

Epistle to the Hebrews

by Graham Jones - The Church at Gun Hill

Introduction

“And I beseech you brethren, suffer the word of exhortation; for I have written a letter to you in few words. Know that our brother Timothy is set at liberty; with whom, if he come shortly, I will see you. Salute all them that have the rule over you, and all the saints. They of Italy salute you. Grace be with you all. Amen.” Hebrews 13 vv 22-25

Now the reason I've started at the end is because here we find the substance of the letter to the Hebrews. At the end we have the letter and before it we have the exhortation. I wish to use this, therefore, as an introduction to the epistle, because, before we get into the book, there are one or two things that we ought to clarify about the book. The authorship of the epistle is for me an important issue. Of course, of great importance is what the book is actually saying, but I believe we ought to have some awareness of who wrote this 'letter' or exhortation and to whom it was addressed, in order to get a correct understanding of the 'letter's' contents. I believe that it was the apostle Paul. Most modern scholars tend to think that it was not Paul, but I believe we are on safe ground to accept the Pauline authorship of Hebrews.

To be sure, the epistle seems to be anonymous. Although the title does declare that it is the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews, it is no part of the original text. Nevertheless, what we should notice is that in those verses of chapter 13 quoted above, it is obvious that the people who received the letter did know who wrote it. He speaks to them as one known to them and tells them that he is going to visit them. Taking our clues from the above passage, it is possible to suggest that the book of Hebrews is an exhortation, rather than a letter, which was sent under cover of a separate and brief letter (written... in few words) from Paul, by which the recipients would know quite clearly who the author of the exhortation was. To my mind, the reason that he does not introduce himself in the first verse of the exhortation to the recipients of the document is that his credentials are that he is the Apostle to the Gentiles. They are Jews. So he writes to them as a fellow Jew; the apostolic introduction and greeting are not appropriate. However, he does have a heart for his brethren for whom, he exclaims elsewhere, ***“I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh, who are Israelites...”*** (Romans 9 v 3). Here he is writing to the Jewish community and right from the very start it is clear that he is exhorting them to go on and embrace fully by faith that salvation which Jesus purchased with His own blood.

“To the Hebrews” is an old title for the book but not part of the original document. Nevertheless, as we read through the book, we can discover that it is a most fitting title. What is written therein is directed to a Jewish people who have either already accepted Christ as Saviour and Lord or are moving in that direction. That is very important to understand. In Acts 2 we get the record of events on the Day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit filled the first disciples. You will remember that they spoke with other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance. There was Divine arrangement in what happened on that day, so that nobody could say that it was just gibberish that they were uttering. No, it all happened when Jews from all over the known world had journeyed to Jerusalem. People were able to say, “Hey, that fellow over there is speaking my language where I come from.” Somebody else cried out “And he’s speaking my language.” They each heard their languages from the different parts of the world whence they came. You see, the Feast of Pentecost was one of the three pilgrim feasts (Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles) when every Jewish man was expected to journey to Jerusalem to make an offering to God. This was no coincidence; it was of God and the Biblical record emphasises the situation carefully: ***“And there were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men, out of every nation under heaven.”*** (Acts 2 v 5) Not only that but some of the nations are listed: ***“Parthians, and Medes, and Elamites, and the dwellers in Mesopotamia, and in Judaea and Cappadocia, in Pontus and Asia, Phrygia, and***

Pamphylia, in Egypt, and in the parts of Libya about Cyrene, and strangers of Rome, Jews and proselytes, Cretes and Arabians, we do hear them speak in our tongues the wonderful works of God.” (Acts 2 vv 9-11). They were all there. North, south, east and west and all come together to be in Jerusalem.

Now what is the relevance of all this? It is just this: when Peter had preached his Day of Pentecost ‘sermon’, he had not spoken particularly about the baptism in the Holy Spirit but he had spoken particularly about the Lord Jesus Christ. He had preached the Gospel with the following result: ***“Then they which gladly received his word were baptised: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls.”*** (Acts 2 v 41) What happened to those three thousand souls from every nation under heaven? When the Feast of Pentecost was over, they went back home again. They had heard the good news, repented and believed. They had been baptised. They had received the end of their faith; they had accepted the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ, and then they returned home – three thousand souls. And verse 47 of Acts 2 then concludes ***“And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.”***

I believe that the epistle to the Hebrews was written to Jews who had become Christians or who were moving towards accepting Christ, but who were dispersed throughout the Roman world. In particular, I believe it was written to those Jewish Christians and Christian communities in the area known as Asia Minor – modern Turkey. Amongst this large group in Acts 2 you have people from this area: Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia.

