

INTRODUCTION TO THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS

A. THE RECIPIENTS OF THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS.

The Letter to the Hebrews is God's message to Jewish Christians who tended to slide back into Judaism. They looked backwards to the veiled Old Testament revelation instead of forwards to the unveiled New Testament revelation. *The Old Testament revelation remains veiled when it is read without the unveiled New Testament explanation. The veil is only taken away when a person turns to Jesus Christ and his completed work of salvation*¹.

Two principles follow out of this:

- Non-Christians and nominal Christians can only begin to understand God's revelation in the Bible when they turn to Jesus Christ!
- The Old Testament revelation must always be interpreted in the light of the New Testament revelation!

1. The people addressed.

The recipients of the letter were believers as well as unbelievers within the Hebrew community.

The true remnant within the Hebrew community consisted of *Jewish Christians*. They shared in the heavenly calling (3:1); were however slow to learn (5:11), needed someone to teach them the ABC of the Bible all over again (5:12), were still spiritual babies in need to grow to maturity (5:11 - 6:3), bore fruit of good works and love (6:8,10; 10:34) and had the hope of the fulfilment of God's promise as an anchor hooked in God's presence (6:19). They belonged to those who believe and are saved (10:39).

However, some of them participated in the New Testament covenant without being regenerated. They were unfaithful to God's covenant and slid back into their traditional Judaism: they drifted away (2:1), ignored such a great salvation (2:3), continued deliberately in sin (3:12; 10:26), continued in unbelief (3:12; 4:2), turned away from the living God who had revealed himself in Christ (3:12), became hardened (3:13), did not persevere to the end (3:14; 4:11), fell short of attaining the promise to enter the rest (4:1), continued in disobedience (4:6-7,11), shared in the New Testament covenant without being born again and fell away (6:4-8), trampled Christ underfoot, treated the New Testament covenant as useless and insulted the Holy Spirit who offered them grace (10:29). They belonged to those who shrink back and are destroyed (10:39).

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 already possessed the Old Testament foundation when they became Christians. Some foundational teachings from the Old Testament were:

- Repentance from dead works²
- The necessity of faith in God³
- Prescribed ceremonial purifications⁴
- The laying on of hands in commissioning and blessing people⁵
- The resurrection from the dead⁶
- Eternal judgement⁷

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 within 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. When they became Christians, they were still living under the old covenant. Insisting that the old covenant had 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!

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.

¹ 2 Corinthians 3:14-16

² Ezekiel 18:11-13,30-32

³ Genesis 15:6; Habakkuk 2:4; cf. Hebrews 10:38

⁴ Numbers 19

⁵ Deuteronomy 34:9

⁶ Isaiah 26:19

⁷ Daniel 12:2

According to historians, such non-conformist groups of Jews could also be found in the Diaspora within countries to which Jews had been dispersed. 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 AD, Christian baptism, as the central act of initiation into Christianity, took place on Sunday. However, 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.

The addressees were probably a smaller group of 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). They would fall into the hands of the living God (10:31), a consuming fire (12:29). He urged them to hold firmly to the confidence they had at first and to persevere doing the will of God. Then they would 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 called *the Septuagint* and that they were Greek speaking Jews, called *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 rather than from first-hand 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 Gentile Christians in their area. They may have been a house-church within the wider fellowship of a city-church. They tended to neglect the bond of fellowship that bound them to other Christians outside their own small circle.

2. 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 96 AD and therefore, according to our extant literature, the first place where the letter to the Hebrews appears to have been known, was Rome. 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. The book of Romans shows that the church at Rome had a Jewish-Christian base⁸.

The church was probably founded by Jews and converts to Judaism, who had become Christians during Pentecost in 30 AD and had afterwards returned to Rome⁹. Throughout 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 AD, 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.

⁸ Romans 11:13,18

⁹ Acts 2:10-11

According to Romans 1:7 the Letter to the Romans was sent to the church in Rome¹⁰ and according to Hebrews 10:25 the Letter to the Hebrews was sent to this conservative Jewish Christian enclave or house-church at Rome¹¹, 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.

B. THE WRITER OF THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS.

1. 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 AD ascribed 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 (according to Calvin), Barnabas, Apollos (according to Luther) or even Priscilla and Aquila, we must conclude that we do not know who wrote the letter to the Hebrews.

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

This theory was originated by Clement in about 190 AD 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 (170 AD), Irenaeus (170 AD), Hippolytus (240 AD), and Gaius of Rome did not regard Paul as the writer. Eusebius (300 AD) remarks that even in his day some of the Romans did not consider Paul as the writer. Jerome (384 AD) and Augustine (354-430 CE) 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 397 AD still made a distinction between the 13 letters of Paul and the letter to the Hebrews, only the sixth Synod of Carthage in 419 AD ascribed all 14 letters to Paul.

