

Introduction. Most New Testament epistles are addressed either to a local assembly or an individual, but some are addressed to a general audience. Those after Hebrews are called by the name of the author. But one, Hebrews, has neither a named author nor recipients. Its title indicates it is addressed to those of Jewish ancestry* and its contents clearly focus upon those who have made a profession of Jesus as their Christ. This profession led to an understandably very difficult and emotionally trying transition for many Jewish believers. They had been raised from infancy in the heritage of Old Testament history, law and prophets. Many were steeped in it and had been rigorously trained in it and had earnestly sought to keep and obey it (plus the many unscriptural additions to the law introduced by the Pharisees). Examples, Peter, Acts 10:14, and Saul/Paul, Philippians 3:4-6. Others, former Sadducees or Herodians, had had little use for the Lord particularly because of His condemnation of their unbelief in resurrection and its consequences for sinners. Nevertheless despite their deep internal disputes they had a deeply ingrained national patriotism, now being tested under their new loyalty to the Christ they had slain. Throughout the letter the author addresses various institutions and traditions that were being replaced. The props of their earthly religion were being taken out from under them and their eyes opened to a new heavenly reality based upon the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. This, first by the direct actions of the Holy Spirit as recorded in the Acts, and then indirectly through the ministry of the four Gospels and the Epistles being completed and distributed.

But those who had become believers under the conviction of the Holy Spirit were still feeling the tug of the religious teaching and beliefs they had before being converted. The writer of Hebrews counters this heritage, the teachings and promises of their religious upbringing, by pointing to blessings and prospects far superior, far better than what they were now expected to discard. Things that were indeed the reality of the types and shadows found in their Law, History, Psalms and Prophets of the Old Testament. In profound grace God systematically takes up the many features of their religious heritage and fulfills them by replacing them with irresistible heavenly blessings and promises for every facet of their religious and everyday lives. As we go through the letter we should watch for and take note of these, jot them down and contemplate and meditate upon them. They are ours too.

On the other hand some who had made a profession of trusting in Jesus Christ apparently had been swept up in the wave of enthusiasm by the signs and wonders among the Christians of that day. Perhaps ambitious like a Judas expecting a return of the King to expel the Romans so they could have a part in the Kingdom. But they did not love Him, only the glory He seemed to promise. The epistle

contains a number of solemn warnings for such, testing the genuineness of their faith. Since some of these might seem troubling and confusing to some real believers the writer carefully makes clear the distinction between mere profession and true faith. One example is 6: 4 - 11, especially v. 9, "but beloved . . ." Also 10:39.

While addressed to the Hebrews the blessings and promises in the letter are not limited to the Hebrew believers but apply to all believers, Jew and Gentile alike. While the gospel was preached to the Jew first and then the Gentile the Jews had to receive salvation on the same basis as the Gentiles, faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and His death upon the Cross. Their countrymen had crucified the Messiah, the Christ. Perhaps some of them had been in the crowd calling for His crucifixion. But by God's grace some were being saved, now humbled by entering the same gate as the formerly detested Gentiles. The book of "The Acts" documents the story of the pro-active grace of God towards them. Now encouragement was needed for what was a perilous way before them, ch 10:32-34; 11:32-40; 12:1-4. How good is the God we adore! They needed to be completely weaned from the earthly religion and institutions they had formerly rightly held and kept. When taking something away from a little one parents soon learn the art of substituting something more attractive and better. God, in the epistle to the Hebrews, does that.

Not only were the Hebrew believers being weaned from their past "faith," another important, though unstated, function of the letter was to prepare them for the destruction of the City they loved and the Temple in it they revered. The very center and underpinning with the relics of their religious beliefs were shortly to be quickly and suddenly destroyed. These would literally become totally unavailable to any who may have desired to rely on them. They would soon be religiously homeless orphans. In fact very soon. Probably less than five years after the letter to the Hebrews was written the non-Christian Jews in Jerusalem rebelled against their occupiers, the Romans. This led to a military response by the Romans and ultimately to the death of many of the Jews who had not fled heeding the Lord's prophetic urging, Luke 21:20-24. Those who did flee benefitted from this letter to them, the Hebrews.

Despite the commands of the Roman General to preserve the Temple it was inadvertently destroyed by fire. The center of earthly worship of Jehovah for 1000 years was gone. The Jews were scattered worldwide and have been ever since, over nineteen centuries. Although through His providential mercies of God they miraculously have maintained their identity as a people, despite their ignorance and negligence of Him. The nation is on hold in unbelief until the Lord returns to reign. (over)

The Epistle to the Hebrews prepared the faithful for this traumatic event and provided encouragement and direction to faith in God's Better Way;
His Man superior to the angels,
His superior Priesthood and Great High Priest,
His superior Covenant replacing the Law,
His superior Sacrifice once and for all,
His superior Altar,
His superior center of worship, gathering outside the Camp instead of the Temple,
His superior Object and goal of the race,
His superior Author and finisher of faith,
and His superior hope, heavenly not earthly, eternal not temporal.

Watch for these and others. How blessed we are! Yet today these scriptures are needed more than ever so Christians can sort out the beliefs of the New Covenant from the Old. Why? Because so many, ignorantly or unscrupulously, have dragged the commandments and rituals of the Law into Christendom despite the clear teaching of the New Testament and particularly this epistle to the Hebrews. May God though His Spirit give eyes to see the light He has given.

By Ron Canner, October 29, 2008

* NOTE.

The name Hebrew means "passing over," as in crossing over a river. It was given Abram after he entered the promised land, Genesis 14:13, because he was a foreigner having come from the east, crossing over the Euphrates River. It was the formidable boundary and barrier separating the civilizations of the East from those of the West. It still is. See Revelation 9:14; 16:12.

Some think the name "Hebrew" refers to Abraham's ancestor, Eber, Genesis 11:16. But Eber's descendants would include many, many peoples beside the line of the promised Seed which clearly was though Isaac and Jacob, Genesis 17:15-21. Among many other descendants of Eber, all descendants of Abram, Ishmael, Esau, Midian and other sons of Keturah would have rights to the promises with Isaac. (The Muslims contend for fancied rights to the promises through Ishmael even today.) Yet indeed, all of the nations of the earth will be blessed in Abram in the end, Genesis 12:2,3; but Israel will be head of all the nations, Isaiah 9:6,7, Daniel 2:44; Luke 1:32-33.

R.