The thirteen letters before Hebrews are definitely identified within their text as letters written by the Apostle Paul who was the apostle to the Gentiles. (I can have no truck with modernists who question the Pauline authorship of these letters and who thus question the Biblical text.) Then we have the Epistle to the Hebrews. After that we have the Epistle of James and this was addressed to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad, followed by the First Epistle of Peter, and Peter was the Apostle to the Circumcision, to the Jews (Galatians 2 v 8). And we find Peter writing to ***“the strangers scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia.”*** (I Peter 1 v 1). What is meant by this word “strangers”? Here is the Greek text:

Πετρος, ἀποστολος Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, ἐκλεκτοὶ παρεπιδημοὶ διασπορᾶς Ποντοῦ...
Petros, apostolos Iesou Xristou, eklektois parepidemois diasporas Pontou...

And the translation:

“Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ to the elect sojourners (strangers) of the diaspora (the dispersed) throughout Pontus ...”

So Peter is writing to Jews of the dispersion, sojourning (never the idea of a permanent residence outside of the Promised Land) in the areas named which are all in Asia Minor. Check it with the maps in the back of your Bible! Now in those areas there were many cities which had been visited by Paul, cities which were of the Gentiles, but with Jewish Christians resident in them - these Jews of the Diaspora. There were also Judaisers, Jews who had partially come to a faith in Christ but believed that first, before you put your faith and trust in Christ, you must fulfil the Jewish Law and be circumcised and thus become a Jew. Paul had a lot of trouble with Jews who were opposed to the Gospel of Christ; but he also had trouble with Judaisers who were willing to accept Christ but not as one in whom all the Law’s demands had been met. So Peter is writing to Jews of the Dispersion who had become Christians in these areas.

Now in II Peter 3 v 1 & 2 he explains, ***“This second epistle, beloved, I write unto you”*** (In other words, he was writing to the same people that he had written to in his first epistle - in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia) ***“that you may be mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets and of the commandment of us the apostles of the Lord and Saviour.”*** He had spoken to them – thousands of them, three thousand of whom came to accept the Lord as their Saviour.

Now of greater interest to our present study is what Peter suggests a bit later on in this second epistle: ***“...even as our beloved brother Paul also according to the wisdom given unto him has written unto you; as also in all epistles speaking in them of these things.”*** (II Peter 3 v 15-16). It is

interesting because Paul had written to the very same group of Jews that Peter is now writing to. And the word that Peter uses and which is translated “has written” is ἐγράψεν (egrapsen). There is another word which is used by Paul in Hebrews at the end of the book - ἐπεστειλα (epesteila) – which occurs in the sentence **“I have written a letter unto you in few words”** (Hebrews 13 v 22). It is thus translated as ‘I have written a letter’ but it is, in Greek, just one word. The distinction I am making is this, that Peter seems to be referring to a writing, the word of exhortation rather than a letter and makes a contrast between what Paul has written and his epistles (vv15 & 16). Paul himself refers to his word of exhortation (what we now know as “The Epistle to the Hebrews”) but also mentions the brief, accompanying letter.

So Peter says in his letter to this group that Paul had written to them and I believe that the writing that Peter was referring to was the word of exhortation which we call the Epistle to the Hebrews and Peter states that it was Paul who wrote it.

There are also some other points to bear in mind before we move on to examine why it is important to know that Paul wrote Hebrews. In Asia Minor, Paul had experienced many problems in the cities of those regions. He had problems with the Jews. As he preached from city to city he had adopted the practice of starting at the local synagogue, on the basis that the gospel was to be proclaimed to the Jew first and then to the Gentiles. When he moved from Asia Minor to preach the Gospel in Europe things were different. At Philippi, because there was apparently no synagogue there, he went to the riverside where prayer was wont to be made. But in the regions of Asia Minor, where there were believing Jews, it was his practice to meet in the synagogues and at every opportunity to proclaim Christ. Some believed and accepted the Saviour, but often that led to the local Jewish leaders becoming jealous or angry, often stirring up the people against him and so he would move on from city to city. On occasions Jews from one place would follow him to the next city to stir up even more trouble.