3. 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, namely, the apostles." 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 Christ¹².

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 (imprisonment)¹³.

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 life¹⁴.

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, be and do.

C. 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 AD.

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 70 AD when Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed.

¹⁰ in 57 AD

¹¹ in 64 AD

¹² Galatians 1:11f

¹³ Colossians 4:18

¹⁴ 1 Corinthians 11:1

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

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 30 AD.

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 49 AD. 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 64 AD.

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 64 AD.

D. THE PURPOSE OF THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS.

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). The writer warns them against the consequences of falling away from the Christian faith. This is a serious warning to modern liberal Christians.

The writer teaches that *the new covenant in Jesus Christ (the distinct New Testament teachings) had antiquated and superseded the old covenant (the distinct Old Testament teachings). The New Testament lies hidden in the Old Testament; and the Old Testament is revealed in the New Testament. The Old Testament contains the shadows, the prophecies and types; and the New Testament contains the fulfilment of these prophecies and the realities of these types. The Old Testament must always be interpreted in the light of the New Testament.*

The writer exhorts the readers to persevere in the new covenant and to grow spiritually to maturity.

E. THE DIVISION OF THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS.

The theme of the letter

“God’s final revelation is in Jesus Christ.”

(God spoke previously through the prophets, but in these last days he spoke through Jesus Christ).

or:

“An exhortation to have faith in Jesus Christ and not fall away from the distinct Christian teachings.”

The division of the letter

The book may be divided into two parts as follows:

Part 1. Hebrews 1:1 to 10:18. TEACHINGS: JESUS CHRIST IS WORTHY OF OUR FAITH.

It consists of four sections:

a. Section one consists of Hebrews 1:1 to 2:18.

Christ reveals God’s final revelation (The finality of Christianity).

An introduction concerning God’s final revelation through Jesus Christ and Christ’s superiority to the Old Testament prophets (1:1-4). Christ’s superiority to angels (1:5-14). The first practical warning not to ignore this revelation (2:1-4). The humiliation and glory of Christ (2:5-9). Christ as Saviour and High Priest of his people (2:10-18).

b. Section two consists of Hebrews 3:1 to 4:13.

Christ is God’s Son over God’s house (The true home of the people of God).

Christ’s superiority to Moses (3:1-6). The second practical warning not to harden their hearts against this revelation, that is, a warning that the rejection of Christ is more serious than the rejection of Moses (3:7-19). A warning that “the true rest of God” may be forfeited (4:1-10). An exhortation to make every effort to enter into the true rest of God (4:11-13).

c. Section three consists of Hebrews 4:14 to 7:28.

Christ is the great High Priest (The high priesthood of Christ).

An encouragement concerning what Christ’s high priesthood provides (4:14-16). The qualification of the high priesthood in general (5:1-4). Christ’s qualifications for the high priesthood (5:5-10). The third practical warning not to remain spiritually immature (5:11-14). A serious warning against falling away from the Christian Faith (6:1-8) An encouragement to persevere (6:9-12). An encouragement about the steadfastness of God’s promise (6:13-20).

The teaching that Christ belongs to a better order, the order of Melchizedek: The greatness of Melchizedek (7:1-10). The imperfections of the priesthood of Aaron (7:11-14). The superiority of the new priesthood (7:15-19). The new priesthood is

superior because of God's oath (7:20-22), because of its permanence (7:23-25) and because of the character of Christ (7:26-28).

d. Section four consist of Hebrews 8:1 to 10:18.

Christ is the Mediator of a better covenant (The better covenant, sanctuary and sacrifice)

Christ's high priesthood in the heavenly sanctuary is superior to the Old Testament priesthood and the new covenant is superior to the old covenant (8:1-6). The old covenant has been superseded (8:7-13). The sanctuary under the old covenant (9:1-5) and the temporary ritual in that sanctuary applied only until the time of the new order (9:6-10). In contrast, Christ's high priestly ministry in the heavenly sanctuary obtains eternal redemption (9:11-14). It consists of the shedding of his blood as a ransom for sins (9:15-22). It is the perfect and final sacrifice (9:23-10:18). The Old Testament *shadows* have been replaced by the New Testament *realities* (10:1)!

Part 2. Hebrews 10:19 to 13:25. EXHORTATIONS: HAVE FAITH IN JESUS CHRIST AND DO NOT FALL AWAY FROM THE CHRISTIAN FAITH.

