

IN THESE LAST DAYS

The Message of Hebrews

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Introduction

Like a precious gem, Hebrews is rare, enigmatic, and exceptional. On the one hand, Hebrews contains important theological expositions. Its teaching about Christ is profound, including penetrating insights about His humanity and divinity (Hebrews 1; 2). It also provides a careful analysis of the meaning of the New Covenant and the roles of the law and the cross in our salvation (Hebrews 8–10). More importantly, however, Hebrews contains distinctive theological contributions that are especially significant for Adventists. It provides the most extended explanation in the New Testament of the meaning of the Sabbath and its observance (Hebrews 3; 4), explains in detail Jesus' priestly ministry in the heavenly sanctuary (Hebrews 5–10), and contains robust instruction and probably the most famous affirmation in the New Testament about the creation of the universe (Hebrews 11:3). Thus, together with Daniel, Revelation, Leviticus, and Genesis, Hebrews is especially valuable for Adventist theology.

On the other hand, the exhortations of Hebrews are profoundly moving. While its warnings against apostasy are sobering,¹ its description of Jesus as the anchor of our hope is reassuring and comforting.²

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It also contains one of the most emotive calls to faith and perseverance in Scripture.³

The mystery of Hebrews

Hebrews is a rare document. Though sent as a letter, it was probably not intended as one. Instead, the author describes the document as a “word of exhortation,” which was the expression that was used to refer to a sermon in both the synagogue and the Christian church.⁴ Accordingly, it describes the author as a speaker, not as a writer.⁵ Thus, it is often pointed out that Hebrews “is the most elegant and sophisticated, and perhaps the most enigmatic, text of first-century Christianity . . . a masterpiece of early Christian rhetorical homiletics.”⁶

Hebrews is also enigmatic. After almost two millennia of study, scholars do not agree on the answers to six important questions: Who wrote it? To whom was it written? When was it written? Is it a letter or a sermon? What is its literary structure? And how should we understand its symbolic language?

Hebrews was probably written by the apostle Paul from Rome between the years AD 60 and 65 to Hellenist Jewish Christians living in Jerusalem.⁷ We know the author was male because he uses the Greek masculine participle *diēgoumenon* (“to tell”) in Hebrews 11:32 when referring to himself. We also know that he was possibly in jail when he wrote, as his movements were restricted (Hebrews 13:18, 19).⁸ He also refers to Timothy, and the only Timothy we know from early Christian sources was the companion of Paul (verse 23). The kinds of topics and images that the author chooses suggest that he was probably of Jewish origin. Likewise, his argumentation is closer to Jewish midrash than to other systems of reasoning.⁹ He was also presumably well educated and enjoyed rhetorical training.

Most importantly, Hebrews always appears in New Testament manuscripts as part of the Pauline letter collection. The Chester Beatty papyrus P⁴⁶—the earliest manuscript of Hebrews and of the Pauline letters—places Hebrews right after Romans. Hebrews already bears

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the title “To [the] Hebrews,” which follows the way Pauline letters were identified and is different from the way catholic epistles were identified. The question that remains, then, is why did Paul, or the author, not identify himself? We know that the audience knew who the author was (verses 8, 19). Was Paul trying to protect the addressees from persecution, as some have suggested?¹⁰

Hebrews was written from Rome. Paul includes the greetings of the Italians, who are with him, as was the custom in the early Christian churches.¹¹ This greeting suggests that Paul wrote Hebrews between AD 60, the time he first arrived in Rome, and around AD 65, when he died there, according to tradition.

Paul is probably writing to a home church of Hellenist Jewish Christians in Jerusalem—that is, Jewish Christians whose first language was Greek and had been born outside Palestine. The readers may have moved to Jerusalem to receive further education, as Paul himself had done, or, perhaps in other cases, to participate in establishing the Messianic kingdom.¹² Thus, the author distinguishes his readers from their leaders as well as from other Christians in the area (verses 17, 24). It is also possible that Paul knew at least some of them from the time when he lived in Jerusalem before his conversion (Acts 6:1–8:1).