Later on, when churches in these places had been established, he found and heard reports that people were not always going on in the faith as they should be. Sometimes Judaisers caused problems by, in effect, teaching that before you could accept Christ as Saviour, you must become a Jew. They introduced the Law before faith, ignoring the work of salvation by God’s grace. When Paul and Barnabas had first preached the Gospel in Asia Minor, they faced problems from these Jewish legalists, who tried to bring in the works of the law as the basis for salvation:

“And certain men which came down from Judaea taught the brethren, and said, Except you be circumcised after the manner of Moses, you cannot be saved.” (Acts 15 v 1)

Paul and Barnabas argued vehemently with them and, in the end, took the matter back to Jerusalem for guidance from the elders and apostles there. Their decision, in the Spirit, ought to have been final. Their position and teaching on the matter was clear:

“Forasmuch as we have heard, that certain which went out from us have troubled you with words, subverting your souls, saying, You must be circumcised, and keep the law; to whom we gave no such commandment...”

“For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things; that you abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication; from which if you keep yourselves, you shall do well.” (Acts 15 vv 24 7 28-29)

Later, Paul had to write about these issues in his letters. To the Galatians in Asia Minor he wrote explaining that, having begun in the Spirit, they were not then made perfect by going on in the flesh (Galatians 3 v 3). Paul had been compelled to rebuke Peter and Barnabas for separating themselves from Gentile Christians for fear of offending fellow Jews, **“knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified.”** (Galatians 2 v 16). Further on in the epistle, he warns them clearly about the dangers of following the ways of these Judaisers:

“As many as desire to make a fair show in the flesh, they constrain you to be circumcised; only lest they should suffer persecution for the cross of Christ... For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision avails anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation.”
(Galatians 6 vv 12 & 15)

To the church at Colosse he reassured them that, by faith they had experienced a real work of God of which circumcision was a type:

“And you are complete in Him, which is the Head of all principality and power: in who also you are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ: ... And you being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, has He quickened together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses.” (Colossians 2 vv 11 & 13)

Then, against other Judaising influences he encouraged:

“Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbaths: which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ.”
(Colossians 2 vv 16 & 17)
“Where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free: but Christ is all, and in all.” (Colossians 3 v 11)

Paul had these churches of Asia Minor very much in his heart before the Lord. He was concerned for them; he had established them; he had seen them come to the Lord. Obviously, from what we have already read in some respects the ground was prepared in that those who had been converted on that Day of Pentecost had come back and they had the message in their hearts. Peter could, therefore, write to them too.

Acts chapter 21 records the incident where Paul is arrested in Jerusalem. Note who causes the trouble! Paul was visiting the Temple, having made a solemn vow:

“And when the seven days were almost ended, the Jews which were of Asia, when they saw him in the temple, stirred up all the people and laid hands on him...”
(Acts 21 v 27)

So the trouble begins and eventually he is arrested and taken away by the Romans. At the end of all the various legal processes, a couple of years later, he is taken to Rome as a prisoner, waiting for his appeal to Caesar to be heard. But here is the important identification – the Jews which were of Asia. They were not from Jerusalem; they were visiting for the festival. They were from Asia Minor. They knew Paul. They had heard him preach in their synagogues. They had resisted his words then and stirred up trouble. Here they were now and they were the cause of his arrest. They are very jealous for the Temple and for that reason they are crying out against him. Their accusation was that he had brought a non-Jew, a Gentile into the temple, thus defiling it. They are obsessed with the religious ritual of the temple. They were very much on Paul's heart. When people do not understand you, you can react in one of two ways: you can either seek vengeance or you can bring them before the Lord and plead even more that the Lord would open their eyes that they might see the truth. And Paul's prayer for Israel, for the Jewish people, was that they might be saved. And the more these Jews of Asia cried out against him, the more he desired that their eyes might be opened. We find him, even when they have brought about his arrest, that he is standing, held by the Roman guards, but asking that he might speak to them. And he speaks to them in Hebrew; he testifies to them about his own conversion and preaches about the Lord Jesus Christ. Even though they have caused his arrest, his heart is yearning for them to be saved. So it is very sad, at the end of Paul's life, when he is writing his last letter to Timothy, probably shortly before his execution and knowing he was about to die, he says, ***“For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand...”*** (II Timothy 4 v 6). In such circumstances, he pours out his heart: ***“This you know, that all they which are in Asia be turned away from me...”*** (II Timothy 1 v 15). How sad! How heart-breaking! He desired above all, that these Jewish people should be saved. He had travelled through many hazards to their cities, preached in their synagogues, and he had seen the Lord saving souls in wonderful ways. He wanted to see so many more accepting Christ as Saviour and Lord, so

much so that in Acts 19 v 10, when Paul was preaching and teaching the word of God in Ephesus, it explains further that **“...this continued by the space of two years; so that all they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks.”** Yet these are they who were responsible for his arrest and, at the end, all turned away from him.