It consists of four sections:

a. Section one consists of Hebrews 10:19-39.

The indispensable character of unswerving faith.

An exhortation to worship God through Christ (10:19-25). The fourth practical warning not to commit the sin of deliberate apostasy (10:26-31). A call to perseverance (10:32-39).

b. Section two consists of Hebrews 11:1-40.

The nature and examples of faith.

The nature of faith (11:1-3). The faith of Abel, Enoch and Noah (11:4-7). The faith of Abraham (11:8-12). The ultimate destination of those who believe (11:13-16). More about the faith of the patriarchs (11:17-22). The faith of Moses (11:23-28). The faith exercised during the exodus and settlement in Canaan (11:29-31). More examples of people of faith (11:32-38). The teaching that the faith of the Old Testament people is vindicated only in Jesus Christ (11:39-40).

c. Section three consists of Hebrews 12:1 to 13:21.

The fruits of faith.

An exhortation to persevere in faith by following Jesus Christ, who is the Pioneer and Perfecter of faith (12:1-3). An exhortation to accept God's discipline (12:4-11). An exhortation to get up and live a holy Christian life in dependence of God's grace (12:12-17). An encouragement that the heavenly Jerusalem is much better than the earthly Jerusalem (12:18-24). The fifth practical warning not to refuse this final revelation of God (12:25-29).

d. Section four consists of Hebrews 13:22-25.

Concluding exhortations and Post Script.

Exhortations to love brothers, to entertain strangers, to remember prisoners, to honour marriage, to avoid sexual immorality and the love for money (13:1-6). An exhortation to imitate the faith and example of leaders (13:7-8). An exhortation to bring true Christian sacrifices (13:7-16). An exhortation to obey leaders (13:17). A request for prayer (13:18-19). A prayer and doxology (13:20-21). Some personal notes (13:22-23). Final greetings and a benediction (13:24-25).

F. THE MAIN MESSAGES OF THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS.

1. The letter to the Hebrews establishes the finality of Christianity.

The writer establishes the finality of the Christian gospel / Christianity by contrasting it with all that went before it. He shows the supremacy of Jesus Christ in both his Person and his work. With respect to his person, he regards Jesus Christ as greater than all the human servants and spokesmen, greater than all the prophets and greater than Moses. He regards Jesus Christ as greater than all God's other servants in the universe, the angels. He shows that Jesus Christ is God in chapter 1 and that he is Man in chapter 2. Jesus Christ is the Son of God, God's agent in creating and maintaining the universe. And yet, he became the Son of Man, who submitted himself to humiliation and death. Now Jesus Christ is exalted above the heavens, enthroned at God's right hand, and he lives forever there as his people's Representative with God. The writer warns that whoever rejects this revelation of God in Jesus Christ, must face the dreadful judgement of the living God (10:26-31; 12:25-29).

2. The letter to the Hebrews teaches the relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament.

Hebrews 7:19 teaches, "The law (the Old Testament revelation / the Torah and particularly the ceremonial law) *made nothing perfect.*" Hebrews 8:5 teaches that the earthly sanctuary and its ceremonies were *only a copy and shadow* of what is in heaven. Hebrews 9:8-10 teaches that the Holy Spirit showed that while the first tabernacle/temple was still standing, the way into the Most Holy Place/heaven had not yet been revealed. The Old Testament ceremonies and sacrifices were not able to clear the conscience of the worshipper, but were *only external regulations that applied until the time of the new order.* Hebrews 10:1 teaches, "The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming - not the realities themselves. For this reason it (the law) can never ... make perfect those who draw near to worship".

The Old Testament revelation contains *the shadows*, while the New Testament revelation contains *the realities* of these shadows! The Old Testament covenant, priesthood, sanctuary, festivals and offerings were *foreshadowing* the realities

of the New Testament. The Old Testament *types* or *illustrations* pointed forward to the New Testament *antitypes* or *fulfilments*. The Old Testament reveals God's *preparation* and the New Testament reveals God's *fulfilment*.