The argument of Hebrews suggests that the audience of Hebrews had a problem of double allegiance. They had difficulty understanding the meaning and implications of Jesus’ priestly ministry in the heavenly sanctuary (Hebrews 5:11–6:8). They were slow to recognize that Jesus’ death, ascension, and ministry in the heavenly sanctuary had made obsolete the Levitical priesthood, the temple, and the sacrifices of animals.¹³ They were Jewish Christians who, though having accepted Jesus in the past, remained loyal to the Jerusalem temple and its rituals. Acts provides evidence that Jewish believers continued to offer sacrifices many years after the death and ascension of Jesus (Acts 21:23, 24). Hebrews argues that such sacrifices were obsolete and soon to disappear and that their offering should not continue.¹⁴ In fact, the author suggests that continuing to offer these sacrifices could

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eventually lead to the rejection of Jesus and His sacrifice (Hebrews 6:4–6; 10:26–29).

Hebrews is the third-longest letter of Paul.¹⁵ Considering the amount of papyrus used, the cost of the secretary, the production of the letter to be sent, and the copy to be retained by the author, E. Randolph Richards has calculated that the author spent at least the equivalent of US\$2,000.¹⁶ This amount did not include the costs of a messenger. If Paul was a prisoner when he produced this letter, what kind of sacrifices and fundraising must it have taken to write and send it? I think Paul wrote this letter because he thought it was important and deserved his investment and sacrifice.

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The first assertion of the author, and probably the most important, was that “in these last days [God] has spoken to us in His Son” (Hebrews 1:2, NASB). The readers of Hebrews did not know it yet, but their world was going to end within the next ten years. The meltdown of Jerusalem and Jewish society would be epic and tragic, like the Flood and the fall of Babylon, a time of trouble as the world had not yet seen (Matthew 24:21, 22). They sensed, however, that the end was approaching fast.

The signs that the end was approaching were increasing in number and intensity. The clouds began to gather with the ascension of Gaius—whom the soldiers called Caligula—in AD 37. The following year the Jews of Alexandria suffered pogroms that culminated with the public scourging of thirty-eight Jewish elders on August 31.¹⁷

Around two years later, offended that a Jew had pulled down an altar to him in the city of Jamnia, Gaius ordered the legate of Syria, Publius Petronius, to set up a gigantic statue of him in the temple in Jerusalem. This order threatened to trigger the worst crisis since the desecration of the temple by Antiochus Epiphanes (167–164 BC). It surely reminded the followers of Jesus of His prediction less than ten years earlier that an “abomination of desolation” would stand in the

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Holy Place (Matthew 24:15; Mark 13:14). Fortunately, Gaius was assassinated on January 24, AD 41, before the order could be carried out.¹⁸ Paul most likely alluded to this event around ten years later when he suggested that Gaius's attempt to set up his statue in the temple in Jerusalem prefigured what the man of lawlessness would later do in the temple of God (2 Thessalonians 2:3, 4).

In AD 41, Claudius forbade Jews in Rome to gather together "in accordance with their ancestral way of life."¹⁹ Eight years later (AD 49), Claudius expelled them from Rome due to the constant riots at the instigation of a certain Chrestus,²⁰ which, some scholars think, may have been a mistaken reference to Christ, suggesting that the disturbances were caused by conflicts between Jews and Christians.²¹

From AD 46 to 48, a famine hit Palestine and the surrounding territories. Agabus, a Christian prophet, predicted this famine, and Christians from Antioch sent relief to Christians in Jerusalem through Barnabas and Paul (Acts 11:27–30). The famine, aggravated by high taxes, the oppression of the Roman occupation, and the extreme polarization between the rich and the poor, frayed the social fabric. Josephus notes that a false prophet named Theudas arose in Palestine around that time.²² He convinced many people to take their property and follow him into the wilderness across the Jordan River, which, at his command, would divide as Joshua had parted the waters of the Jordan before. The plan seemed to be that God would prepare them in the desert for the new conquest of Palestine. But Cuspius Fadus, the Roman procurator, dispersed the movement, executed Theudas, and exhibited his head in Jerusalem.²³ About ten years later (ca. AD 55), a Jewish prophet known as the Egyptian (Acts 21:38) invited his followers to march from the wilderness to the Mount of Olives and then into Jerusalem. Felix, the Roman governor, slaughtered many of them and scattered the movement.²⁴ Still, there would be many others like them.

By AD 59, the time of Paul's last travel to Jerusalem recorded in the Bible, Palestine was in turmoil. According to Tacitus, Felix, the

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governor, “practiced every kind of cruelty and lust.”²⁵ The high priest was Ismael ben Phiabi II, a thug. An ancient lament bemoaned, “Woe is me because of the house of Ishmael b. Phiabi, woe is me because of their thuggery! For they are high priests, and their sons, treasures [*sic*], their sons-in-law trustees, and their slaves beat up on the people with clubs” (b. Pesah. 57a).²⁶ No wonder that Paul, as he prepared to travel, requested prayers that he might be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea (Romans 15:31).