They had been so dear to his heart and this is one of the reasons that I believe Paul had written to them. He of all people, in his desire and in his work, had the most to write to them with such teaching as we find in the book of Hebrews. However, there is other evidence that we can weigh in the balance in considering the suggestion of Pauline authorship. In Acts 16 v 1, we find Paul in Derbe and Lystra, which are in Galatia, an area within Asia Minor:

“Then came he to Derbe and Lystra; and, behold, a certain disciple was there, named Timotheus, the son of a certain woman, which was a Jewess, and believed; but his father was a Greek: which was well reported of by the brethren... Him would Paul have to go forth with him; and took and circumcised him because of the Jews which were in those quarters; for they knew all that his father was a Greek.”

Now I like to understand that Paul took this action, not out of fear for the Jews but for the sake of the Jews that were in those quarters. Paul desired with all his heart that those Jewish people should be saved. Timothy was a Jew. Paul was not taking a Gentile and, through circumcision was making him a Jew. When you read through the Galatian epistle, you will find that he strongly contested any such idea and pointed out that they did not compel Titus, who was a Gentile, to be circumcised (Galatians 2 v 3). Paul would have fought tooth and nail against any such notion. But Timothy was a Jew, born of a Jewish mother. I believe that it was for the sake of the Jews that he circumcised Timothy. Paul's own approach in the matter of maximising the effects of Gospel outreach was declared to the Corinthian church: **“And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law...”** (1 Corinthians 9 v 20).

Thus Timothy was able to accompany Paul as he visited synagogues and preached Christ. Paul took Timothy with him to minister the Gospel. Although these areas were Gentile areas, I believe Paul took Timothy so that he could also have an effective witness to the Jews who also lived in those areas: **“And as they went through the cities, they delivered them the decrees for to keep, that were ordained of the apostles and elders which were at Jerusalem. And so were the churches established in the faith, and increased in number daily.”** (Acts 16 v 4 & 5).

Luke, who wrote the book of Acts, apparently went on to Troas and eventually meets Paul and Timothy there. We know when Luke is present because from verses 1 to 8 he refers to what is done in the third person – ‘he’, ‘they’. When Luke is also with them, then he writes in the first person plural – we (as in verse 10).

Returning to Hebrews 13, we find that it says in verse 23, **“Know that our brother Timothy is set at liberty”**. Elsewhere, Paul refers to him as ‘son’ Timothy, a son in the Gospel as he led him to the Lord. Here, however, he is writing to Jews and speaks of him not only as a brother in Christ but also as a brother Jew. It was common practice for Jews to regard each other in this way. When Ananias first met Saul of Tarsus, he greeted him as ‘Brother Saul’ – before Saul was converted. His conversion did not take place on the Damascus road; it happened when Saul, in faith, responded to the message of Ananias. So, when this writer refers to brother Timothy's being set at liberty, the word he uses for liberty does not necessarily imply his being set free from prison. I think that this is generally assumed to be the case. However, it has a literal meaning of “loosed way from”. In other words, it can convey the idea that he has been released, in the sense of being released from his obligations to his local church fellowship in order to serve elsewhere. Paul did send Timothy away. In the Epistle to the Philippians, written from Rome to this Gentile church, Paul says, **“But I trust in the Lord Jesus to send Timotheus shortly unto you, that I also may be of good comfort, when I know your state, for I have no man like-minded who will naturally care for your state... Him therefore I hope to send presently, so soon as I shall see how it will go with me. But I trust in the Lord that I also myself shall come shortly.”** (Philippians 2 vv 19 & 20). In Hebrews 13 v 23, the author, having declared that Timothy had been

released and was available for ministry, promises, **“...with whom, if he come shortly, I will see you.”** Remember, Troas in Asia Minor, was just across the water from Philippi in Europe. These two sets of verses, one in Philippians and the other in Hebrews, could well have been written at the same period of time. In this respect, bear in mind that the “Epistle to the Hebrews” and the Epistle to the Philippians were both written from Italy. What it demonstrates to us is that the author of Hebrews is clearly the same person who wrote to the Philippians – Paul.