The New Testament reveals *the new covenant*. It teaches that Jesus Christ fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies and shadows. The Old Testament order is no longer applicable. Christians no longer have *priests*, because Jesus Christ is their *only High Priest*. Christians no longer worship God in *an earthly sanctuary*, but *in spirit and truth*. Christians no longer celebrate the Old Testament *festivals*, but especially the Day of the Lord (Sunday) and the Lord's Supper (Luke 22:19-20). Christians are not *circumcised* in their bodies, because they have been circumcised in the heart by the Holy Spirit (Romans 2:28-29). Christians no longer perform purification ablutions, because the blood of Christ has washed away all their sins. As a sign of their baptism with the Spirit (Acts 10:47-48) and the washing away of all their sins (Acts 22:16) they have been baptised with water (Mark 1:8). Christians no longer bring *animal sacrifices*, because the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross was the perfect *sacrifice once for all*. Christians may eat all kinds of food, because nothing outside a man can make him unclean (Mark 7:15-23; 1 Timothy 4:3-5).

God's people in the Old Testament were generally limited to the faithful believers in Israel, a remnant among all the people of Israel (Romans 9:6,28-29). God's people, however, is *continued on a higher plane* (of realities instead of shadows) in the New Testament *and extended* to include believers from every nation on earth!

Since the first coming of Christ and the completion of the Canon of the New Testament, Christians must study the Old Testament by looking at the fulfilments of the prophecies and realities of the shadows in the New Testament. The Old Testament revelation must only be interpreted in the light of the New Testament revelation.

3. The letter to the Hebrews teaches a change of priesthood in chapter 7.

The priesthood of Jesus Christ is unique and absolutely different and superior to all other priesthoods.

a. The priesthood of Jesus Christ is not based on the law, but on the gospel.

God prophesied that Jesus Christ would be a priest in the order of Melchizedek that would supersede the Aaronite priesthood. And God confirmed his promise with an oath. The uniqueness of his priesthood is that he is both priest and sacrifice.

b. The priesthood of Jesus Christ is based on his perfect character.

In the Old Testament, the high priest of Israel was not personally free from sin. But through an animal sacrifice for his own sins, he was *ceremonially set apart* from the other Israelites for the proper discharge of his sacred functions. But Jesus had no need to present a daily sacrifice, nor even a yearly sacrifice, either for his own sins or for the sins of his people. He had no need to be set apart in any such ceremonial manner. The perfect character of Jesus is shown in his sinless life on earth and his separation from sin in heaven. *Christ's separation from sin is inward and moral, not merely outward and ceremonial*. Of all people who ever lived, only Jesus Christ was completely sinless. Hebrews 2:17-18 says that he lived among us and was tempted like all of us, yet without sinning. Therefore he can be and is *a merciful high priest, who can sympathise with all our weaknesses* (4:15). In his human nature, he remained completely separate from sin in all its forms and completely dedicated to God the Father. Although Jesus lived among sinners, received sinners, ate with sinners, was known as a friend of sinners, he is set apart from sinners! He is in a total different class than sinful man. *Christ's separation from sin is total, because he is now in heaven*. He has withdrawn from sin in this world and sits exalted at the right hand of God. Hebrews 7:26-28 says, "Such a high priest meets our need - one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens ... perfect forever!"

c. The priesthood of Jesus Christ is based on his resurrection from the dead.

In the Old Testament, there were many high priests, because death prevented them from continuing in their office (7:23). Generation after generation, the high priests in Israel died and their office passed on to another high priest. Their high priesthood was *temporary*. But the high priesthood of Jesus Christ is far superior, because it is *permanent*! It is permanent, because he was resurrected from the dead, ascended into heaven and lives for ever! Hebrews 7:24 says, "Because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood". Hebrews 9:24 says, "He entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence". Everyone who believes in Jesus Christ, has Jesus Christ as his high priest right at the right hand of God the Father. Because he lives forever, his saving power is available without end! His saving power cannot be hindered by any of the changing circumstances of this life. His task is to eternally save, protect and bless every Christian. And the way of approach to God the Father is always open, because in the presence of God, Jesus Christ represents his people as "a priest for ever".

4. The letter to the Hebrews teaches a change of covenant in chapter 8.

a. There is a change of covenant: it is superior to the old covenant.

In the Old Testament God made a covenant with Abraham (2167-1992 BC)¹⁵. The people of God during the Old Testament should respond to this covenant by faith¹⁶.

The patriarchs lived 215 years in Canaan (2092-1877 BC) and the Israelites lived 430 years in Egypt (1877-1447 BC). Thus 645 years later, God added the law (the moral, ceremonial/ritual and civil law) to the covenant with Abraham in

¹⁵ Genesis 12-22

¹⁶ Genesis 15:6

order to show people their transgressions and to lead them to faith in Jesus Christ and his work of salvation¹⁷. The people of God during the Old Testament should respond to this covenant by obedience¹⁸. In the letter to the Hebrews, the writer compares this covenant of the law in the Old Testament¹⁹ to the covenant of faith in the New Testament²⁰.

