

Hebrews

Full Assurance for Christians Today

George R. Knight, General Editor

William G. Johnsson



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GENERAL PREFACE

The Abundant Life Bible Amplifier series is aimed at helping readers understand the Bible better. Rather than merely offering comments on or about the Bible, each volume seeks to enable people to study their Bibles with fuller understanding.

To accomplish that task, scholars who are also proven communicators have been selected to author each volume. The basic idea underlying this combination is that scholarship and the ability to communicate on a popular level are compatible skills.

While the Bible Amplifier is written with the needs and abilities of laypeople in mind, it will also prove helpful to pastors and teachers. Beyond individual readers, the series will be useful in church study groups and as guides to enrich participation in the weekly prayer meeting.

Rather than focusing on the details of each verse, the Bible Amplifier series seeks to give readers an understanding of the themes and patterns of each biblical book as a whole and how each passage fits into that context. As a result, the series does not seek to solve all the problems or answer all the questions that may be related to a given text. In the process of accomplishing the goal for the series, both inductive and explanatory methodologies are used.

Each volume in this series presents its author's understanding of the biblical book being studied. As such, it does not necessarily represent the "official" position of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

It should be noted that the Bible Amplifier series utilizes the New International Version of the Bible as its basic text. Every reader should read the "How to Use This Book" section to get the fullest benefit from the Bible Amplifier Volumes.

Dr. William Johnsson, editor of the Adventist Review, is uniquely qualified to develop this volume on the book of Hebrews in the Bible Amplifier series. Not only was his doctoral dissertation at Vanderbilt University on the Epistle to the Hebrews, but he has previously published three books on the subject. Dr. Johnsson is a prolific writer. Prior to assuming his present position, he was a pastor and a college and seminary Bible teacher in India and the United States.

George R. Knight

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

Coming back to the book of Hebrews is like visiting a dear friend. I have spent more time with this book than with any other portion of the Bible—in my doctoral dissertation, which centered on chapters 9 and 10; in teaching college and seminary classes for many years; in meetings for ministers; and in writing. Yet I find that Hebrews is an inexhaustible mine of spiritual treasure, and every time I speak or write about it I discover something new that warms my heart.

The book of Hebrews has profoundly impacted my life. I hope this treatment, the fruitage of more than thirty years of reflection, will convey to readers some of the joy, assurance, and practical value that I have found. For Hebrews speaks to our day—of this I am convinced. Hebrews addresses powerfully the spiritual lethargy that grips individual Christians and many congregations. Hebrews pulls us out of the rut of spiritual indifference by directing our gaze to Jesus, whose person and work it uplifts in a presentation of unsurpassed clarity and beauty.

Chitra Barnabas typed and retyped this manuscript, and I am indebted to her for countless hours of faithful labor. And many others—who knows how many hundreds and thousands from classrooms, seminars, camp meetings, ministers' meetings, or by letter—have shared their reactions and insights on the marvelous book of Hebrews. To everyone who has enriched my understanding, helped me see fresh perspectives, or corrected my ideas, I am deeply grateful. Most of all, however, I thank my Lord, who has given me the opportunity to spend so many hours with this precious book.

William G. Johnsson
Silver Spring, Maryland

GETTING STARTED

How to Use This Book

The Abundant Life Bible Amplifier series treats each major portion of each Bible book in five main sections.

The first section is called “Getting Into the Word.” The purpose of this section is to encourage readers to study their own Bibles. For that reason, the text of the Bible has not been printed in the volumes in this series.

You will get the most out of your study if you work through the exercises in each of the “Getting Into the Word” sections. This will not only aid you in learning more about the Bible but will also increase your skill in using Bible tools and in asking (and answering) meaningful questions about the Bible.

It will be helpful if you write out the answers and keep them in a notebook or file folder for each biblical book. Writing out your thoughts will enhance your understanding. The benefit derived from such study, of course, will be proportionate to the amount of effort expended.

The “Getting Into the Word” sections assume that the reader has certain minimal tools available. Among these are a concordance and a Bible with maps and marginal cross-references. If you don’t have a New International Version of the Bible, we recommend that you obtain one for use with this series, since all the Bible Amplifier authors are using the NIV as their basic text. For the same reason, your best choice of a concordance is the *NIV Exhaustive Concordance*, edited by E. W. Goodrick and J. R. Kohlenberger. *Strongs Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* and *Young’s Analytical Concordance to the Bible* are also useful. However, even if all you have is *Cruden’s Concordance*, you will be able to do all of the “Getting Into the Word” exercises and most of the “Researching the Word” exercises.

The “Getting Into the Word” sections also assume that the reader has a Bible dictionary. *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Dictionary* is quite helpful, but those interested in greater depth may want to acquire the four-volume *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (1974-1988 edition) or the six-volume *Anchor Bible Dictionary*.

The second section in the treatment of the biblical passages is called “Exploring the Word.” The purpose of this section is to discuss

the major themes in each biblical book. Thus the comments will typically deal with fairly large portions of Scripture (often an entire chapter) rather than providing a verse-by-verse treatment, such as is found in the Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary. In fact, many verses and perhaps whole passages in some biblical books may be treated minimally or passed over altogether.

Another thing that should be noted is that the purpose of the “Exploring the Word” sections is not to respond to all the problems or answer all the questions that might arise in each passage. Rather, as stated above, the “Exploring the Word” sections are to develop the Bible writers’ major themes. In the process, the author of each volume will bring the best of modern scholarship into the discussion and thus enrich the reader’s understanding of the biblical passage at hand. The “Exploring the Word” sections will also develop and provide insight into many of the issues first raised in the “Getting Into the Word” exercises.

The third section in the treatment of the biblical passages is “Applying the Word.” This section is aimed at bringing the lessons of each passage into daily life. Once again, you may want to write out a response to these questions and keep them in your notebook or file folder on the biblical book being studied.