In Hebrews 13 vv 18 & 19, the author seeks their prayers: **“Pray for us: for we trust we have a good conscience, in all things willing to live honestly. But I beseech you the rather to do this, that I may be restored to you the sooner.”** It seems that at this time the writer is in prison and is asking for their prayers that he might be set free and restored to them. He reminds them of the time when **“...you had compassion of me in my bonds and took joyfully the spoiling of your goods.”** (Hebrews 10 v 34). Here was a writer who knew imprisonment. Surely the person it is most likely to be is Paul.

Then there is that greeting which is shared in Hebrews 13 v 24: **“They of Italy salute you.”** Here is a further piece of evidence to lend weight to the idea that it is Paul who is writing. It seems that the author was a prisoner, writing from Rome. It could be and has been suggested that the phrase οἱ ἀπο τῆς Ἰταλίας (hoi apo tes Italias) implies that these are people who are ‘away from’ their native Italy and are, therefore, with the writer in another country, ἀπο (apo) meaning ‘away from’. However, it is also possible to say that Rome, that great city and centre of a vast Empire, was supreme and people from the Italian states surrounding it, residing in Rome would have equally been described as being οἱ ἀπο τῆς Ἰταλίας (apo tes Italias) – those from Italy. In Rome there were those from Italy who were sending their greetings to the Jews of the Diaspora in Asia Minor. Remember that Paul, on his way to Rome as a prisoner, met brethren in Italy and was welcomed by them. These brethren were clearly Jewish. They listened to what he had to share and some of them believed (Acts 28 vv 14-29). These would be among those Jews who were from Italy.

In about 50AD, the Emperor Claudius expelled all the Jews who were not Roman citizens from Rome. So many left Rome at that time and travelled to other European cities such as Corinth or Philippi; some might have crossed over to Asia Minor. Amongst them were Priscilla and Aquila. Paul met them first in Corinth (Acts 18 v 2). When Paul wrote his letter to the Romans, probably somewhere between 57 and 59AD, it is evident that Priscilla and Aquila were back there (Romans 16 v 3), no doubt with other Jews but with greater reason to send greetings to Jews of Asia Minor.

The book of Hebrews is patently written by a Jew, someone who is learned in the Old Testament scriptures, speaking as a Jew to fellow Jews. That is a major reason why there is a great difference in style between Hebrews and the other Pauline epistles. Often, this issue of stylistic differences is often presented as a challenge to Pauline authorship. But there is a problem with applying stylistic criteria, such as analysing vocabulary, phraseology, subject matter and so on, as a means of assessing authorship. The problem with this sort of narrow, literary analysis is that it ignores the work of the Holy Spirit. We believe that the Bible has been fully inspired by God. The Holy Spirit, working through but not over-riding human channels, is nonetheless not restricted by human limitations. Peter described the process of this inspiration of scripture when he wrote, **“...holy men of God spoke as they were moved (borne along) by the Holy Spirit.”** (II Peter 1 v 21) Later in that epistle, written as the first epistle to Jews of the Diaspora, he then implied that what Paul wrote was in the same category of inspired scripture: **“... even as our beloved brother Paul also according to the wisdom given unto him has written unto you; as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction.”** (II Peter 3 vv 15 & 16).

Here, of course, we have already made the point that this writing is different from the other epistles for Paul is not writing as the Apostle to the Gentiles to non-Jews, but as a Jew to fellow Jews. That also explains why it is anonymous, even though the original Hebrew recipients did, I believe, receive the exhortation under cover of a brief letter, “written in few words” from Paul. From the last chapter of Hebrews, we can realise that they knew who was writing to them. That letter, however, does not form

part of the sacred text. It was directed to a narrow readership, whereas the text of Hebrews itself is inspired by the Holy Spirit to be read by everyone.