In Exodus 24:1-8, this covenant of the law was confirmed by animal sacrifices and the sprinkling of blood on the altar, on the Book of the Covenant and on the people. Moses called it “*the blood of the covenant*”, that is, the shedding of blood that ratified the covenant. Hebrews 9:18-22 refers to this same ratification of the covenant.

The prophet Jeremiah lived prophesied between 627-550 BC. In Jeremiah 7:23-26 we read how the people of Israel disregarded and disobeyed the covenant. God says, “From the time your forefathers left Egypt until now, day after day, again and again I sent you my servants the prophets. But they did not listen to me or pay attention. They were stiff-necked and did more evil than their forefathers”. Prophet after prophet recalled the people of Israel to their covenant loyalty. In Jeremiah 11:10-11, God says, “Both the house of Israel and the house of Judah *have broken the covenant* I made with their forefathers. Therefore ... I will bring on them a disaster they cannot escape”.

In Jeremiah 31, Jeremiah predicts the inauguration of *a new covenant*. Hereby he also in effect announces the impending dissolution of the old covenant together with its order. Hebrews 8:7-8 says, “If there had been *nothing wrong with the first covenant*, no place would have been sought for another covenant. What was wrong with the first covenant was that “God found fault with the people”. Hebrews 8:9 says, “Israel *did not remain faithful to God’s covenant*”; the people of Israel broke it! Israel *did not* keep the covenant and they *could not* keep the covenant in their own power, because they were not regenerated.

Although the formulation of the covenant with Abraham remains the same throughout the ages, it is given a much deeper meaning and fulfilment in the New Testament, so that it is called “*a new covenant*”. The superiority of the new covenant is based on three important differences:

The first difference. The implanting of God’s law in the hearts of people is much more than the memorising of God’s law! God commands the Israelites that his commandments should be on their hearts and they should impress them on their children²¹. However, even the memorising of the law of God cannot guarantee the performance of what is memorised!

What is needed is *regeneration, a new nature, a heart liberated from its bondage to sin*. The people need a heart that not only spontaneously knows and loves the will of God but has the power to do it! Through Jeremiah (627-550 BC) and Ezekiel (593-571 BC), God prophesied the coming of the new covenant. Jeremiah²² says that the new covenant will in particular be characterised by the following: God will implant his laws in the hearts of people, their knowledge of God will be a matter of personal experience, and God will blot out their sins. Ezekiel²³ says that the new covenant will consist of a new relationship to God. In particular it will be characterised by the following: God will remove all their sin, remove their heart of stone and give them a new heart and new spirit. God will put his Holy Spirit in them and thus cause them to obey his commandments. The covenant is “*a new covenant*”, because it can impart this *new heart*, this regeneration through the Holy Spirit!

The second difference. The knowledge of God is a personal an intimate experience that goes far beyond the national acknowledgement of God! Already the second generation of Israelites in Canaan did not know the Lord or what he had done²⁴. Even before their exile to Assyria (586 BC), the prophet Hosea (754-714 BC) said that there was no faithfulness, love or acknowledgement of God in the land of Israel²⁵. There was only an ignoring of God’s law²⁶. God desired mercy towards people and acknowledgement of God rather than sacrifices and offerings²⁷. And the prophet Jeremiah explained “knowing God” as “doing what was right and just” and “defending the cause of the poor and needy”²⁸. Thus, in the old covenant, *the knowledge of God* was simply a national acknowledgement of God, reflected in their character and conduct²⁹.

¹⁷ Galatians 2:15-25 (50 AD)

¹⁸ Exodus 19:4-6

¹⁹ the first covenant

²⁰ the second covenant

²¹ Deuteronomy 6:6-7 (1407 BC)

²² Jeremiah 31:31-34

²³ Ezekiel 11:19-20; Ezekiel 36:25-28

²⁴ Judges 2:10

²⁵ Hosea 4:1

²⁶ Hosea 4:6

²⁷ Hosea 6:6

²⁸ Jeremiah 22:15-16

²⁹ 1 Samuel 2:12

However, in the new covenant “knowing God” is a personal and intimate experience. Each individual of God’s people will possess this knowledge, because of the new heart each person receives. “They will all know me” (8:11). It is a knowledge of God, which grows until it reaches perfection when Christians see Christ face to face³⁰.

The third difference. The blotting out of sins was known in Israel, but becomes essential to the new relationship with God under the new covenant! Under the old covenant, God was incomparably a pardoning God, blotting out transgressions³¹, sweeping away sins like the morning mist³², treading sins underfoot and hurling all iniquities into the depths of the sea³³. He is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness to thousands, forgiving their wickedness, rebellion and sin. However he does not leave the guilty unpunished³⁴.

