

(S) Welcome to **Discipleship training On The Air**. In this teaching series, you will have an opportunity to learn to know the Bible. As you listen to this programme, make notes in a notebook or record the programme. Today we introduce the letter to the HEBREWS - PART 1. We will learn about the recipients, the writer, the date of writing the letter, the purpose and the division of the letter.

POINT 1. THE RECIPIENTS OF THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS.

First. The people addressed.

One. The addressees were not Gentile Christians, but Jewish Christians. What precisely was understood by the term "Hebrews" is not known. Nevertheless, from the internal evidence in the letter, it is natural to think of the addressees as *Jewish Christians*. *Hebrews 6:1-3 says that the addressees possessed the Old Testament foundation when they became Christians*. This foundation consisted of repentance from dead works, faith in God, instructions in ceremonial purifications (plural: "washings", not "Christian baptism"), the laying on of hands, the resurrection from the dead and eternal judgement. Now these things were *the foundational teachings of the Old Testament*. Ezekiel 18:11-13,30-32 taught *repentance* from such dead works. Genesis 15:6 and Habakkuk 2:4 (Heb 10:38) taught the necessity of *faith* in God. Numbers 19 prescribed *ceremonial purifications*. Deuteronomy 34:9 described *the laying on of hands* in the commission of people, while Leviticus 1:4 described it as a part of the sacrificial ritual. Isaiah 26:19 taught *the resurrection of the dead* and Daniel 12:2 taught *the eternal judgement*. The first coming of Jesus Christ into the world gave these foundational teachings of the Old Testament a fresh and fuller significance. They are certainly also foundational teachings in Christianity.

But because the Hebrews were probably under pressure from various quarters and were not growing spiritually, they were more and more giving up the distinctive Christian beliefs and were reverting to Judaism, stressing only these foundational teachings of the Old Testament, which were also a part of Judaism and certain Jewish sects. *The addressees were living under the old covenant when they became Christians*. The insistence that the old covenant has been antiquated and superseded by the new covenant (7:18; 8:6,13) would only make sense to people who were still trying to live under the old covenant or who were reverting back to it. Gentile Christians never lived under the old covenant and would not need to be convinced that the old covenant had been superseded.

Two. The addressees were probably non-conformist Jewish Christians. They were Christian converts from a non-conformist Jewish background. Their background was not so much the traditional normative Judaism of Jerusalem and its temple rituals as the non-conformist Judaism of communities like the Essenes and the community of Qumran. According to historians, such non-conformist groups of Jews could also be found in the countries to which Jews had been dispersed (the Diaspora). According to the historian Josephus, such communities distinguished themselves from other Jews when they performed their sacrificial duties by the superiority of the purifications that they habitually practised.

It appears that the Jewish community in Rome preserved non-conformist features especially such as *baptisms* or *ceremonial washings*. When these Jews became Christians, some of these Jewish practices were taken over into the Christian community at Rome. According to Hebrews 6:2, the Hebrew Christians took a great interest in such *baptisms* or *ceremonial washings*. According to the Apostolic Tradition written by Hippolytus at the beginning of the third century A.D., Christian baptism, as the central act of initiation into Christianity, took place on Sunday, but on the preceding Thursday the candidate was required to have a ritual bath for the removal of impurity. This ritual of purification before baptism is not taught in the New Testament, but it may well have been a legacy from Judaism in Rome. Therefore, if the letter to the Hebrews was sent to Rome, the reference to "instructions in ceremonial purifications" in Hebrews 6:2 may have had a more immediate relevance to their situation than might be readily apparent to a modern reader.

Three. The addressees were probably a smaller group of Christians, who were conservative Jewish Christians that kept aloof from the main body of Christians. Hebrews 2:3 says that they were probably a group of Jewish Christians, who had never seen or heard Jesus in person, but had learned of him from people who had themselves listened to Jesus. Hebrews 10:32-34 relates that after their conversion they had been exposed to persecution in which they had to endure public abuse, imprisonment and the looting of their possessions. Hebrews 6:10 and 10:34 says that they had especially helped other Christians, particularly those who suffered most during the persecutions. However, Hebrews 5:11 to 6:6 shows that their growth as Christians had stopped and they were in danger of falling away from the Christian faith back into what they were before. It is very probable that they were reluctant to completely cut their ties with the Jewish faith, which still enjoyed the favour and protection of the Roman government. The writer, who either knew them or was aware of their situation, warned them seriously against falling away from the Christian faith altogether, because they would not be able to be brought back to repentance (6:6) and would fall into the hands of the living God (10:31), who is a consuming fire (12: 29). He also encouraged them, that if they held firmly to the confidence they had at first and

persevered to do the will of God, they would really share in Christ's glorious future (3:14), their hope would be very sure (6:11), they would receive what God had promised (10:36) and they would receive God's kingdom that cannot be shaken (12:28).