The fourth section, “Researching the Word,” is for those students who want to delve more deeply into the Bible passage under study or into the history behind it. It is recognized that not everyone will have the research tools for this section. Those expecting to use the research sections should have an exhaustive Bible concordance, the Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary, a good Bible dictionary, and a Bible atlas. It also will be helpful to have several versions of the Bible.

The final component in each chapter of this book will be a list of recommendations for “Further Study on the Word.” While most readers will not have all of these works, many of them may be available in local libraries. Others can be purchased through your local book dealer. It is assumed that many users of this series will already own the seven-volume Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary and the one-volume Seventh-day Adventist Bible Dictionary.

In closing, it should be noted that while a reader will learn much about the Bible from a reading of the books in the Bible Amplifier series, he or she will gain infinitely more by studying the Bible in connection with that reading.

INTRODUCTION

The Book of Hebrews

Before studying what anyone has written about the book of Hebrews, listen to the book itself. Take your Bible—preferably the New International Version, since we will be using that—and open to Hebrews. Read the entire document at one sitting. It isn't as long as you might think; all you need is about one hour.

As you begin to read, pray that the Lord will open your eyes so that you may see and understand. In addition:

1. List on a piece of paper what you consider to be the main point or idea of each chapter. Try to see how each chapter builds on the one before so that the book comes together as a whole.
2. What do you think is the theme of the book as a whole? What problems or issues in the Christian community to whom the author was writing do you think he may have been trying to help them with?
3. For each chapter, list or underline one text or idea that speaks especially to your spiritual life at this time. Why does the text or thought seem so precious to you?

The book of Hebrews amazes and mystifies. To many Christians, including those who spend much time with the Bible, the book remains remote. They marvel at the majesty of its concepts and the power of its logic, but its language of priests and temples, of sacrifices and ceremonial purifications, seems to belong to another age.

Not surprisingly, modern biblical scholarship has largely neglected Hebrews. Whereas a century ago giants like Bishop W. H. Westcott produced masterly commentaries on this book, the writings of recent times have been puny, stilted. Only in the past thirty years or so have Protestant scholars begun to do serious work in Hebrews again.

And what about Seventh-day Adventists? Hebrews, because of its teaching about the high-priestly ministry of Jesus and the heavenly sanctuary, played a major role in the formation of Adventist doctrine. Sadly, we, too, have neglected this book in recent times. We have largely failed to take the time to listen and to understand, to stay with

the text long enough that the Holy Spirit can reveal its meaning and its message for our day.

Hebrews isn't an easy book, though neither is it as difficult as we may think. If we study it as a whole—starting at the beginning, following the argument in its measured, magnificent development, letting the Word speak to us first in its terms and not ours—we can grasp its meaning.

Hebrews contains a word from the Lord for us. Hebrews is the Word of the Lord. Because it is, we will find this ancient writing intellectually stimulating, spiritually rewarding—and surprisingly contemporary in its message.

The Structure of Hebrews

What stands out in your mind from your reading of Hebrews? Set aside, for now, questions you may have; did you see any pattern or structure in the emerging argument of the book?

For instance, did you notice how, from time to time, the discussion about Jesus—who He is and His high-priestly work—stops for practical applications? The theological argument breaks periodically for practical application. These breaks are signaled by words like therefore (2:1; 3:1; 10:19), and by the abrupt change from the third person to the first or second person. That is, Hebrews alternates theological discussion with practical application. People often think of Hebrews as a book heavy with theological reasoning, but the theology over and over merges with application to life. We may discern the following pattern:

Argument 1:1–14

Application 2:1–4

Argument 2:5–3:6a

Application 3:6b–4:13

Argument 5:1–10

Application 5:11–6:20

Argument 7:1–10:18

Application 10:19–13:25

This structure is unique in Scripture. To appreciate its full force, we must realize that more than alternation is involved. Both theological argument and practical application build in length and power as they

proceed, each reaching its own climax. At the same time, each matches and blends with the other.

A thousand miles from the ocean, the Rio Negro joins the mighty Amazon. The Amazon runs fast, brown, and massive; the Negro's waters are clear, with a blackish tint. The rivers join and merge, but for miles they run side by side. As you look down from an airplane, you can see the Negro waters in the midst of the Amazon.

That is like Hebrews. Two streams but one river; two currents, each developing its own course, but one work with one purpose. What a masterpiece!

Another feature of Hebrews is the careful development of major ideas. One by one each is introduced, fleshed out, and then rounded off. For instance, the high-priestly concept is introduced at 2:17, 18, expanded at 4:14–5:10, and fully developed at 7:1–10:18. Covenant is introduced at 7:22, developed in 8:6–13, and wound up at 10:16–18. Likewise faith, introduced at 2:17, is expanded in 3:1–6 but only treated fully in 11:1–39.

A third feature of the structure is the manner in which Psalm 110 influences the theological argumentation. We find an allusion to the opening verse of the psalm as early as Hebrews 1:4, then later references in 1:13; 8:1; 10:12, 13; and 12:2.

But the fourth verse of the psalm—"The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: 'You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek'"—plays a crucial role. This scripture provides the primary Old Testament anticipation of the high-priestly idea, and the author of Hebrews takes it up point by point in his argument. In Hebrews 5:5, 6 this verse is used to show divine appointment to the priesthood; in 6:19, 20 that Jesus has become a high priest; in 7:11, 12 to show divine prediction of a new order of priesthood; in 7:15–17 that Christ's priesthood is forever; and in 7:20, 21 that the divine oath sets apart His office.

The Purpose of Hebrews

The writer calls his work a "word of exhortation" (13:22). He did not intend it to be a theological treatise divorced from life, and our studies of structure have shown well that point. Theology and application dovetail into one another, as theological argument serves the application and the application arises out of the argument.