Hebrews was probably written around AD 62, toward the end of Paul’s first imprisonment in Rome. That same year, James, the brother of Jesus and leader of the church in Jerusalem, was assassinated by the temple authorities. When Porcius Festus had suddenly died while in office, the high priest Annas the younger, whom Josephus describes as an insolent man, saw an opportunity. He convened the Sanhedrin, accused James of breaking the law, and condemned him to be stoned to death, which he would not have had the power to do had there been a Roman governor in office.²⁷

Josephus tells us that there were many foreboding signs of the fall of Jerusalem. He especially relates that during the Feast of Tabernacles that same year (AD 62), a certain Jesus, son of Ananias, an untrained peasant, stood up in the temple and began to cry: “A voice from the east, a voice from the west, a voice from the four winds, a voice against Jerusalem and the holy house, a voice against the bridegrooms and the brides, and a voice against this whole people!”²⁸ He continued to cry this warning taken from Jeremiah’s temple sermon (Jeremiah 7:34) for seven years and five months, despite beatings and floggings by the authorities, until he died in AD 69 during the siege of Jerusalem.

Jewish society had begun to unravel. It was probably around this time that Hellenistic believers in Jerusalem received Paul’s letter about Jesus, the Son, seated at the right hand of God, a powerful and merciful Priest interceding in their behalf in a time of need.

As I write these words, our world and society also seem to be on the brink. COVID-19 has disrupted our world, and natural disasters

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seem to be increasing in number and destructive power. Society is fraying, and political systems around the globe are becoming increasingly polarized and unstable. Seasoned thinkers and observers have begun to express their fears that democracy itself is in peril.

These circumstances make us realize that we also need a fresh view of the Son of God, the powerful Ruler and Intercessor who sits at the right hand of God. May God open our eyes to a clearer and deeper vision of Jesus as we study this letter for the last days.

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1. Hebrews 6:1–8.
 2. Hebrews 10:19–25.
 3. Hebrews 10:35–12:4.
 4. Hebrews 13:22; cf. Acts 13:15; 1 Timothy 4:13.
 5. Hebrews 8:1; cf. 2:5; 5:11; 6:9; 11:32; cf. 9:5.
 6. Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 1.
 7. See Félix H. Cortez, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, Seventh-day Adventist International Bible Commentary (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press®, forthcoming).
 8. Another possibility is that he was sick.
 9. See Daniel Boyarin, “Midrash in Hebrews, Hebrews as Midrash,” in *Hebrews in Contexts* (Boston: Brill, 2016), 15–30.
 10. E.g., Christos Sp. Voulgaris, “Hebrews: Paul’s Fifth Epistle From Prison,” *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 44 (1999): 200; David L. Allen, *Hebrews*, New American Commentary (Nashville: B & H, 2010), 66–68.
 11. 1 Corinthians 16:8, 19; Philippians 4:22; Titus 3:15; 1 Peter 5:13; 3 John 14.
 12. E.g., Isaiah 11:10–12:6; 40:9–11; Jeremiah 31:10–12; Ezekiel 34:11–31; cf. Acts 1:6.
 13. Priesthood: Hebrews 7:11–28; temple: Hebrews 8:1, 2, 5; 9:11, 12, 23, 24; sacrifices of animals: Hebrews 8:3, 4; 9:9, 10; 10:1–4, 11–14, 18.
 14. Hebrews 8:13; 9:9, 10; 10:1–4, 18.
 15. After Romans and 1 Corinthians.
 16. E. Randolph Richards, *Paul and First-Century Letter Writing: Secretaries, Composition, and Collections* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 165–169.
 17. F. F. Bruce, *New Testament History* (New York: Doubleday, 1969), 252.
 18. Bruce, 253–258.
 19. Bruce, 295.
 20. Suetonius, *Divus Claudius* 25.4.
 21. Bruce, *New Testament History*, 297, 298.
 22. This Theudas may be different from the one mentioned in Acts 5:36.
 23. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 20.5.1.
 24. Acts 21:38; Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 20.8.6; Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.13.5.

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25. Tacitus, *Historiae* 5.10
26. Jacob Neusner, *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2011), 4:256.
27. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 20.9.1; Bruce, *New Testament History*, 368–377.
28. Josephus, *Jewish War* 6.5.3.