So Paul, writing as a fellow Jew addresses his Jewish brethren: ***“Wherefore, holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling, consider the Apostle and High Priest of our profession, Christ Jesus.”*** (Hebrews 3 v 1) He presents to them ***their*** Apostle, the Lord Jesus Christ. And God wants us to see that He, the Lord Jesus, is the Apostle in this letter, the One who has been sent. If you read Matthew 15 v 24, you will find the woman whose daughter was demon possessed. She came to Jesus pleading and begging Him to set her daughter free. The disciples complained to the Lord to send her away and Jesus said, ***“I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”*** That word ‘sent’ is the very verb (ἀποστελλω – apostello) from which the word “apostle” comes. Jesus is the Apostle to the Jewish people, to Israel. This is what is presented in the book of Hebrews, that Jesus is the great Apostle to His people, the One through whom God has spoken in these last days. ***“God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spoke in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us in a Son Whom He has appointed heir of all things...”*** (Hebrews 1 v 1). Jesus is better, is superior, is exceedingly much greater than the angels of heaven (Hebrews 1 vv 4 & 5); He is greater than Moses through whom the Law was given (Hebrews 3). He is greater than Joshua who did not bring the people into that perfect Rest, but Jesus, whose name is also Joshua, has done so (Hebrews 4). He is greater than the high priest of the old order, for the high priest of the line of Aaron was tainted by sin, but our great High Priest is without sin (Hebrews 5 & 7). He is greater and better than any of the sacrifices that were offered on Jewish altars (Hebrews 9 & 10). And Paul presents to the Hebrews their great Apostle and this is a key verse, ***“...consider the Apostle and High Priest of our profession, Christ Jesus.”*** (Hebrews 3 v 1). Now although this is written to the Hebrews, we can rejoice in the truth of this scripture because we know the truth of it ourselves. God wants us to treasure this scripture and to be blessed by it, but we do have to understand to whom it was written in the first place so that we do not misinterpret some of its teachings.

Paul wrote in the Epistle to the Galatians:

“But I certify you, brethren, that the Gospel which was preached of me is not after man. For I neither received it of man, neither was I taught it, but by the revelation of Jesus Christ. For you have heard of my conversation in time past in the Jews’ religion, how that beyond measure I persecuted the church of God, and wasted it: and profited in the Jews’ religion above many my equals in mine own nation, being more exceedingly zealous of the traditions of my fathers. But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother’s womb and called me by His grace, to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the heathen (Gentiles, non-Jews), immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood, neither went I up to Jerusalem to them which were apostles before me, but I went into Arabia, and returned again unto Damascus.” (Galatians 1 vv 11-17).

What Paul is writing about in these verses is the revelation that was given to him concerning his apostleship to the Gentiles and the Gospel that he was commissioned to preach to the Gentiles. Otherwise Paul is a liar because he said that he did not receive it of man and neither was he taught it by man. And yet three days after his encounter with the Lord on the Damascus road, a certain man, a fellow Jew, Ananias came through the door of the house where he was staying and preached to him the Lord Jesus Christ, exhorting him to ***“arise, and be baptised, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord.”*** (Acts 22 v 16) Ananias was a man who brought to Paul a word from God to respond to in the obedience of faith in order to receive from the Lord the fulness of His salvation. What he is talking about is not his personal experience of salvation which he received as a Jew when he responded in faith to the message of God brought by a fellow Jew, but he is talking about the revelation of his apostleship to the Gentiles and of the fulness of the message of the Gospel which he was to deliver to them. Later, when he went by revelation up to Jerusalem to meet those who had been apostles before him and communicated to them the Gospel which he preached among the Gentiles, he said, ***“To whom we gave place by subjection, no, not for an hour, that the truth of the Gospel might continue with you...for they who seemed to be somewhat in conference added nothing to me... When they saw that the Gospel of the uncircumcision was committed unto me, as the Gospel of the circumcision was unto Peter... and when James, Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the***

grace that was given unto me, they gave to me and Barnabas the right hands of fellowship, that we should go unto the heathen, and they unto the circumcision.” (Galatians 2 vv 5-9) When Paul went up by revelation, it was with this Gospel which he preached to the Gentiles. Was he right in preaching it to the Gentiles or was it for the Jews only? Of course he was right: God had revealed it to him. And there was nobody in Jerusalem that would say that he could not preach it to the Gentiles. There were one or two who had crept in rather wily, and tried to say differently, but he said that they who seemed to be somewhat, in conference added nothing to him and the leaders, James, Peter and John gave him the right hands of fellowship – full agreement. They confirmed the word that had been given to him. It is important to know this when seeking to identify the author of Hebrews, for in Hebrews 2 v 3 it says, “How shall we escape if we neglect so great salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them who heard Him?” It was Paul who had received this confirmation from those who had heard Jesus.