We best understand Hebrews, therefore, as a sermon. As in all good preaching, the pastor has an aim in view. He or she speaks to a

spiritual need. But preaching isn't haranguing the people; preaching has a theological base. Exhortation only becomes effective when it proceeds from a foundation of Scripture and theological reasoning.

What, then, was the preacher's purpose in the sermon to the Hebrews? The applications give us the answer. As we work through the passages we located under structure, we learn the faults in the congregation and the preacher's admonitions to his people in view of those faults. Out of it all we get a pretty clear spiritual profile of the people.

They had been Christians for quite some time and could recall the preaching of the apostles and miracles associated with the gifts of the Holy Spirit (2:3, 4). In the early years of their faith, they had suffered insults, persecution, and even confiscation of their property; they had stood side by side with those imprisoned for Christ (10:32, 34).

But the years have rolled on; now they have grown weary in the Christian way. They feel like letting go, simply drifting away with the crowd (2:1). They have begun to neglect the faith (2:2); they feel tempted to unbelief (3:2–14). Sin's deceitfulness has begun to harden their hearts (3:13–16); they have failed to grow spiritually (5:11–14). They gradually quit coming to church (10:25), and some may even have publicly renounced Christ (6:4–6; 10:26–31; 12:15–17).

So the "problem" of the Hebrew Christians is either a weariness leading to gradual drifting away from the community, or a deliberate, open rejection of Christ and His people because of the inroads of sin in the heart.

Is the preacher talking to them—or to us? The spiritual profile of the Hebrews bears startling resemblances to Christians today.

The "solution" corresponds to the problem. The preacher admonishes the people to stay alert (2:1), to hold fast (3:6, 14; 10:23), to grasp (4:14; 6:18), to be earnest (4:11; 6:11), to consider (3:1), to exhort one another (3:13; 10:25; 13:19, 22), to recall (10:32), and to endure (10:36; 12:1).

The great quality held out, however, is faith. Faith characterized the life of both Jesus and Moses (3:2); lack of faith led to Israel's failure (4:12). The heroes of old overcame physical hardships and conquered temptations through faith (11:1–39), and so will Christians of the first century—and even today.

But the admonitions grow out of theology, as we have seen—and that theology boils down to the magnificence of Jesus and His work for us. "Such a great salvation" (2:3)—this is what it will all come down to.

If the tired Hebrew Christians can catch a glimpse of their Lord—who He is, what He accomplished on Calvary, His heavenly ministry—they will no longer neglect or reject the faith. They will be renewed, revived, invigorated.

And so will we.

Hebrews' Major Themes

1. *The magnificence of Jesus dominates the thought patterns of the book.* All the applications spring from this truth; they aren't merely a preacher's concern to hold his flock together. Jesus! He is the One altogether magnificent—magnificent in His person, magnificent in His work. Hebrews develops the portrait of Jesus as High Priest like no other portion of Scripture. Elsewhere we find the idea barely alluded to or suggested, as in Romans (8:34) or John (1 John 2:1, 2) or Revelation (1:12–20); in Hebrews we see it argued systematically (2:17, 18; 4:14–5:10; 6:20–8:2).

But Hebrews presents other portraits of Jesus—not so extensively as the high-priestly one, but nonetheless significant. Jesus is the pioneer who has passed over life's course of suffering and temptation (2:10; 12:2); He is also the apostle of our faith (2:1) who was sent to earth for us and the forerunner (6:20) who has gone on ahead to the heavenly courts.

2. *Full assurance in Jesus.* The Hebrew Christians, a despised, persecuted minority, had privileges beyond the Jerusalem temple and its rituals—if only they could have seen them. The Lord Jesus was the true High Priest, and He ministered in the true temple—the heavenly one, of which the earthly was but a weak reflection. His sacrifice of Himself on Calvary accomplished at a stroke something that all the slaying of animals could never do—it purged sins, once for all.

So in Jesus Christians have full assurance. They have access to the heavenly Most Holy Place and a conscience cleansed of sin.

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great high priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water (Heb. 10:19–22).

3. *Sin, however, is an exceedingly serious thing.* The absolute confidence that Christians may have in Jesus doesn't take sin lightly. Sin cost the

death of the spotless Son of God. So heavy is it that no manner or number of rituals and animal sacrifices could ever bring remission (9:6–10; 10:1–4). These bloody sacrifices were but types and shadows of what Jesus would accomplish by His dying (10:1, 2).

In three striking passages (6:4–6; 10:26–31; 12:15–17), the author lays on the line the seriousness of neglecting or rejecting Jesus. So strong is his language that Christians have debated their meaning from the earliest centuries. The point in all three is the same: In view of the magnificence of Jesus and His work, how heinous to abandon Him and His saving blood.

4. *Christian life as pilgrimage also runs through this book.* Throughout history, God’s followers have been strangers and aliens on this earth. They have looked beyond the pleasures of this world, because they have an eternal destiny. Whatever hardships, insults, and difficulties they have encountered, they know that they are citizens of a better country. Like Abraham, they see their life on earth as merely a sojourn, a series of stages on the way to their goal—the heavenly Jerusalem (11:13–16).

5. *Faith emerges as the quality above all others to characterize God’s pilgrim people.* Hebrews 11 is rightly famous for its parade of men and women of faith; but, in fact, faith is underlined throughout the book. Faith has two elements: It sees the unseen, and it turns hope into reality. Faith is active and dynamic; it endures patiently. Faith is faithful.

6. *The Sabbath plays a distinct and unique role in Hebrews as a symbol of our rest in Christ.* The argument in 3:6–4:10 will reward our careful study with insights regarding the place of the Sabbath in early Christianity and the theological significance of the Sabbath.