Under the new covenant, forgiveness and eternal acquittal is written into the very terms of the covenant. God says, “I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more” (8:12; 12:17). When God remembers sins, his holiness takes action against sins and he punishes sins³⁵. But if God does *not remember* (or bring into remembrance) the sins of people, then it is *because his grace has determined to forgive them*, not in spite of his holiness, but in complete harmony with his holiness, righteousness and love. He will never bring our sins against us in the Final Judgement Day! Therefore the writer of Hebrews teaches that the new covenant is “*a better and superior covenant*” than the old covenant (7:22; 8:6), because of whom Jesus Christ is and what he has done. He is the Mediator of the new covenant, fulfilling all the shadows of the Old Testament and making complete salvation a reality for every believer! The above three promises are “the better promises” (8:6) on which the new covenant is based. Based on the completed salvation work of Jesus Christ, God first regenerates people and puts his laws in their hearts. Then they will all know God personally. Finally, God will remember their sins no more!

b. There is a change of covenant: it is extended to all the nations.

The prophet Isaiah prophesied between 740-680 BC. The Old Testament already prophesied the extension of the new covenant to all nations³⁶. In Jeremiah, the new covenant is made with “the house of Israel”, which according to Isaiah included the ‘aliens’, the foreigners who bound themselves to the LORD. Isaiah prophesied that God would make the Messiah “a covenant and light *for all the nations*”³⁷! During the Old Testament the covenant was defined as: “I will be your God and you will be my people”. Throughout the New Testament God promises Christians *from all nations*, “I will be their God and they will be my people”³⁸! The Bible teaches that in the new heaven and new earth Christians from all the nations will be “God’s people” and God himself will dwell with them³⁹!

The New Testament teaches that the new covenant has made the old covenant obsolete. In the New Testament Jesus instituted the new covenant with the cup at the Lord’s Supper, and calls it “the blood of the covenant”⁴⁰. With these words Jesus announced *the replacement of the old covenant with Israel by the new covenant with all Christians from all nations, including the nation of Israel.* The sacrifice of Jesus on the cross definitely had the effect, which Jeremiah said the new covenant would have. In Romans 8:3-4, Paul says, “What the law was powerless to do ... God did by sending his Son ... to be an offering. So ... the righteous requirements of the law might be fulfilled in us ... who live according to the Spirit”. It is absolutely clear that in the New Testament, the new covenant is extended to people regenerated by the Holy Spirit in every nation! *‘The age of the law and prophets’ of Israel is past! ‘The age of the Son’ is here and is here to stay!* “By calling this covenant ‘new’, God has made the first covenant obsolete; and what is obsolete and ageing will soon disappear” (8:13)!

5. The letter to the Hebrews teaches a change of sacrifice in chapters 9-10.

a. Jesus Christ sacrificed his own body.

While the Old Testament priests in the order of Aaron brought animal sacrifices, Jesus Christ gave himself as a living sacrifice for the sins of his people. The Psalmist, who knew the uselessness of animal sacrifices, dedicated his own life to God for the obedient accomplishment of his will⁴¹. The words of the Psalmist are recognised as the language of Christ, when he came into the world (10:5-7). In the body, which God prepared for him, he fulfilled the will of God. It is this consecrated body and obedient life which Jesus Christ offered up to God that is the completely acceptable sacrifice to God which effectually cleanses his people in their heart and conscience.

b. Jesus Christ sacrificed himself once-for-all.

³⁰ 1 Corinthians 13:12

³¹ Isaiah 43:25

³² Isaiah 44:22

³³ Micah 7:18-19

³⁴ Exodus 34:6-7. The guilty are those who do not repent or do not want to repent and consequently their sins remain.

³⁵ Revelation 16:19

³⁶ Genesis 22:17-18; Isaiah 56:3-8

³⁷ Isaiah 42:6

³⁸ 2 Corinthians 6:16

³⁹ Revelation 21:3

⁴⁰ Mark 14:24

⁴¹ Psalm 40:6-8

While the Old Testament priests in the order of Aaron had to sacrifice repeatedly, Jesus Christ sacrificed himself once-for-all. The Old Testament sacrifices had to be repeated because they could not meet the real need of the people. But the sacrifice of Jesus Christ is completely perfect and therefore was once-for-all time. The complete redemption and cleansing effects in the lives of the followers of Jesus Christ has been a matter of plain experience for 2000 years! Such a sacrifice as Jesus Christ brought needs no repetition. It is once-for-all time!

c. The sacrifice of Jesus Christ is completely effective.