Now Paul had written in a general way to these Christians in these areas of Asia Minor and particularly to the Gentile believers. He had written to Christians in the region of Galatia; he had written to the Colossians; he had told those of Ephesus that they were **“without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world.”** (Ephesians 2 v 12) In Hebrews, Paul is writing a special exhortation to Jewish people in those areas who had become Christians or were moving in the direction of accepting Christ as Saviour and Lord. There is an inference that we can draw from Hebrews 13 and verses 7 and 17 that the recipients were Jewish believers, for he encourages them to **“remember them that have the rule over you”** and to **“obey them that have the rule over you and submit yourselves, for they watch for your souls...”** In other words, he is writing to a group of Christians but why is he not writing to their church leaders? In each epistle, you would expect to write particularly to the elders, deacons and so on, those who are responsible for the church. Here, he was not writing to the leaders because, in all probability, they were Gentiles and, in the first place, Paul’s message was to the Jewish element of the Christian churches there.

The view that Paul gives in the letter to the Hebrews – and this we must now bear in mind - is a view from the earth, where he talks about types and shadows in the Old Testament and exhorts his readers to look away from those heavenward. In Ephesians, Paul makes it clear that this is where Christians have their spiritual lives: God **“has raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus.”** (Ephesians 2 v 6) Here, in Hebrews, he is exhorting Jewish people who are so wrapped up in the ritual of their Jewish faith, to look away to heaven and to **“consider the Apostle and High Priest of our profession, Jesus Christ.”** In Hebrews 12 v 2 it directs readers (expanding the AV text to give a more complete translation), **“Looking away unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith.”** Jesus is in heaven. Look away from the types and the shadows of the Old Testament! Look away to the true realities of which those types and shadows spoke! The true realities are in heaven. Maybe many Jewish Christians were becoming a little bit despondent because they could see all around them in their synagogues, or in Jerusalem when they visited at festival times, the Jewish ritual which had always been so meaningful to them on earth and they had nothing visible or tangible in the Christian church as there was in Judaism. And Paul was urging them to look to heaven where the realities are. He was speaking to those who knew God’s word, what we call the Old Testament, and to those who knew that they were God’s people, Jews, but who needed to receive the end of their faith, who needed to receive and enter into all that the types and shadows spoke of. They needed to receive the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ. If they failed to receive Him, then there was no other way of salvation. There was no way of salvation in all their ritual, sacrifices and ceremonies. There is no hope without Jesus.

In Galatians 2 vv 11-21, Paul had occasion to rebuke Peter, because he ate with Gentiles when nobody else was looking, but when other, Jewish Christians came, he separated himself from them and would not eat with them. Paul records what he said. **“...I said to Peter before them all, ‘If you, being a Jew, live after the manner of Gentiles, and not as do the Jews, why do you compel the Gentiles to live as do Jews? We who are Jews by nature and not sinners of the Gentiles...”** You see the high position that Paul accords to the Jews, even those who are not saved. But he continues, **“Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus**

Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified.

When it comes to understanding the book of Hebrews, we must take special note of the place of the Jews and the revelation which they have received, even if they are not believing Jews, not Christians, and what has been committed to them. If we look at Romans chapter 3 (this is all important in understanding the book of Hebrews), Paul has been saying that there is no difference, whether you are Jew or Gentile, we are all sinners. (Compare with Galatians where Paul referred to those who were Jews by nature and not sinners of the Gentiles). But in Romans he is emphasising that whether you be Jew or Gentile, you have all sinned and come short of the glory of God. So at the beginning of Romans 3 he asks, "What's the point of being a Jew then?" ***"What advantage has the Jew? Or what profit is there of circumcision? Much every way: chiefly because that unto them were committed the oracles of God."*** They received that revelation from God concerning redemption and salvation. We have to know and understand this special relationship when we come to the book of Hebrews. To have that special revelation is to have a special responsibility and if they fail to go on to embrace the fulness of the revelation then of how much sorer punishment will they be considered worthy? Failure to grasp this is the reason that Hebrews seems to many to be a book which contradicts other parts of Scripture, particularly in the matter of the eternal security of those who are saved in the Lord Jesus Christ. The terms that are used in Hebrews are of an elect people - the Jews are an elect people - but, as the book is at pains to point out – only if they follow it through to its fulfilment in Christ Jesus. If they do not, then they will perish.

