Hebrews – Overview

Author: The earliest manuscripts of the book do not provide the name of the author. In the early church, many believed that Paul was the author but even then some questioned Paul's authorship. The vocabulary and style of Hebrews is different from Paul's letters. Paul's normal layout of his letters has an opening greeting, prayers, doctrine, application, closing statements and greetings. Hebrews mixes sections of doctrine with sections of warnings and exhortations. There is no opening greeting. Some other suggestions for authorship are Apollos, Barnabas, Priscilla, Luke, Peter, Jude and Epaphras. There are even more suggestions than what I have listed. Paul Ellingworth, in the The New International Greek Testament Commentary, has a good section on the many suggested authors of Hebrews.

When: The latest date for the book is generally thought to be 96 AD. Clement of Rome mentioned the book of Hebrews in a letter dated 96 AD. An important question to answer is whether or not Hebrews was written before or after the destruction of the temple in 70 AD. Many think that the writer of Hebrews would have mentioned the destruction of the temple if the book was written after 70 AD. The destruction of the temple would have made it much harder for Christians to return to Judaism. What is Judaism without the temple and associated sacrifices and feasts? Another factor that people look at is the level of persecution that the recipients faced. Simon Kistemaker, in the Hendriksen-Kistemaker New Testament Commentary, dates the book in the early 80s based on the history of persecution. Paul Ellingworth says that the statements about persecution may indicate that Hebrews was written before 64 AD when more intense persecution began under Nero. The date of the book is hard to determine.

Where: The answer to where the book was written depends on one's opinion of who wrote the book and when. Some who believe that Paul wrote Hebrews also believe that Paul wrote the book while he was in prison in Rome.

Recipients: The book, in some early manuscripts, is titled "To the Hebrews". Hebrews has many Old Testament quotations. The book assumes more than a passing familiarity with the Old Testament. It seems reasonable to conclude that the book was primarily written to Jewish Christians. No church was mentioned in the letters but the recipients were encouraged to obey their leaders and submit to them. Some suggestions on where the letter was sent are Israel, Rome, Alexandria, Spain, Corinth and Galatia.

Content: Hebrews lays out a case for the superiority of Jesus Christ compared to Old Testament prophets, angels, Moses, Joshua, and the Aaronic high priests. Jesus is the mediator of a superior covenant which is based on superior promises. Jesus provides a rest which is superior to the rest that Israel received when Joshua led them into the Promised Land. Jesus is a high priest in the order of Melchizedek. His priesthood and priestly service are superior to the Aaronic priests and priestly service. Only the blood of Christ can atone for our sins and give us forgiveness. Christ's atonement, forgiveness and rest are received by grace, through faith in Jesus Christ. The word "superior" may not appear in the text of Hebrews, depending on your version, but "better", "more excellent", "more honor" and similar words and phrases were used. Hebrews is an exhortation to hold fast to faith in Christ and to not revert back to the old ways because Jesus is better in every category.

Hebrews uses a lot of quotes from the Old Testament. Sprinkled through the sections of doctrine are sections of warnings and exhortations. Chapter 11 is the well known chapter on faith with examples of people who exhibited faith even in difficult circumstances. The readers were experiencing some suffering and persecution, but not "to the point of shedding your blood". Suffering can make cowards of us. The writer warned and exhorted the readers to hold firmly onto their Christian faith and to not attempt to alleviate their suffering by abandoning their faith in Christ.