

# Hebrews 1:1-4: Jesus is the Center of the Universe...Is He the Center of Yours? Part 1

Ricardo Campos, Pastor Grace Chapel, Orange, CA May 20, 2018

## I. Introduction

The book of Hebrews has something incredible to tell you: the pinnacle of all existence has arrived and His name is Jesus. God may've spoken to us before through prophets, but now He's speaking to us through His Son. And what He has to reveal to us will change our lives forever. Come rain or shine, our lives will not be shaken because of what the Son has done for us through His blood.

## II. Hebrews 1:1-4: Jesus is the Center of the Universe...Is He the Center of Yours?

The book of Hebrews is somewhat of a mystery. Among other things, unknown is the author, the audience and their location, the date, and the exact nature and circumstance of the crisis the audience faced. But it's not a complete mystery. The book itself reveals that it's addressed to Jewish Christians (not unbelievers [or believers] facing the threat of hell) who are undergoing persecution, which is why the author writes this letter of warning and encouragement. Here's what we know about the author, date, audience and destination, and purpose of this incredible letter:

**Author:** the early Church considered several candidates: Paul, Barnabas, Luke, and Clement of Rome. Recent scholarship suggests many others: Apollos, Silvanus, the deacon Philip, Priscilla and Aquila, Jude, Aristion, Silas, Epaphras, Timothy, Peter, Jude, Stephen, and the Virgin Mary. The masculine participle in 11:32 precludes any female as the author. And Paul cannot be the author because he received his message directly from Christ (Galatians 1:12) while the author of Hebrews received it secondhand, from those who heard Christ (Hebrews 2:3). Additionally, if Paul is the author, why doesn't he identify himself as in the rest of his letters?

There are varied arguments given to support all these possible authors. But in the end many (if not all) of the arguments are not strong enough to prove who the author is. For example, some say it was Luke because of his mastery of the Greek language and rhetoric (which the author of Hebrews possesses). Based on this, anyone with such mastery could be the author. Barnabas was considered because he was a Levite (Acts 4:36) and Hebrews has much to say about the Levitical system. His name also means "Son of Encouragement," and the author calls his letter a "word of exhortation [encouragement]." But the only thing we know of Barnabas' Levitical background is that he was from the tribe of Levi. He may've been very familiar with the Levitical system, but Scripture is silent about this. Based on this, any Levite familiar with the Levitical priesthood should be considered. Apollos was considered because of the epistle's eloquent Greek style and its use of the Old Testament, which matched Apollos' description as an "eloquent man and mighty in the Scriptures" (Acts 18:24). He was also an associate of Paul, Jewish, educated, and learned his message from others (Acts 18:26; Hebrews 2:3). But Apollos was not the only associate of Paul who possessed these qualities. In the end these are guesses, some very unlikely, especially Priscilla: the author is a male (the masculine participle in Hebrews 11:32).

Thus, the author is unknown. He was well versed in the Greek language and rhetoric. Due to his knowledge and familiarity with the Old Testament Scriptures and the Levitical system, he was likely Jewish. He knew his audience and cared deeply about them (Hebrews 5:12; 6:4-12; 10:19-39; 13:23-24). He was a faithful minister of God to the point of imprisonment (Hebrews 10:24).

**Audience and Destination:** the options for audience are: Jewish or Gentile Christians (or a mixture of both) and Christians or non-Christians who were considering Christ but ultimately rejected Him (or a mixture of both). The destinations suggested are: Jerusalem, Rome, Samaria, Antioch, Corinth, Cyprus, Ephesus, Bithynia and Pontus, and Colossae.

Regarding the destination, support for the various locations is not strong enough to prove for certain where the letter was sent. For example, support for Rome comes from 13:24 which some interpret as “those who come from Italy.” But Mosser in his dissertation *No Lasting City: Rome, Jerusalem and the Place of Hebrews in the History of Earliest Christianity* (St. Mary’s College, University of St. Andrews, 2004) examined first-century manuscripts with this type of phrase “employing the preposition *apo* followed by a place name” and he concluded that it consistently refers to “the place *from which* the epistle was written.” If Mosser is correct, then Hebrews was written *from* Rome not *to* Rome. Some see support for Jerusalem in Hebrews 13:13 since “outside the camp” may likely refer to Jerusalem or something within it. Also, 13:13 does make allusions to Jerusalem and the heavenly Jerusalem is meant to play against the earthly Jerusalem (13:14). But it may not be Jerusalem itself since the believers in Jerusalem were known for their poverty (Acts 11:29; Romans 15:25-27) but the audience of Hebrews was not poor and were known for their charity (6:10; 10:34). Also, some of the believers in Jerusalem had suffered martyrdom (Acts 7:59-60; 12:2) while no one among the Hebrews’ audience had been killed for their faith (12:4). The destination was likely near enough Jerusalem so that the warning not to go back to the temple sacrificial system makes sense.