It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins (10:4). But the blood of Jesus Christ purifies us from all sins (9:14)⁴². His death on the cross is a ransom for *all sins committed during the Old Testament period* (9:16) and a ransom for *all our sins in the present time*⁴³. His death *obtained eternal redemption* for us, his people (9:12). It cleanses our consciences from all guilt, thus justifying us before God (9:15)⁴⁴. It makes us completely holy, thus sanctifying us before God (10:10)⁴⁵, and makes us perfect forever (10:14)⁴⁶. This perfection includes the fact that God implants his laws in our hearts and writes them on our minds (10:16) and that he will not remember our sins and lawless acts anymore, that is, he will never bring our sins against us in the Final Judgement Day (10:17). We can and may draw near to God with a sincere heart and in full assurance of faith (4:16; 10:19-22).

6. The letter to the Hebrews teaches a change of sanctuary and worship ceremony.

Moses had to build a sanctuary according to the pattern shown to him on Mount Sinai. Although this sanctuary was a *copy*, it must not be viewed in terms of the philosophy of Plato, as a copy of some archetype or eternal idea in heaven. The heavenly realities are not glorified archetypes of things on earth, but are *the spiritual realities that cannot be fathomed by limited people on earth*. The real heavenly sanctuary is not a more ideal type of sanctuary somewhere in heaven, but represents *the holy and majestic presence of God*. The writer uses the known things on earth, which people can imagine, to describe the realities in heaven, which people cannot even imagine! The writers of the Bible, like Ezekiel, the writer of Hebrews and John in the book of Revelation, use *apocalyptic language* to describe the eternal heavenly realities or realities of the spiritual order. The writer reveals the realities in heaven in terms of “the new Jerusalem” and “the heavenly sanctuary”, which would come down onto the new earth after the Second Coming of Christ. In Hebrews 12:22-24, the writer describes the realities in heaven as the presence of God the Father, the Judge of all people, with Jesus Christ, the Mediator of the new covenant, at his right hand. The throne of God is surrounded by uncountable number of angels in joyful assembly, and also by the Church Triumphant (the victorious Church) in heaven, which consists of the spirits of righteous men, that is, Christians who had already died. In heaven there is no real temple building and on the new earth there will be no stone temple building. Revelation 21:3 and 21 describes this reality the best when it says, “Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men and he will tabernacle with them. ... And I did not see a temple building in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple!”

Also on earth now, Christians need no earthly temple or building to worship God. God does not live in any earthly temple or building. Because the curtain in the earthly temple had been torn from top to bottom after the death of Jesus Christ⁴⁷, Christians who live on earth no longer need earthly building to worship God or earthly priests to represent them before God. They have direct and permanent access to God through Jesus Christ, their Mediator (4:16). Christians themselves are being built together on earth to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit⁴⁸. Christians live on earth in the direct spiritual presence of God. They no longer worship God through the Old Testament ceremonial law, its sacrifices, tithes, ablutions and food rules, but in spirit and in truth. They are themselves a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God. For example, they offer to God the sacrifice of praise, which is the fruit of lips that confess his name (13:15).

As is clear from all the cross-references to other passages in the New Testament, the letter to the Hebrews is not an intruder into the New Testament, but makes a proper and indispensable contribution to the whole New Testament!

7. The letter to the Hebrews teaches the true nature of faith.

“Faith is *continually* the assurance of things *continually* hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (11:1).

The word ‘assurance’⁴⁹ is *not objective* in the sense of giving ‘substance’ or ‘essence’ or ‘actual being or reality’ (1:3) to our hopes, *but subjective* in the sense of giving ‘conviction’ or ‘confident assurance’ or ‘guarantee’ that things we now hope for will in the future be realities.

⁴² 1 John 1:7

⁴³ Mark 10:45

⁴⁴ Romans 3:24-25

⁴⁵ 1 Corinthians 1:30

⁴⁶ Romans 8:30

⁴⁷ Matthew 27:51

⁴⁸ Ephesians 2:19-22; 1 Peter 2:5

⁴⁹ ἡ υἰοστροφία

The word ‘conviction’⁵⁰ does not have the sense of ‘refutation’ of error⁵¹, but means (legal) ‘evidence’ or ‘proof’ that the invisible things belong to the spiritual order and that they are invisible because they belong to the future, like the fulfilment of God’s promises. Physical eyesight produces evidence (and therefore conviction) of visible things, but *faith is the organ which enables people to see the invisible order*⁵².

