The “Epistle to the Hebrews,” a marvelous piece of early Christian homiletics, is a bit of a mystery among the texts of the New Testament. Since at least the third century it has been included in the epistles of Paul, although it does not name its author and in style and vocabulary it does not display Pauline traits. While labeled an epistle, and resembling an epistle at its conclusion, it does not have the characteristic salutation and thanksgiving sections that begin most Pauline epistles. It is, above all, a homily, a “word of exhortation” as its author calls it (13:22), crafted with considerable rhetorical skill, calling some unidentified Christian community to a renewed faith in Christ.

Author

The identity of the author of Hebrews has puzzled readers from the start. Although some ancient Christians accepted it as Pauline, others, recognizing the stylistic difficulties, thought that it might have been written by companions of Paul such as Luke or Barnabas. Origen, the famous Alexandrian theologian of the third century, thought that Paul was responsible for the content, but that someone else actually penned the text. “God only knows” who that someone was. Ever since the Reformation readers have explored other possibilities. Luther, for example, suggested that Apollos the Alexandrian missionary mentioned in Acts 18 and 1 Corinthians, wrote the piece. Many other names have been proposed, including Priscilla, another collaborator of Paul, who was suggested by the famous German church historian Adolf von Harnack. The suggestion
is intriguing but is incompatible with the masculine self reference (11:32), but there is no
decisive evidence for any candidates.

*Addressees*

Identifying the Christians addressed in this homily is as difficult as naming its author.
They apparently had suffered some persecution (10:32-33), and there were signs of disaffection
in their midst (10:35). These conditions could have affected people in many parts of the early
Christian world. It may be that this homily was meant to be delivered to more than one
audience. In any case, as his concluding remarks (13:22-25) indicate, the homilist sent it off
perhaps to a church in Rome. The greeting from “Those from Italy” (13:24) sounds as if it is
coming from acquaintances to people “back home.” The homily was known in Rome by the end
of the first century, when phrases from it appear in a letter, known as *1 Clement*, from the Roman
church to the church at Corinth.

The situation of the addressees can only be inferred from the homily. Not surprisingly,
different modern readers of Hebrews have constructed different settings that the homily might
have addressed. The most common scenario is that a group of believers in Jesus had been
disappointed by the failure of their hopes for a new era to dawn. These followers of Jesus had
come to the movement from a Jewish background, which they relinquished when they came to
believe in Jesus. Now they were considering abandoning their commitment to Jesus as the hoped
for Messiah and were putting their hope for proper relationship with God in the traditional ritual
life of the Jewish Temple and its sacrificial system. Our homilist wants to admonish them that
true worship of God is to be found not in ancient ritual, but in the life of the new covenant
community, grounded in the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ.
Other scenarios have been proposed that do not presume a prior Jewish affiliation. Non-Jewish adherents of the new Messianic movement may also have expected tangible results from their commitment to be realized in their own lifetime. Our homilist may be counseling them that they need to have faith but that their hopes will indeed be realized. As you read through Hebrews you may well want to imagine for yourselves what situation the homilist was trying to confront.

Structure

In order to get some sense of the overall thrust of many of our New Testament texts, it is useful to develop some appreciation of the text’s structure or organization. The homily that is Hebrews organizes its reflection on the significance of Christ in fairly well-defined units, characterized by inclusios, or motifs that mark the beginnings and ends of a section, special vocabulary, that only appears in portions of the text, alternation between exposition and exhortation, i.e., explanation of what a Biblical passage might mean and how it is to be applied. Our homilist uses these structuring devices in complex ways, leading modern interpreters to propose various models of how the homily hangs together. You may want to make your own outline of the text as you hear it. The following is one way of seeing the flow of the text, which emphasizes some of the balanced, coordinated elements within the homily:

A. 1:1–4 Exordium: The Definitive Word
   I. Christ exalted and humiliated, a suitable High Priest
      1:5–14 A Catena of Scriptural Citations
      2:1–4 Transitional Admonition
      2:5-9 The Subjection and Glorification of the Son
      2:10–18 Christ and his Family
II. Christ faithful and merciful