The fact that the writer quoted only from the Greek translation of the Old Testament, makes it probable that the people addressed knew the Old Testament in the Greek translation and were Greek speaking Jews (Hellenists). From the internal evidence, it is also implied that their knowledge of the ancient sacrificial ritual of Israel was derived from reading the Old Testament and not from firsthand contact with the temple service in Jerusalem. Hebrews 10:25 says that some of them were in the habit of not meeting together with other Christians. This may point to the fact that they were *a smaller group of conservative Jewish Christians* not having fellowship with the larger group of Christians in their area. They may have been a house-church within the wider fellowship of a city-church and tended to neglect the bond of fellowship that bound them to other Christians outside their own smaller circle.

Second. The destination of the letter.

In Hebrews 13:24 the writer sends greetings "from those from Italy", which could mean that the letter was either written from Rome or to Rome. The church father Clement of Rome is acquainted with this letter in A.D. 96 and therefore, according to our extant literature, the first place where the letter to the Hebrews appears to have been known, was Rome. Therefore, it is more likely that people who had originally come from Rome sent greetings to Rome via this letter. Moreover, Timothy, who is mentioned in Hebrews 13:23, was well known in Rome. Moreover, the book of Romans shows that the church at Rome had a Jewish-Christian base (Rom 11:13,18).

The church was probably founded by Jews and converts to Judaism, who had become Christians during Pentecost in A.D. 30 and had afterwards returned to Rome (Act 2:10-11). Through the following years, more and more Gentiles had become Christians in Rome, so that by the time the letter to the Romans was written in 57 A.D., the Gentile Christians were in the majority. As a whole the church at Rome had accepted the implications of the Gentile world-mission, but a small conservative enclave within the church at Rome clung to the more conservative principles of traditional Judaism. According to Hebrews 10:25, the most probable historic situation was that the letter to the Hebrews was sent to this conservative Jewish Christian enclave or house-church at Rome, or at least to those Jewish Christians in the church at Rome who were in the habit of not meeting together with the other Christians in Rome.

POINT 2. THE WRITER OF THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS.

First. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews is unknown.

We do not know for certain to whom the letter to the Hebrews was written. It is to a Jewish Christian community and the best possibility is at Rome. We certainly do not know who wrote the letter to the Hebrews. The tradition of the early Christian Church from the end of the fourth century A.D. ascribes it unanimously to Paul. Before that, there was uncertainty and speculation only. Although people have argued that it could have been Clement of Rome, Luke (Calvin), Barnabas, Apollos (Luther) or even Priscilla and Aquila, we must conclude that we do not know who wrote the letter to the Hebrews.

Second. The theory that Paul wrote the letter to the Hebrews.

This theory was originated by Clement in about A.D. 190 in Alexandria in Egypt and was consequently accepted in the whole Christian Church in the east. However, the Christian Church in the west only ascribed it to Paul from the end of the fourth century onwards. In the west, the Muratorian Canon (A.D. 170), Irenaeus (A.D. 170), Hippolytus (A.D. 240), and Gaius of Rome did not regard Paul as the writer. Eusebius (A.D. 300) remarks that even in his day some of the Romans did not consider Paul as the writer. Jerome (A.D. 384) and Augustine (A.D. 354-430) swayed opinion in the west towards accepting Paul as the writer, not because they were convinced, but because of the practical reason that its canonicity was bound up with the belief in its apostolic authorship. While the third Synod of Carthage in A.D. 397 still made a distinction between the 13 letters of Paul and the letter to the Hebrews, only the sixth Synod of Carthage in A.D. 419 ascribed all 14 letters to Paul.

Third. The reason why Paul cannot be the writer of the letter to the Hebrews.

Hebrews 2:3 says, "This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed *to us* by those who heard him." Thus, the writer of the letter to the Hebrews says that he was not an apostle who had heard the Lord Jesus Christ himself, but that he was a second-generation Christian, a disciple of the apostles and had heard the message of salvation from them. In contrast Paul says that he had heard the gospel directly from Christ (Gal 1:11f).

While the writer to the Hebrews exhorted his readers to remember those who are persecuted or imprisoned (10:32; 13:3), Paul asked his readers to remember his chains (Col 4:18).

While the writer to the Hebrews exhorted his readers to imitate the faith of their leaders (13:7), Paul exhorted his readers to imitate his life (1 Cor 11:1).

While the writer to the Hebrews generally uses the name "Jesus" only, Paul generally uses the name "the Lord Jesus Christ".

While the writer to the Hebrews uses only the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament in his quotations, Paul uses both the Hebrew original as well as the Greek translation in his quotations.

While Paul used the spoken form of Greek in his letters, both Luke and the writer to the Hebrews use the literary form of Greek in their writings, which was not better Greek, but a different form of Greek.

Conclusion. We don't know who wrote the letter to the Hebrews. Only God knows. But according to 2 Timothy 3:16, the writer was definitely inspired by the Holy Spirit and wrote to us what God wanted us to know, believe and do.

POINT 3. THE DATE OF WRITING THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS.

Because the writer and the addressees are uncertain, the date when and place where the letter was written is also uncertain.

In Hebrews 13:23 the writer states that Timothy, who was a junior fellow worker of Paul, had been released from prison. This means that the letter was written during the first century A.D.