8. The letter to the Hebrews calls Christians to go outside the camp and bear the stigma of Christ.

Jesus suffered outside the gate. Christians are called to go out to him outside the camp to bear his reproach (13:12-13).

a. Outside the camp during the Old Testament period.

For example, the scapegoat laden with the sins of the Israelites was taken as far outside the camp as possible⁵³.

‘The camp’ is a symbol of the established fellowship and religious ordinances of Judaism. The Jews had become accustomed to think of ‘the camp’ and all that was inside it as ‘sacred’, while everything ‘outside the camp’ was ‘profane and unclean’. They felt secure inside the camp amid its familiar installations. Inside the camp the Jews were insulated from the outside world.

b. Outside the camp during the New Testament period.

For example, Jesus suffered outside the camp. This was a token that the Jews, Jerusalem and Judaism had rejected the messianic claims of Jesus. His rejection by the Jews was a stigma. The crucifixion outside the gate of Jerusalem was an added stigma.

While the Jews claimed Jerusalem inside its gates, Christ claimed the world outside its gates. To come to Jesus Christ as a former Jew⁵⁴, a person must come out of the Jewish camp⁵⁵ to Christ and give up the external Jewish religious rituals and follow Christ and his completed work of salvation.

The future no longer lies with the limited Jewish camp (the old order/Old Testament religion), but with the enormous worldwide Gentile mission of Jesus Christ and his Body (the new order/the New Testament message). The future does not lie with denominationalism, belonging to a particular denomination, but with the host of Christians pilgrims who are aliens and strangers in the world⁵⁶.

Time and again during the New Testament period, individuals and churches had to come out of their secure and familiar camps and go out to the unknown and unfamiliar world to occupy new territory under the leadership of Jesus.

c. Christians are called not to settle down, but to be pilgrims and strangers.

“For here we *never* have an abiding city, but we *continually* seek after (the city which) is to come (13:14).

The Jews kept in their hearts clinging to their old securities, but *these securities themselves were insecurities!* With the first coming of Jesus Christ (the Messiah), the perfect and eternal High Priest, had arrived (4:14; 7:16,24-28), the perfect sacrifice had been brought (7:27; 10:14), the Old Testament law was fulfilled, cancelled, changed⁵⁷ and the old securities crashed! The curtain separating the presence of God from people was torn in two⁵⁸. The middle wall of separation and hostility between Jews and Gentiles (the ceremonial law)⁵⁹ had been abrogated⁶⁰. The kingdom of God was taken away from the unrepentant Jews and given to Jews and Gentiles who would bear the fruit of the kingdom⁶¹. With the first coming of Jesus Christ the old order (covenant) was fulfilled and replaced by the new order (covenant)(8:6-13). “

The letter to the Hebrews was probably written about AD 64, just before the persecution of Nero against Christians in Rome broke out. The external city of Jerusalem and the temple were doomed to be destroyed soon⁶². They were actually destroyed in AD 70. *With the first coming of Jesus Christ the old order was terminated!*

The writer to Hebrews said that by leaving a ‘city’ which was doomed to pass away for a ‘city with foundations whose architect and builder is God’ (11:10), the Hebrew Christians would be the gainers.

⁵⁰ ο ελεγχος

⁵¹ 2 Timothy 3:

⁵² cf. 11:27; Romans 8:24-25

⁵³ Leviticus 16:20-22

⁵⁴ This applies also to former Muslims.

⁵⁵ Or the Muslim camp, Hindu camp, Buddhist camp, Christian denominational camp, or any other religious camp or religious cult.

⁵⁶ 1 Peter 2:11

⁵⁷ Matthew 5:17; Colossians 2:14; Hebrews 7:12

⁵⁸ Matthew 26:51

⁵⁹ And the Muslim sharia

⁶⁰ Ephesians 2:15

⁶¹ Matthew 21:42-44; Romans 11:16-24

⁶² Luke 19:43-44; Luke 21:20-24; John 2:19

Now at present (about 2000 years later) 'the heavenly city' was yet to come, but everyone (whether originally Jew or Gentile) who goes out (of the present world order and its institutions that will be shaken)(12:26-29) to Christ, is already enrolled in the heavenly register of citizens (12:23)⁶³.

Man cannot find 'the permanent and eternal rest' in any of the present institutions in the world: whether they are political, social or religious institutions. Christians are called not to settle down, but to be pilgrims and strangers within the present world order (11:13)⁶⁴.

⁶³ Galatians 4:26

⁶⁴ Philippians 3:20; 1 Peter 1:17; 1 Peter 2:11