7. *The second coming.* The book of Hebrews, so strong in developing the pilgrimage idea and the heavenly work of Christ, also points to “the Day” (10:25)—the day of the Lord that will usher Christian pilgrims into their eternal rest.

Indeed, Christ’s past work (Calvary) and His present work (intercession) guarantee His future coming. “Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him” (9:27, 28). Though the way may seem long for the Christian pilgrim, “in just a very little while He who is coming will come and will not delay” (10:37). He who once shook the earth at the giving of the

law on Mount Sinai will once again shake it—and not only the earth but the heavens also (12:26, 27).

Outline of Hebrews

1. The Magnificence of Jesus (1:1–4) The better revelation
2. The Magnificence of Jesus' Person (1:5–7:28)
 - a. The better name (1:5–2:18)
 - b. The better leader (3:1–4:13)
 - c. The better priest (4:14–6:20)
 - d. The better priesthood (7:1–28)
3. The Magnificence of Jesus' Work (8:1–10:18)
 - a. The better covenant (8:1–9:10)
 - b. The better blood (9:11–10:18)
4. Living in View of Jesus' Achievement (10:19–13:25)
 - a. The better country (10:19–11:40)
 - b. The better city (12:1–13:25)

The Perennial Question

In many years of teaching the book of Hebrews, I have heard one question above all others: Who wrote it?

In the King James Version the superscription to the book reads, “The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews.” Those words, however, were added after several centuries; the oldest title is simply “To the Hebrews.”

In fact, every point of the King James Version superscription has been challenged. Hebrews bears almost none of the usual marks of a letter—designation of the sender, the readers, an opening greeting, and personal matters. It is, as we have seen, a written sermon rather than an epistle.

Likewise, the identity of the readers has been called into question, with several scholars favoring a Gentile audience. On balance, however, I think the evidence points to Jewish Christians feeling the pain of rejection by their fellow countrymen and perhaps exclusion from the rituals of their ancestral faith.

But still the question—who wrote it? Because the author did not identify himself, speculation has abounded. We know that as early as the second century, Christians were discussing the authorship of Hebrews. In the 190s Clement of Alexandria concluded that Paul wrote it in the Hebrew language, while Luke translated it into Greek.

However, a few years later, the scholar Origen left the matter open-ended:

If I gave my opinion, I should say that the thoughts are those of the apostle, but the diction and phraseology are those of someone who remembered the apostolic teachings and wrote down at his leisure what had been said by his teacher. Therefore if any church holds that this epistle is by Paul, let it be commended for this. For not without reason have the ancients handed it down as Paul's. But who wrote the epistle, in truth, God knows. The statement of some who have gone before us is that Clement, bishop of Romans, wrote the epistle, and of others that Luke, the author of the Gospel and the Acts, wrote it. But let this suffice on these matters (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 6:25).

These questions help explain one of the most puzzling facts of the early church: Hebrews was one of the last books to be accepted into the New Testament canon. For a book to be considered canonical, it had to come from the hand of an apostle or someone associated with an apostle. Only after several hundred years did the view of Pauline authorship prevail and Hebrews find universal acceptance.

But surely Paul is the logical candidate for author? If not Paul, who?

I am wary of arguments from silence. Just as I reject the contention that Paul must have written Hebrews because he was the only one capable of this masterpiece, I also reject the view that Paul could not have written Hebrews—which is what most scholars, including conservatives, hold today. They point to major differences of language (the Greek of Hebrews is unlike that of Paul in his letters) and ideas. For instance, the author of Hebrews doesn't speak of himself as an apostle (2:3, 4; 13:6, 7), and he uses terms like law and faith in ways quite different from Romans and Galatians.

Seventh-day Adventists have an unusual interest in the question of authorship. Ellen G. White, whom we believe to have received the prophetic gift, attributes the book to Paul in many incidental references. Sometimes, however, she simply refers to "the apostle."

While I recognize the differences from Paul's acknowledged writings, I also find resonances with those writings in the book of Hebrews. I think the book is Pauline, but with some other factor associated with its writing that was quickly lost. To me, this makes far better sense of the data than speculating that Luke or Peter or Apollos or Prisca (Priscilla) wrote it. The essential question, however, is clear

beyond dispute: This book is inspired, a work of the Holy Spirit that speaks with power to Christians today—and to me.

A final question: When? While we cannot establish the point with certainty, much of the reasoning suggests a date in the 60s. M. L. Andreasen argued strongly for a context in which Jewish Christians faced the imminent loss of the temple, and his logic retains force. And a date in the early 60s, of course, supports a Pauline link for the book.

For Further Reading

1. M. L. Andreasen, *The Book of Hebrews*.
2. E. E. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, rev. ed., xix-xxii.
3. P. E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 1–32.
4. W. G. Johnsson, *In Absolute Confidence*, 9–33.
5. *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, F. D. Nichol, ed. 7:387–394.
6. *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Dictionary*.
7. B. F. Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, xxvii-lxxxiv.

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CHAPTER ONE

The Better Revelation

Hebrews 1:1–4

The book of Hebrews opens with a dramatic flourish, as arresting and compelling as the da-da-da-dah that launches Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. We hear heavenly music—ideas that grasp us by the hand and wrench us out of our mundane world and into the courts of the living God. Four magnificent verses propel us into the thought of this powerful document.

These verses form more than an introduction or prelude to what follows. Rather, we best listen to them as an overture, sounding the great themes that the apostle will develop at length in the course of his sermon. The words, the ideas, rise and fall, weaving and blending, moving forward relentlessly. They don't form an outline—he won't subsequently take them up in order—but rather a thematic cascade, a tone poem of extraordinary richness.