Regarding the audience, they were familiar with the Old Testament Scriptures and had practical knowledge of the Levitical sacrificial system (6:4-20; 10:1-29). They knew the author well; he was aware of their problem and solution (5:12; 6:4-12; 8:1-2; 10:19-39; 12:22-24; 13:7, 15). They faced persecution from those who rejected Jesus as Messiah, so they felt pressure to return to God’s sacrificial system (6:4-6; 10:1-29). Thus, the author warned them, but he was also “confident of bettering things” concerning them because of their previous un-timid faithful conduct (6:9-10; 10:32-34).

Are they Christians or non-Christians? Some think the audience is made up of unbelievers who are in danger of going to hell unless they repent. Why? Because of the language the author uses in the warning passages, which seem to say that their eternal salvation is at stake and hell awaits them unless they repent (2:3; 6:8; 10:27, 29). However, it’s crystal clear that the audience is made up of believers. First, Christ and the audience are siblings, thus, they have the same Father, God (2:10–13). Second, even in one of the warning passages where some see eternal damnation, the audience has had their “hearts sprinkled,” their “bodies washed with pure water,” and have been sanctified by the blood of the covenant (10:22, 29). Thus, the audience is made up of God’s children who have been (past tense) sprinkled, washed, and sanctified by the blood of Christ.

**Date:** based on the evidence available an exact date is uncertain. But we do have an idea: Clement of Rome quoted the book in A.D. 95, thus, it was written prior to this. The Jewish temple (and along with it the Levitical sacrificial system) was destroyed by the Romans in A.D. 70. If the temple and the sacrificial system are gone, why does the author fail to mention it? This would have been powerful ammunition for his argument which centers around Christ replacing the Levitical sacrificial system. Additionally, if the temple is gone, it makes nonsense of his warning to the audience not to go back to the Levitical sacrifices. How can his audience go back to a sacrificial system that is no longer available? Thus, as 10:1 seems to indicate, the temple must still be standing, which means Hebrews was written before A.D. 70.

**Purpose of Writing:** the audience faced the danger of apostasy, but it was more than just apostasy. Yes, the audience faced going back to a sacrificial system that Christ had replaced (6:20; 8:1-2; 9:24; 10:1–25; 12:22-29), which would be tantamount to re-crucifying the Lord (6:6). But this is only half of the story. The author also wanted them to realize that Christ's death had acquired for them a priestly position and access that no priest (not even the high priest) ever had. They could now follow Christ into the **heavenly** Holy of Holies! (6:20; 10:19; 12:22-24), where they had 24-hour access to their Lord for petition (4:16) and worship (13:15). And this was not just a privilege but a duty they were not to forsake (10:25). This was the complete danger facing them. So the warning was not just "Don't go back to that nullified sacrificial system or else!" It was "Don't go back to the nullified sacrificial system **and abandon your priestly duty in the heavenly Holy of Holies or else!**" The author encapsulates the purpose of his book in 8:1-2. Some see this as the main point of this section in the book, but everything he said before 8:1-2 and after relates to the central point of what Jesus has done and therefore what the audience's responsibility was. The author didn't want his audience to "fall into the hands of the living God" (10:31) because they turned their back on the open door into God's presence He had purchased for them with His blood. However, the author was confident of their continued faithfulness to God (6:9) because he and they were made of the same metal (10:39) which is very likely why he hoped to be with them once again (13:23).

**Why did Jesus come to earth, why did the Father send the Son?** You might say, "To die for our sins." True, but how does that change anything? Or, "So that we won't go to hell." True, but again, how does that change anything? God the Father has something to say to you and He wants to say it to you through His Son. He sent His Son not only to save you from hell, but to transform your life from the way it is now. He wants you to understand that everything in history has now changed. Jesus has purchased the right for you to enter God's presence Monday morning and every morning. He's come to be the center of your life, not as a Ruler, but a Father who's there for you no matter what. When you make Jesus the center of your universe, when you receive the privilege He's given you to enter into God's presence, your world will be completely transformed. When things go terribly wrong, He'll be there to encourage and guide you every step of the way. When things go unbelievably good, He'll be there to sing your praises and celebrate with you.

### III. Conclusion

*God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through 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 at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become so much better than the angels, as He has by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they.*