

21. A Glorious Conundrum

The Epistle/Homily/Treatise to the Hebrews (Hebrews 1-7)

“Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession. For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin.” (Hebrews 4:14-15)

“Where Can I Turn for Peace?” (hymn no. 129)

“Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession. For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.” (Hebrews 4:14-16 KJV)

1. Where can I turn for peace?
Where is my solace
When other sources cease to make me whole?
When with a wounded heart, anger, or malice,
I draw myself apart,
Searching my soul?

2. Where, when my aching grows,
Where, when I languish,
Where, in my need to know, where can I run?
Where is the quiet hand to calm my anguish?
Who, who can understand?
He, only One.

3. He answers privately,
Reaches my reaching
In my Gethsemane, Savior and Friend.
Gentle the peace he finds for my beseeching.
Constant he is and kind,
Love without end.

Historical Questions about Hebrews

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What is it? Who wrote it? To whom was it written?

- **Date: Unknown**
 - Written either in A.D. 60's, *before* the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, which is never mentioned)
 - Perhaps in the A.D. 80's, *after* the temple was destroyed, because of the emphasis on a heavenly temple and the replacement of the Mosaic system)
- **Authorship: Not identified in the text**
 - The attribution to Paul in the superscription (title) appears late
- **Place of Composition: Not identified**
 - Greetings are extended from "those from Italy" (13:24), perhaps Jewish Christians living in Rome or Italy or, more likely, Jews from Rome away from home in Jerusalem or elsewhere (see Acts 2:10).
- **To: Not specified**
 - Presumably to Jewish Christians (hence the title "To the Hebrews") or to other Christians attracted to or influenced by the Jewish temple cult
 - The addressees may have themselves lived in Italy (see above).

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The Question of Authorship

- **“As to who actually wrote the epistle [to the Hebrews], only God knows the truth of the matter.** According to the account which has reached us, some say that the epistle was written by Clement, who became bishop of the Romans; **others, that it was written by Luke**, the writer of the Gospel and the Acts.” (Origen of Alexandria, c. A.D. 185–254, quoted in Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History, 6.25.14)
- “There exists an Epistle to the Hebrews under the name of **Barnabas** — a man sufficiently accredited by God, as being one whom Paul has stationed next to himself.” (Tertullian of Carthage, c. A.D. 200, *On Modesty*, 20)
- **Other suggestions: Priscilla and/or Aquila, Stephan, Apollos**
- **Jerome (A.D. 340–420), who translated the Bible into Latin, thought that Paul was the author.**
 - Subsequent mss. listed “The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews” in the superscription, but there is not reference to Paul by name or event in the text
- **Did Joseph Smith think that Paul wrote Hebrews?**
 - There seems to be a reference to Pauline authorship in D&C 128:15, which quotes Hebrews 11:40
 - Referred to Paul as the presumed author in relation to verses from Hebrews 4:2, 6:2, 11:4–7, 11:5–6, 11:10, 12:22–24 in *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 59, 99, 158–59, 168, 170
 - The JST simply repeats the title that the Phinney KJV edition of Joseph Smith had “the Epistle to the Hebrews” (does not mention Paul but neither did most of the other epistles)

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Proposal on Authorship

- **The ancient idea of authorship**
 - **The auctor was the originator of or the authority behind the ideas of a work**
- **The earliest Church authorities already suspected a Pauline connection**
 - “[Clement] says indeed that **it was Paul’s, but that it was written for Hebrews in the Hebrew tongue**, and that **Luke, having carefully translated it, published it for the Greeks**; hence as a result of translation, the same complexion of style is found in this Epistle and in the Acts . . .” (Eusebius citing Clement in Hist Eccl 6.14.2f)
 - “. . . If I were to state my own opinion, I should say that **the thoughts are the apostle’s**, but that **the style and composition belong to one who called to mind the apostle’s teachings and, as it were, made short notes of what the master said.**” (Eusebius citing Origen in Hist Eccl 6.25.11–13)
- **Luke, Barnabas (he was a Levite!), or someone else closely associated with Paul may have written it, but the ideas and teachings could still be Paul’s!**
 - **“I am not really concerned, and no man of faith should be, about the exact authorship of the books of the Bible. More than one Prophet may well have written parts of books now collected under one heading.** I do not know. There may have been ‘ghost writers’ in those days, as now. The Lord gave Aaron to Moses in an equivalent capacity, and spoke to Israel through Moses by the mouth of Aaron. He may have done the same in other cases. If so, what of it? Shakespeare’s literature is neither lost nor dimmed because Bacon may have written it.” (J. Reuben Clark, *On the Way to Immortality and Eternal Life*, 210)