As powerful as we find these verses in our English Bible, the original Greek text is even stronger. The New International Version divides the passages into four sentences, but as it came from the apostles hand it was but one, a carefully crafted literary unit with point and counterpoint, theme echoing theme, resonating and rising to the throne of God like a grand orchestral composition.

These verses will reward our careful study. To listen to their music will help us catch the spirit of Hebrews; to contemplate their themes will prepare us for a theological feast; and to see their intent will bring us face to face with Jesus in His magnificence.

Getting Into the Word

Hebrews 1:1–4

Read through Hebrews 1:1–4 several times. Look at different translations, including the King James Version and the New International Version. Read slowly and prayerfully, listening for the music and trying to catch the major themes. Then respond to the following questions:

1. Think about the way other books of the Bible begin. Look at Genesis 1 and John 1 in particular. Compare and contrast the beginning of Hebrews with these books.

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2. Who seems to be the subject of Hebrews 1:1–4? Remember, in the original, this is one sustained sentence; so is God or the Son the chief point of interest? Explain your answer.
3. What does the author mean by God’s “speaking”? Does he intend only the spoken word that can be heard by human ears? Draw up a list of the “many times” and “various ways” in which God spoke in the Old Testament.
4. List the various qualities and activities of the Son in Hebrews 1:1–40. Using a concordance, look up other references to “son” in Hebrews, and study these occurrences in an endeavor to probe the meaning of this key word. By reason of the Incarnation, Jesus is obviously God’s Son, but does Hebrews indicate a deeper meaning? For instance, some commentators (and the statement of fundamental beliefs of Seventh-day Adventists) refer to Christ’s eternal Sonship. Does Hebrews support this conclusion? In what sense or senses might this be true?
5. Notice the manner in which Jesus’ work is set forth in the passage. Think about the biblical functions of prophet, priest, and king. What evidence do you see here that Jesus fulfills each of these functions?
6. Contemplate also the themes of Hebrews 1:1–4 with reference to Jesus before and after the Incarnation. In what ways is the “old” (before Christ) different from the “new” (after Christ)? Does Paul put down the Old Testament? In what ways did the Son’s coming to earth make a difference?
7. The writer obviously had to condense the work of the Son during His earthly sojourn. What did he omit? Why? What is his focus?
8. With the help of a concordance, look up the various references to “better” and “superior” in Hebrews. Does this suggest to you a theme for the book?
9. Read Hebrews 1:1–4 one more time. You understand it better now, but you no doubt have many questions—you want to know more. The answers will come from Hebrews itself as we work through it, listening to the music of the text. From this initial study, however, you have begun to form conclusions. From these opening verses, what would you expect the rest of the book to be about? Reflect for a moment on the effect they have had on you. Jot down your reflections.

Exploring the Word The God Who Speaks

Hebrews opens with two fundamental, life-transforming statements: God is, and God speaks. All that follows hangs on these affirmations.

We can neither prove nor disprove these statements. They are presuppositions, the building blocks of the universe of thought. We can, however, suggest evidence that supports them.

God—before all else is said. God—above all, beyond all. God—in all, through all, to all. Here our thought begins, and of Him will our last thought be.

We were made for Him, made by Him, and, as Augustine said, we are restless until we find our rest in Him. We who believe know Him as Friend—our truest Companion who sticks closer than a brother. Although we have never seen Him, we love Him and rejoice in Him with unspeakable, glorious joy (1 Pet. 1:8).

Yet we cannot prove that God exists. For centuries philosophers and theologians have sought out rational arguments, reasoning from the nature of existence or the evidences of design or the moral aspects of our being. All these arguments are helpful, but none can quite clinch the case. The atheist lines up his ducks also, and in the end each side cancels out the other.

“The person who comes to God must believe that He exists,” the apostle will tell us later (11:6). That is the way we come to know Him and continue to grow in Him—by faith. And it is the only way.

For God is too big for human “proof.” Too big to be established by scientific experimentation. Too big for logic and rational argument. God is the Mind that made all and maintains all, the Mind that our mind feebly echoes. No human mind can fully grasp the divine Mind.

But we who believe see His footprints everywhere. To us, this world is His world, and we are His children. While we cannot explain why everything happens just as it does—especially the tragic and the ugly—we have confidence that we are secure in His hands.

As God is the first and major assumption of Hebrews, so He is the backdrop for all that happens in the book. Or, to change the image, although the Son is the figure in the spotlight, the soloist for the concerto, God conducts the orchestra that supplies the harmony. We find the name God sixty-seven times in this book. Twelve times we hear Lord instead. These uses derive from the apostle’s references to

the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament. But not once do we find Father.

God, we learn, is the founder of all (3:4). He wills the sufferings and death of the Son (2:10), appoints Moses to service (3:2-5), Aaron to high-priestly office (5:4), and Jesus as High Priest of a new order (5:5). God made all things by His word (11:3). He gives promises to humanity, adding an oath to make our future absolutely certain (6:17, 18). God brings blessings and curses (6:7, 8), provides grace (4:16), and remembers acts of loving service (6:10). He gives peace (13:20), warns (13:25), and delivers from death (5:7; 11:19).

And God draws near to humankind, entering into covenant relation with His people (8:8). The apostle calls us a “household” (3:6)—a family lovingly disciplined by the divine Parent (12:3–11). But God is a “consuming fire” to those who despise His grace (12:29).

God’s major activity, however, is speaking. That is the second assumption we find in the book’s opening words, and we will hear it throughout. We find God “speaking” or “saying” (a different verb in the original)—fourteen times in Hebrews for the former, twenty-two for the latter, making a total of thirty-six references throughout the book.

God’s speaking creates the universe (1:3). It designates the Son as superior to angels (1:5–14). It warns us against falling away from the divine purpose (3:7–15). And it guarantees fulfillment of the divine plan (4:1–10).

