scrolls & the Septuagint]

⁷ In speaking of the angels he says,

"He makes his angels winds, [and] his servants flames of fire." [104:4]

⁸ But about the Son he says,

"Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever, and righteousness will be the scepter of your kingdom.

⁹ You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy."
[Psalm 45:6-7]

¹⁰ He also says,

"In the beginning, O Lord, you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. ¹¹ They will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment.

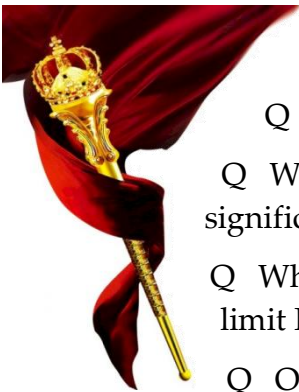
¹² You will roll them up like a robe; like a garment they will be changed. But you remain the same, and your years will never end." [Psalm 102:25-27]

¹³ To which of the angels did God ever say,

"Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet?" [Psalm 110:1]

¹⁴ Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?

- Q Do you suppose the Psalmist knew about Whom he was writing when Holy Spirit [Acts 2] inspired him to note "... today I have become Your Father?"
- Q What is the pragmatically spiritual value of knowing Jesus the Christ is everlasting? Consider the matter (a) theologically, and then (b) religiously, and then (c) personally.



Q What is the scepter of the Christ's kingdom? Why does that symbolize sovereignty?

Q What is the oil by which the Christ was anointed? Why this ingredient?

Q Why will the creation of the Christ perish, but not Christ Himself? What is the significance of the writer's declaration of immutability?

Q Why do most believers ignore the Christ's sovereignty? Why is it useful to delimit His sovereignty? How can we overcome this predisposition?

Q Of all that you know about Jesus the Christ, what is the best evidence that He is indeed worthy of worship, allegiance, and devout obedience?

MY PERSONAL RESPONSE TO THIS QUESTION

- (1) Jesus gave me a reason for being a being worth being.
- (2) I don't want to go to hell, but I will without Jesus the Christ; I want to go to heaven, and I won't without Jesus the Christ.
- (3) I have never need to apologize for the nature, words, nor actions of Jesus the Christ. Mohammed married a young child; Brigham Young had people murdered; Ron Hubbard created a religion on a bet; Moses killed a man; David committed adultery & had a faithful soldier killed; Aaron created an idol of gold; Peter denied Him; Paul was an accomplice in killing believers; Tom Porter? He once walked away from the cross. But the Christ? He never did anything for which I need to apologize.

Figure 1

THE CHINESE CHARACTER FOR LISTENING

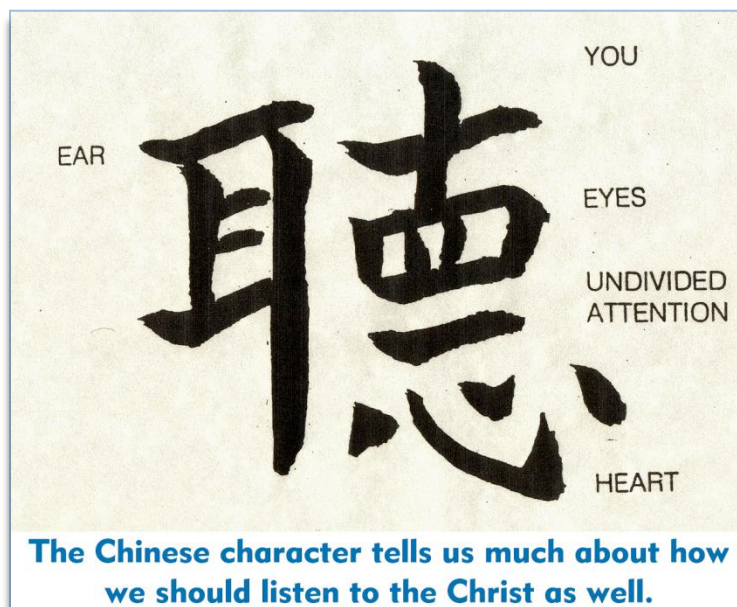


TABLE 1: THE SUPERIORITY OF THE CHRIST

The superiority of the Son's revelation is demonstrated by seven great descriptive statements about Him:

1. *appointed heir of all things*. The incarnate Son, having performed the work of redemption, was gloriously exalted to the position of the firstborn heir of God; i.e., He received the inheritance of God's estate ("all things"). See Romans 8:17.
2. *through whom He made the universe*. See John 1:3; Colossians 1:16.
3. *radiance of God's glory*. As the brilliance of the sun is inseparable from the sun itself, so the Son's radiance is inseparable from Deity, for He himself is Deity, the second person of Trinity (John 1:14,18).
4. *exact representation of his being*. Jesus the Christ is not merely an image or reflection of Deity. Because the Son Himself is Deity, He is an absolutely authentic depiction of Father God's being (cf. John 14:9; Colossians 1:15). Holy Spirit is another absolutely authentic depiction of Father God. In fact, one could reasonably assert all three members of Trinity are authentic depictions of Deity.
5. *sustaining all things*. Christ is not like Atlas, the mythical Greek god who held the world on his shoulders. The Son dynamically holds together all that has been created through Him (Colossians 1:17).
6. *provided purification for sins*. Through his redeeming death on the cross.
7. *sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven*. Being seated at Father God's right hand suggests the work of redemption is complete; and, furthermore, the Christ is actively ruling with Father God as Lord over all (see v. 13; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2; Ephesians 1:20; Colossians 3:1; 1 Peter 3:22).
8. *superior to the angels*. To most pre-Christ believers, angels were exalted beings, especially revered because they were involved in giving the law at Sinai and during creation ("Let us create ...").⁷ The Dead Sea Scrolls reflect the expectation that the archangel Michael would be the supreme figure in the Messianic kingdom. Whether the recipients of Hebrews were tempted to assign angels a place above Christ (Messiah) is not known.
9. *name*. To pre-Christ believers, especially Jews, a name stood for the full character of a person in all he was and did. Using a person's name (e.g., we pray in Jesus name, or we take an oath in God's name) indicated authority of that person. The verses which follow indicate His name was "Son" — a name to which no angel could lay claim.

⁷This is but one interpretation of the plural form of "let us" create human in "our" image; i.e., angels assisted. Others have argued that the "us" is simply plurality glory and/or power. Most Christians accept the notion that "us" refers to Trinity.