According to Hebrews 9:6-9 and 10:1-5, it seems that the readers were aware that gifts and sacrifices were still being offered, not in Rome, but in the temple at Jerusalem. Therefore the letter must have been written before A.D. 70, when Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed.

In Hebrews 8:13 the writer to the Hebrews says that the old covenant, which was made obsolete by the new covenant, was "ageing and would soon disappear." This would be very true especially in the period immediately preceding A.D. 70.

In Hebrews 2:3, the writer speaks of himself and his hearers as belonging to the disciples of the apostles. They were therefore second-generation Christians, who heard the message of salvation from the disciples of Jesus and saw the miracles of the apostles after A.D. 30.

According to Hebrews 10:32-34, they had experienced persecution and this could refer to the expulsion of the Jewish Colony from Rome by the emperor Claudius in A.D. 49. The historian Suetonius wrote that Claudius expelled them because "they were constantly indulging in riots at the instigation of *Chrestus*"! A large scale eviction of this nature would inevitably have been accompanied by public insult, persecution, imprisonment and widespread looting by the people of Rome. However, Hebrews 12:4 says that these Christians had not yet been called to suffer death for their faith, as was the case during the persecution under Nero in A.D. 64.

Therefore, we conclude that the letter to the Hebrews was most probably written to especially the Jewish Christians in Rome not long before the outbreak of persecution against Christians in Rome in A.D. 64.

POINT 4. THE PURPOSE OF THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS.

Throughout the letter, the writer warns against falling away from the Christian faith, back into Judaism. The Hebrews were originally Jews, who had become Christians. But due to various unknown pressures, they were not growing spiritually to maturity (5:11-14). Instead, of going forwards, they were going backwards. They were beginning to give up the distinctive teachings of Christianity and were only emphasising those teachings, which were also the foundational teachings of Judaism (6:1-3). Therefore, on the one hand, the writer warns them against the consequences of falling away from the Christian faith. And on the other hand, he teaches them the truth how the new covenant in Jesus Christ had antiquated and superseded the old covenant and exhorts them to persevere in growing spiritually.

POINT 5. THE DIVISION OF THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS.

The theme of the book of Hebrews is "An exhortation to have faith in Jesus Christ and not fall away."

The book may be divided into two parts as follows:

Part one consists of Hebrews 1:1 to 9:18. Jesus Christ is worthy of our faith.

It consists of four sections:

Section one consists of Hebrews 1:1 to 2:18. **Christ is the Revealer of God's final revelation.** God has given his final revelation through Christ. Christ is God and man, superior to all prophets and all angels, the Saviour and High Priest of people. The writer warns not to ignore this revelation.

Section two consists of Hebrews 3:1 to 4:13. **Christ is God's Son over God's house.** Christ is superior to Moses. The writer warns not to harden hearts against this revelation.

Section three consists of Hebrews 4:14 to 7:28. **Christ is the great High Priest.** As High Priest Christ sympathises with people and listens to their prayers. The writer warns not to remain spiritually immature and risk falling away. Christ is a superior high priest because his priesthood is not according to the law, is based on his sinless nature and on his resurrection from the dead.

Section four consist of Hebrews 8:1 to 10:18. Christ is the minister of a better sanctuary and better sacrifice
The continual animal sacrifices have been replaced by Christ's death once for all. The earthly temple ministry has been superseded by Christ's ministry in heaven. The Old covenant of shadows has been replaced by the new covenant of realities.

Part two consists of Hebrews 10:19 to 13:25. An exhortation to have faith in Jesus Christ and not to fall away from the Christian faith.

It consists of four sections:

Section one consists of Hebrews 10:19-39. The indispensable character of unswerving faith. The writer exhorts people to worship God through Christ and warns people not to commit the sin of deliberate apostasy.

Section two consists of Hebrews 11:1-40. The nature and examples of faith. The writer defines what faith is and gives many examples from faith from the Old Testament. Nevertheless, the faith of the Old Testament people is vindicated only in Jesus Christ.

Section three consists of Hebrews 12:1 to 13:25. The fruits of faith. The writer exhorts the Hebrews to persevere in faith by following Jesus Christ, who is the Pioneer and Perfecter of faith. He exhorts them to accept God's discipline and to live a holy Christian life in dependence of God's grace. He encourages them with the reality of the heavenly Jerusalem, but warns them not to refuse this final revelation of God.

Section four consists of Hebrews 13:1-25. Concluding exhortations and Post Script. The writer exhorts the Hebrews to love brothers, to entertain strangers, to remember prisoners, to honour marriage, to avoid sins like sexual immorality and the love for money. He exhorts them to imitate the faith and life of their leaders, to obey their leaders and to bring true Christian sacrifices. The writer closes with a prayer, doxology, some personal notes and finally greetings and a benediction.

ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT WEEK

First. During the next week, read Hebrews 8-13. Next week we will introduce Hebrews - part 2

Second. See the workbooks "Go and preach God's Kingdom" and Internet on www.dota.net

Third. Listen every SATURDAY to WEDNESDAY on the radio to "Discipleship training on the air".