“At many times and in various ways”—this is how Hebrews 1:1 describes God’s speaking. Think of the times of the Old Testament—the ongoing, repeated, periodic divine communication. “And God said.” This is how the Creation takes place. God spoke to our first parents, Adam and Eve, in the garden; to Cain, the first murderer, and to Noah, the preacher of righteousness; to Abram, in pagan Ur of the Chaldees, and to Jacob, fleeing from his angry brother; and to Moses and Malachi, Samson and Samuel, David and Deborah, Jeremiah and Jehu, Ezekiel and Esther. Throughout the Old Testament, from its first chapter to its last, Yahweh is the God who speaks.

Think, too, of the ways of the divine speaking. In Eden, face to face; from Sinai, with thunder, lightning, and trumpet blast; at the tabernacle in Shiloh, a call in the night to a young boy on his bed (1 Sam. 3:1–14); to Jeremiah, feeling a fire in his bones (Jer. 20:9); to Isaiah, as he enters the temple to worship (Isa. 6:1–4); to Daniel, far

from home in a captor's land (Dan. 10:1–14); and forty days later, in a “still, small voice” to the hero of Mount Carmel (1 Kings 19:12, KJV).

God's speaking cannot be circumscribed or predicted. We cannot know when or how God will speak, but we can be sure that He will speak. He can speak to a prophet through dreams and visions, but He can also use a beast—a donkey!—to rebuke that same fellow when he embarks on a wrong course of action (Num. 22:28).

What does God's “speaking” mean? Yes, words, actual speech; but more than words that enter our ears. God's words may come on stone tablets, or they may fall upon our inward ears, piercing our conscience and complacency in ways that we alone hear them.

Hebrews 1:1, 2 tells us that God spoke “through” or “by.” The Greek preposition here is *en*, literally “in.” God spoke not only by words but in His messengers. The total force of their lives conveyed God's will: they lived out His message.

Thus, God's speaking connotes His total communication. Audible words, written words, silent words, but living words—God speaks. From the beginning, He speaks; He keeps speaking to each generation; He never ceases to speak.

And we of faith affirm: God speaks today. God hasn't left us to grope alone in a silent universe. He hasn't abandoned us to doubts and despair. He speaks: He speaks today.

This truth of the God who speaks is one of the most precious ideas of Scripture. It means much to me. It means that each child of God may feel a hand in his or hers, may hear a voice along life's road: “This is the way; walk in it” (Isa. 30:21).

I cannot tell you when or how God will speak. God is God, not subject to our wishes or limited to our methods. But God loves us and wants to help us. He desires to communicate with us, to ease our burdens, to guide us through the perplexities and worries that tear us apart. When we cast all our burdens on Him, as He invites us to (1 Pet. 5:7), we may confidently expect an answer. But in His time, and in His way.

The Lord will teach us our duty just as willingly as He will teach somebody else. If we come to Him in faith, He will speak His mysteries to us personally. Our hearts will often burn within us as One draws nigh to commune with us as He did with Enoch. Those who decide to do nothing in any line that will displease God, will know, after presenting their case before Him, just what course to pursue. And they

will receive not only wisdom, but strength (White, *The Desire of Ages*, 668).

The God who speaks—what a startling, revolutionary idea to human beings on the threshold of the new millennium! Kafka, Hemingway, Russell, Sartre—these voices have shaped the twentieth century, and they portrayed human existence as “a dirty joke” (Hemingway), devoid of meaning (Kafka and Sartre), or “built upon the platform of unyielding despair” (Russell).

But we who believe know otherwise. We know that God speaks. No, we cannot prove it by a cold, “scientific” method. But we know that He does, because we know Him.

Only two other books of Scripture open with a dramatic flourish like Hebrews. One is Genesis, whose initial words, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth,” introduce the reader to the God who creates.

The other is the Gospel of John, which commences, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.” These words take us back prior to Genesis 1:1, to the beginning of beginnings, the beginning before all beginnings, back beyond the creation of our world, as far as our minds can stretch. In that “beginning”—God! Before all else, Source of all else—God!

And, interestingly, alongside God in the beginning is the Word. What God is, the Word is.

Hebrews 1:1–4 catches up these ideas of Genesis 1 and John 1 (although John’s Gospel was likely written later than Hebrews) and pulls them together. The first assumption is the same for all three passages—God. But in Hebrews the divine activity, recalling the mysterious “Word,” comes to us as speaking rather than creating.

The apostle’s concentration on the divine communication goes beyond affirmation of the many and varied ways of God’s speech, however. His argument focuses the divine speech, pointing to a summit, a climax, when, to use John’s expression, “the Word became flesh” (John 1:14). This leads us to consider the role and function of the Son in Hebrews 1:1–4.

Finality Through the Son

The first two verses of Hebrews set out a pattern of God’s speaking, balancing the old revelation against the new, with point-by-point correspondence in each.

The God Who Speaks
 God spoke—He has spoken
 to our forefathers—to us
 in the past—in these last days
 through the prophets.—by His Son.

Only one phrase has no matching words: “At many times and in various ways.” The omission hits us even harder in the original because the apostle placed these words at the very first of the book. His actual phrase is *polumeros kai polutropds*—Greek words that have a grand and resonant ring in keeping with the sweep of ideas about to be introduced. (The King James Version captures more effectively the dramatic beginning: “God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in times past unto the fathers by the prophets.”)

This construction—putting “at many times and in various ways” at the very beginning of Hebrews and then not supplying any corresponding phrase—suggests a strong contrast between the old revelation and the new. Whereas the old came in fragments, the new comes with finality. The former was partial; here a little, there a little; the new is complete, perfect.