3:1–4:11 A Homily on Faith

4:14–16 Transitional Exhortation: Approach the Merciful High Priest

5:1–5:10 The Merciful Christ and the High Priests

III. The priestly work of Christ

5:11–6:20 Transitional Admonition

7:1–28 Scriptural Reflection: Christ and Melchizedek

8:1–10:18 Scriptural Reflection: Christ’s Sacrifice and the New Covenant

IV. Exhortation to Faithful Endurance

10:19–39 Transitional Admonition

11:1–12:3 A Celebration of the Faithful

12:4–13 A Homily on Endurance

V. Final Advice about life in the New Covenant

12:14–17 Transitional Admonition

12:18–29 Sinai and the Heavenly Jerusalem

13:1–17 Concluding Exhortations

B. 13:18–25 Benediction and Epistolary Postscript

One can also think about the whole homily as a compilation of smaller homilies, all with a common shape. The clearest example is the section from 3:1 to 4:13, which begins with an introduction (3:1-6), followed by a scriptural quotation (3:7-11), followed by an exposition that picks up on several of the verses being interpreted (3:12-4:11), concluding with a rhetorical flourish (4:12-13). That composition would have made a reasonable sermon in an early Christian (or for that matter in a contemporary Jewish) assembly. A similar pattern appears in the central portion of the homily, an introduction (8:1-6), followed by a citation of scripture (8:7-13), followed by a thematic reflection on the text based upon a distinction between the earthly
and the heavenly realms mentioned in the text (9:1-10:10), followed by a summary and application (10:11-18).

On the basis of such little homilies, our preacher weaves together a larger composition, which combines exposition of scripture and exhortation that culminates in a lengthy appeal to his addressees to live lives of faith (10:19-13:17). As you read through Hebrews, you should keep these patterns in mind and think about what the homilist is doing as he develops his larger composition.

Distinctive Claims

Hebrews makes a special contribution to the New Testament because of the way in which it presents the meaning and significance of Christ’s life and death. That presentation uses categories and models foreign to twenty-first century readers, including priesthood, sacrifice, a cosmology that makes a sharp distinction between heaven and earth, etc. It is a critical question for modern readers of Hebrews whether the claims that our homilist advances make sense for readers of the twenty-first century. Our approach is that the homilist, properly understood, does indeed speak to contemporary Christians, but in order to hear his message, it is important first to understand what he does in the environment for which he first wrote, an environment that mingled the thought world of the Hebrew Bible and the world of Hellenistic culture.

The aim of this study will be to reflect on what those abiding claims are. We shall make some suggestions as we read through the text, but, to anticipate, our homilist suggests that God has done something quite special in the life and death of Jesus, fulfilling prophecy and making possible a new way of relating to the Divine. That way of relating to God is in the context of a covenant relationship made possible by the death of Jesus, which also provided an example of
how anyone in this relationship is to live. A life in covenant with God is a life grounded in faith, expectant with hope, and lived in love.

A note about non-canonical sources

This study guide will make reference to some literature that is not part of the Bible familiar to many modern readers. These texts include works written by Jewish authors in the Second Temple period (500 BCE – 70 CE) that were not included in the Hebrew Bible, but were preserved in Greek (the “Septuagint”) or Latin (the “Vulgate”) Bibles. At the time of the Renaissance and Reformation, scholars recognized the differences between different forms of sacred scripture. Protestants called these books not found in the Hebrew Bible “apocrypha” and excluded them from their canon of the Old Testament. Catholics called these books “deutero-canonical” and continued to include them in their Old Testament. Orthodox Christians, who have always used the Septuagint as their Bible, also include these works in their collection of sacred scripture. Many ecumenical Bibles today, such as the New Revised Standard Version, include these works in a section labeled “apocrypha.” Among these works is the Wisdom of Solomon, which the author of Hebrews apparently uses in crafting the first verses of his homily.

Reading

William Lane, “Social Perspectives on Roman Christianity during the Formative years from Nero to Nerva: Romans, Hebrews, 1 Clement,” in Karl P. Donfried and Peter Richardson, eds., Judaism and Christianity in First-Century Rome (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1998) 196-244.

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