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Literary Questions about Hebrews

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Genre Question: *What is It?*

- “Hebrews *begins* like a **treatise**, *proceeds* like a **sermon**, and *closes* like an **epistle** (H.E. Dana, *Jewish Christianity: An Expository Survey of Acts I to XII, James, I and II Peter, Jude and Hebrews* [New Orleans: Bible Institute Memorial Press, 1937], 201).
- Yet not simply a **theological treatise**, because it has an **apologetic purpose**, defending the superiority of Christ and preventing the readers from lapsing back to the Mosaic system.
- Also, it is more of a **homily** (an extended lesson closely connected to a scriptural text) rather than a **sermon** (more topical).
- Only 13:1–25 reads like a letter or **epistle**.

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Theme and Style

- **Through Christ faithful Christians have direct access to God**
- Confident in their covenant relationship with God, *the faithful should follow Christ's example of obedience and patience in the face of persecution*
- Differences from the Pauline letters
 - **Perhaps the best Greek in the New Testament, comparable only to Luke-Acts**
 - **The author seems to suggest that he and his audience heard the gospel indirectly from those that had heard it from the Lord (2:3)**
 - Contrasts with Gal 1:1 and 12, where Paul insists that he received the gospel directly from the risen Lord
 - Does not focus on justification, the deadness of the works of the law, or love (*agapē*) in the same way
 - Although all the other letters are to gentile or mixed congregations, so Paul may have taken another approach with an all-Jewish audience
 - *There are, however, some parallels to Hebrews' use of Jewish ritual in Romans*

Structure of Hebrews

- **Introduction (Treatise): God Has Spoken by His Son (1:1-4)**
- **Body (Homily)**
 - **Superiority of Jesus as God's Son (1:5-4:13)**
 - **Superiority of Jesus' Priesthood (4:14-7:28)**
 - Superiority of Jesus' Sacrifice and Ministry (8:1-10:18)
 - Availing Oneself of Jesus' Priestly Work: Faith and Endurance (10:19-12:29)
- **Conclusion (Epistle)**
 - Ethical Exhortations: Injunctions about Practice (13:1-19)
 - Blessings and Greetings (13:20-25)

Teachings in Hebrews 1–7

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“God hath spoken to us by his Son . . .”

Christological Treatise Statement

- *“God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, Hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed **heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds**; Who being the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person, and **upholding all things by the word of his power**, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high; **Being made so much better than the angels**, as he hath by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they.”* (1:1–4)
- *Earlier dispensations, particularly that of Moses, were incomplete compared to the full revelation of the gospel by and in Christ*
- Reflects an extraordinarily high christology, like that in John 1:1–18
- **Christ as creator and sustainer of the universe** reflects the hymn of Colossians 1:15–17
- **Christ’s superiority over the angels** also recalls the argument of Colossians

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Superiority Over the Angels (1:5–2:18)

Jesus as God's Son

- **Christ Is the Firstborn and above All** (1:5–14)
- **“Give More Earnest Heed”** (2:1–4)
- **Exaltation Through Abasement** (2:5–18)
 - “But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honour; **that he by the grace of God should taste death for every man. For it became him, for whom are all things, and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings.** For both he that sanctifieth and they who are sanctified *are* all of one: for which cause he is not ashamed to call them brethren . . .” (2:9–11)
 - “Wherefore in all things it behoved him to be made like unto *his* brethren, **that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation (hilaskesthai) for the sins of the people.** For in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, he is able to succour them that are tempted.” (2:17–18)
 - **hilaskesthai:** NIV renders this “make atonement for the sins”; NJB, “expiate the sins”
 - **Expiation**, rather than strictly a reconciliation, model

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Superiority Over Moses (3:1–4:13)