This is because the new comes by the Son. The description of God’s speaking has moved toward this point, and when the Son is introduced, He moves to center stage. So we notice a curious fact about the single long sentence that comprises Hebrews 1:1–4: Although God forms the subject and the book begins with Him, as soon as the Son enters the picture, the remainder, and majority, of the sentence focuses on Him. And that pattern, as we already suggested, continues throughout the book.

“In Son”—that is how the original reads literally. The construction emphasizes the quality of Sonship; we bring out the thought better with “by one who is Son,” or “by one who has the status of Son.” Paul is contrasting the fragmentary revelation that came through prophets with the full revelation that the Son brings.

We will notice the term Son several times in Hebrews. Each time the name carries heavy weight, pointing to the significance and superiority of His person. Thus, Son indicates revelation with finality (1:2), superiority to angels (1:5–14), qualification for the new and better priesthood (5:4–6; 7:28), and one whom we are warned not to despise (6:6; 10:29). In 2:10–18, the Son takes on our human nature and becomes our brother.

Hebrews 1:1–4 makes three marvelous affirmations concerning the Son. First, He is the radiance of God’s glory. The word translated “radiance,” *apaugasma*, suggests a beam of light, a bright ray, a shining forth. Various translations render it as “effulgence” (NEB), “brightness” (KJV), “reflection” (RSV), or “radiance” (Phillips). This description lifts us to the realm of glory, where the Son shines in eternal day. He dwells in light unapproachable; He is the Light of lights.

He is also the exact representation of God’s being. Here the metaphor changes to the seal and its impression on wax. The word is the same as the one from which we derive character, and tells us that the Son is the very stamp of the divine essence. What God is, the Son is.

But the affirmation of the Son’s glory and deity goes further: The Son is the divine radiance and the divine essence. Literally, “being”—not became. Eternally the Son is Light of light. Eternally He is image of the divine. Eternally He has been so. Eternally He will be so.

No more exalted description of the Son can be found in Scripture. Only three other passages compare with these verses in declaring the true, eternal, preexistent deity of our Lord—John 1:1, 2; Colossians 1:15–17; and Revelation 1:5, 17, 18. Here we find the decisive reply to those voices, ancient or modern, who would suggest that He is in some sense less than God or that He was elevated at some point in time to the status of God.

Our salvation hangs on these affirmations and the fact that they declare. Today, as through the centuries, the person of Jesus Christ confronts men and women. He arrests us with His eye and asks us, “Who do you say I am?” (Matt. 16:15). We cannot avoid that question. After all the studies in the history of religions, all the psychological analyses and philosophical discourses, the question still stands, demanding our response.

We who believe affirm: Jesus of Nazareth was what He claimed to be. More than a good man, a teacher, a miracle worker. More than the Jews’ messiah. Yes, much, much more—God in the flesh! Eternally, truly God!

The term Son points to more than the incarnation, though. He did not become the Son; He is the Son, the eternal Son. Son suggests exalted status and function.

Jesus often used this term of Himself. While His most frequent self-designation was “Son of Man,” he showed the closeness of His relation to God by Son—the word by itself. For instance: “All things

have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (Matt. 11:27).

The terminology of Father and Son may mislead us. Inevitably we associate it with time and origin: Sons derive their being from fathers; fathers are prior in time. But Jesus as eternal Son did not originate in and through the Father. Rather, the biblical language of Father and Son points to shared being, equality, divine essence. And the Jews so understood this language, for when Jesus called God His own Father, they were offended because they realized He was “making himself equal with God” (John 5:18).

Ellen White’s statements about Christ’s eternal preexistence and deity run along the same lines. While her “in Christ is life, original, unborrowed, underived” (White, *The Desire of Ages*, 530) has become a classic quote, no less significant is the following:

The Son is all the fullness of the Godhead manifested. The Word of God declares Him to be the ‘express image of His person.’...

Christ is the preexistent, self-existent Son of God....In speaking of His preexistence, Christ carries the mind back through dateless ages. He assures us that there never was a time when He was not in close fellowship with the eternal God. He to whose voice the Jews were then listening had been with God as one brought up with Him.... He is the eternal, self-existent Son....

While God’s Word speaks of the humanity of Christ when upon this earth, it also speaks decidedly regarding His preexistence. The Word existed as a divine being, even as the eternal Son of God, in union and oneness with His Father (White, *Evangelism*, 614, 615).

While affirming the eternal Sonship, Ellen White suggests that the incarnation made Him Son in a different way: “While the Son of a human being, He became the Son of God in a new sense. Thus He stood in our world—the Son of God, yet allied by birth to the human race” (White, *Selected Messages*, 1:227).

Prophet, Priest, and King

The Son’s work is as glorious as His person. As we study Hebrews 1:1–4, we see His work in three phrases that correspond to His

career—His preincarnate activities, those during the incarnation, and those following.

Preincarnate: The Son created the universe and sustains all things. Not by chance did our world and starry heavens come about; not by chance do they continue. A divine Mind made them, and a divine Hand keeps them turning. And that is the hand that would be nailed to the cross for us. So the world isn't an alien place for the Son—or for us. It's His, and ours.

Incarnate: The entire course of the Son's work on earth is summed up in one clause—"He... provided purification for sins." No mention of the Sermon on the Mount or the parables; no miracles, exorcisms, and healings; no temptations; no nurture of the disciples and establishment of the church. The apostle cuts to the root, to the problem that turned humanity from God's will in the garden and still lies back of the suffering, pain, and desperate needs of men and women today.

Postincarnate: The Son sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. That is, He reigns. Sitting indicates that His work of purifying sins was completed, successful. Now He rules from the place of honor.

But He is heir of all things, meaning that eventually all things will return to Him. By His person as eternal Son He is Lord of lords and King of kings; by reason of His creatorship and sustaining power He has the right to reign over all—but presently only the church so acknowledges Him. But, because He is heir of all things, the entire universe at last will come back to Him to serve and to worship.

We can break down the understanding of the work of the Son in yet another way. We can see it in terms of prophet, priest, and king.

As Prophet, the Son conveys the divine will. In Him, as we have seen, the speaking of God reaches its zenith. There is no more fragmentary, imperfect communication; now the Word has become flesh. He speaks the words of God; He lives the words of God; He is the Word of God. Just before His departure from this earth, when Philip wanted to see the Father, He said: "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). "No one has ever seen God, but... the... Son... has made him known" (John 1:18).

As Priest, the... Son makes us clean before God. He offers a sacrifice, even Himself, that has more power than a thousand bulls or goats. He deals with our sins, once and for all.

In the New Testament, we find Jesus' saving work portrayed in a variety of ways. For instance, He brings us acquittal in court (justification), buys us back (redemption), puts us in God's family (adoption), and restores our broken relationship with God (reconciliation). But the language of purification in Hebrews 1:3 ties salvation firmly to the sanctuary and its services; and that connection will emerge as the major theological thrust in the development of the book.

As King, the Son now reigns. We serve One who has all power, to whom the heavenly hosts give allegiance. Because He is King, He will return to our world to assume His rightful role over the people He created and won back to God.

The Old Testament generally keeps the roles of prophet, priest, and king separate and distinct. Occasionally certain individuals combined two roles—like Jeremiah, who was a prophet as well as a priest, or David, who was both king and prophet. But no person in the Old Testament was ever prophet, priest, and king—all three. This could have happened only if a king had come from the tribe of Levi (since the priesthood was hereditary), and none ever did.

But the Son is unique. Unique in person, unique in work, He sums up the Old Testament and goes far beyond. In Him all roles reach their climax and find their ultimate meaning.

The Old and the New—Something Better

In this overture to Hebrews, we hear strains of a melody that will sound many times through the book. The apostle compares and contrasts the old and the new—"in the past... in these last days." Here he argues that the new revelation is superior to the old because it comes through One who is Son rather than through prophets, and because it comes perfectly rather than fragmentarily.

Note: We aren't dealing with the bad versus the good, but the good versus the better (or the ultimate). The Old Testament isn't flawed or defective—how could it be, since God was its Author? But the Old Testament, good as it was, pointed beyond itself to the One who would come as God's speech embodied; then the partial would become whole.

One of the key words of Hebrews, therefore, is better. We find this word a total of thirteen times (1:4; 6:9; 7:7, 19, 22; 8:6; 9:23; 10:34; 11:16, 35, 40; 12:24). Beyond these occurrences, however, the apostle has structured the entire argument around a series of comparisons. The

old and the new run together throughout, with the new growing out of the old, building upon it, but surpassing it. So, apart from the better revelation of 1:1–4, we find the better name (1:5–14), the better Leader (3:1–6), the better Priest (4:14–5:10), the better priesthood (7:1–28), the better sanctuary (8:1–6), the better covenant (8:6–13), the better blood (9:1–10:18), the better country (11:13–16), and the better city (12:18–24; 13:14).

As we work through Hebrews, we will need to listen carefully to the intricacies of the melodies of “old” and “new.” Many Christians, unfortunately, consider the Old Testament to be a closed book that may safely be neglected, and because of this it fails to speak to their lives today. They err greatly, depriving themselves of spiritual treasure provided by God Himself. Other Christians, including some Adventists, make exactly the opposite mistake: they collapse the new into the old, leveling out its distinctiveness, its uniqueness, failing to discern that the coming of the Son to be among us makes all things new.

Hebrews will set us straight if we will prayerfully take enough time. Then we will no longer depreciate the old, for we will understand the new in light of the old; and we will no longer depreciate the new, for we will see the new in light of the Son, who is the radiance of the divine glory.

Applying the Word

Hebrews 1:1–4

1. As I reflect on my life, what instances come to mind when I sensed that God was speaking to me? What form did this “speaking” take? How willing or unwilling was I to listen and obey what God said?
2. Many people claim to hear “voices.” How can I know that it is God speaking to me and not the devil or even my own secret desires?
3. Hebrews 1:1–4 rings with the majesty and magnificence of Jesus. What other passages in the Bible emphasize Jesus in the same way? How do these passages add to the sense of majesty and awe in Hebrews 1:1–4?
4. How can the message of Hebrews 1:1–4 help me deal with the crime, war, distress, and misery that seem to abound more and more? How, especially, can it help me through the crises in my life?

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5. Why is reading from all the Bible important? What are the possible consequences of concentrating on one testament? In what ways is Jesus the key to the Old Testament? How does He surpass the Old?

Researching the Word

1. Prepare a two-column sheet of paper. Scan the book of Genesis, and in the left column list all the times when God spoke to people. In the right column make a note of how God spoke to people. Compare this with what you know from the gospels about how Jesus communicated with people. What contribution does this make to your understanding of Hebrews 1:1, 2?
2. With the aid of a concordance, look up all the references in the New Testament to the word heir. Which ones especially help you to understand the meaning of the word heir in Hebrews 1:2? What does the New Testament say about our relationship to God as heirs? In what ways does the Bible suggest that our relationship as heirs is the same and in what ways is it different from Christ's?
3. Look up all the references to cleanse and cleansed in Hebrews (KJV: purge and purged). Read a few verses before and after each one to get the context. If you have access to the SDA Bible Commentary, look up what it says about purge and purged in each of these verses. What do the passages elsewhere in Hebrews add to your understanding of Jesus as He is presented in chapter 1:1–4?

Further Study of the Word

1. For a detailed study with reference to the Greek text, see B. F. Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 3–16.
2. For a more general commentary, see F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, rev. ed., 1–9.
3. For an overview of the passage, see W. G. Johnsson, *In Absolute Confidence*, 34–53.