Jesus as God's Son

- **Moses a Servant, Christ a Son** (3:1–6)
 - “And Moses verily *was* faithful in all his house, as a servant, for a testimony of those things which were to be spoken after; But **Christ as a son over his own house; whose house are we**, if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end.” (3:5–6)
- **Warning Against Unbelief** (3:7–19)
- **The Promised Rest of God** (4:1–11)
 - **“Rest” = Promised Land (Canaan) = Heaven**
- **The Word of God a Sword** (4:12–13)
 - “For the word of God *is* quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and *is* a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.” (4:12; cf. Rev. 1:16 and esp. D&C 6:2 and parallels)

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Israel under Moses

- “Harden not your hearts, as in the provocation, in the day of temptation in the wilderness, when your fathers tempted me, proved me, and saw my works forty years. Wherefore I was grieved with that generation... so I swore in my wrath, “They shall not enter into **my rest.**” [Ps. 95:8–11].” (Heb. 3:8–11)
 - **Provocation or rebellion at Massah (“strife, complaint”) and Meribah (“testing, trying”)** when Moses brought forth water out of the rock for the complaining Israelites
- “[**Moses**] sought diligently to sanctify his people ... but they hardened their hearts... Therefore, the Lord in his wrath, for his anger was kindled against them, swore that they should not enter into his rest while in the wilderness, which rest is the fullness of his glory. **Therefore, he took Moses out of their midst, and the Holy Priesthood also.**” (D&C 84:23–25)
 - The tabernacle was intended to provide the Israelites with their endowment and make them “a kingdom of priests”
 - Instead **they lost the Melchizedek Priesthood, the ordinances of the house of the Lord,** and the Levites received portions of the Aaronic or preparatory priesthood

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Superiority of Jesus’ Priesthood (4:14–7:28)

- **Jesus the Great High Priest (4:14–5:10)**
 - “Seeing then that **we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God,** let us hold fast *our* profession. **For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin.** Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.” (4:14–16)
- **“Are You Prepared to Hear the Meat about Christ or Do You Still Need Milk?” (5:11–6:12)**
 - Sounds like Paul! See 1 Corinthians 3:2
 - “Moving beyond” the basic principles of the gospel (6:1–2, but not “setting them aside” JST), **consider the responsibility that comes with “tasting the powers of the world to come” (6:5)**
 - *Seems to be a reference to those whose calling and election are made sure and then deny the sure witness of the Holy Ghost: “If they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame” (6:6; cf. 10:26–27, D&C 76:43, 84:41, 132:27)*
- **The Certainty of God’s Promise (6:13–20)**
 - “For when God made promise to Abraham, because he could swear by no greater, **he sware by himself . . .** Wherein God, willing more abundantly to shew unto the heirs of promise the immutability of his counsel, **confirmed it by an oath.**” (6:13–17)
 - *For “oaths,” wherein God swears unconditionally (contrast with covenants), see also JST Genesis 14:25–31. How does this bear on D&C 84:33–45 n.b. 39–40?*

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Melchizedek and Christ

- **The Priestly Order of Melchizedek (7:1–28; cf. Gen. 14, Psalm 110)**
- **Melchizedek = “King of Righteousness,” both a personal name and a title**
 - King of Salem (“peace,” hence he was a “Prince of Peace”) who, like Enoch, taught his people and helped them obtain translation
 - Acknowledged priesthood superior to Abraham, from whom the Israelites were descended
 - *Melchizedek a type of shadow of Christ*
- **The priesthood that Melchizedek held was “without father, without mother, without descent, having neither beginning of days nor end . . .” (Heb 7:3 JST)**
- **“Christ glorified not himself to be made an high priest...as [God] said also in another place, ‘Thou art a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek’ [Ps. 110:4]... [Christ was] called of God an high priest after the order of Melchizedek.” (Heb. 5:5–6, 10)**
 - “For he of whom these things are spoken pertains to another tribe... For it is evident that our Lord sprang out of Judah, of which tribe Moses spoke nothing concerning priesthood.” (Heb. 7:14–15)
 - Neither Melchizedek or Christ were descended from Aaron nor were they entitled to the Levitical priesthood
 - “If therefore perfection were by the Levitical priesthood...what further need was there that another priest should rise after the order of Melchizedek, and not be called after the order of Aaron?” (Heb. 7:11)
- **Next lecture: Jesus the Great High Priest!**