If we read Hebrews on a level with other NT scripture it sounds as though it is telling us that Christians can lose their salvation, that you can fall away, come under the judgment of condemnation and perish. But Paul is speaking to the chosen people of God. They are the elect of God, but only if they go on to the full end of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Thus, in Hebrews 3 v 6, where he has been speaking about Moses and his house, he adds, ***"...but Christ is a Son over His own house, whose house are we (we=people of Israel) if we hold fast the confidence and rejoicing of our hope firm unto the end."*** It is a Jewish exhortation to the people of Israel. The Holy Spirit says, ***"Today, if you will hear His voice, harden not your hearts as in the provocation in the day of temptation in the wilderness, when your fathers tempted Me and proved Me and saw my works forty years."*** He is not writing in the first place to Gentiles but to the Jews – about your fathers'. If they had pressed on to the full revelation God had given them in those days, they would have entered the Promised Land straight away, but having been brought out of Egypt, they refused to enter in. God has given to His people of Israel, a revelation, contained in types, and shadows and figures, but now the fulness has come, all that those types pointed to, in Jesus Christ. What was the cry of His people? "We will not have this man rule over us." "We have no king but Caesar." The Lord reveals in this book of Hebrews that they will only be part of His house if they follow it through to the end and receive Jesus, the Messiah, as Saviour and Lord.

Paul, by the Holy Spirit, speaks about 'falling away'. Now we understand that it is impossible for those who are saved, to fall away and perish. Jesus said, "I give them eternal life... they shall never die." If you lose eternal life, then it was not eternal life. Jesus promised, "None shall pluck them out of My hand." And to those who suggest you yourself can decide to leave, the Scripture says, "You are not your own; you are bought with a price." In Hebrews 6 vv 4-6 it declares, ***"It is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good Word of God, and the powers of the world to come, 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."*** However, the Greek word which is used here in Hebrews 6 and which is translated "falling away", is a word which is used only here in Hebrews – nowhere else. Its meaning, in a full context, would be "fall aside from the right path" – to take the wrong track, if you like – "to fall away from reaching the final revelation." They had been pursuing the right path; they had received the oracles of God, revelation from God. That it was an advantage to be a Jew, not because it made them any better or superior, for all have sinned. But they had the true oracles of God. They are following on the right path until the final revelation in Jesus Christ arrives and they say, "We don't want that pathway, we want this one." Thus, they fall away. If they have received that enlightenment, if they have tasted of the heavenly gift, made partakers of the Holy Spirit and tasted the good Word of God and the powers of the world to come, if they have received the full revelation of God and they refuse it, then it is

impossible to renew them again to repentance. Balaam in the Old Testament was not really God's man, but he spoke as one whose eyes had been opened (Numbers 24 v 15). He had received enlightenment and revelation from God Himself, yet still rejected the Word of God in his heart. The scriptures here are not talking about those who are saved losing their salvation. They are talking of those who, having been enlightened to see the truth and having experienced a foretaste of the things of God – the complete oracles of God which He gives them in its completeness in Christ Jesus – then refuse to accept and enter into it. That is 'not going on unto perfection' as directed in Hebrews 6 v 1. They go so far but, when the final part is revealed in Christ Jesus, they fail to go on to the completeness of it all. In Hebrews 10 v 29, it speaks of them of having ***“trodden under foot the Son of God, and has counted the blood of the covenant, wherewith he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and has done despite to the Spirit of grace.”*** The blood of the OT covenant, which was a figure of the blood of Christ in the NT, and by which the Jews were provisionally sanctified, is thereby treated as an unholy thing.

When we see these scriptures from the perspective that Paul was writing to Jews, it makes all the difference to what he is saying. When he wrote to the Corinthian church, he commented, ***“But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumbling block and unto the Greeks foolishness.”*** (1 Corinthians 1 v 23) For the Jews it is a scandal. Where there is rejection, treading under foot the Son of God, then there is nothing else left but judgment and destruction. So Paul exhorts his readers ***“See that you refuse not Him that speaks. For if they escaped not who refused him that spoke on earth, much more shall not we escape, if we turn away from Him who speaks from heaven.”*** (Hebrews 12 v 25) The exhortation that we have in Hebrews is one directed to God's earthly people Israel to come to full faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and to leave the types and shadows. The latter were to be destroyed anyway – the Temple with the sacrifices, rituals and priestly functions. It all came to an end with the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 70AD. And where is it today in modern Judaism? There is no Temple ritual, sacrifices or functioning priesthood or high priest. None of these types are there any more in Jewish belief and practice. But the realities of what they all foreshadowed do exist in the heavenlies. Those things which were most important to the Jews have now gone. Paul thus exhorted them to leave those types and shadows. If they were afraid of being despised by fellow Jews for holding to their Christian faith and for not being engaged in the rituals of Judaism, he pointed out ***“...Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered without the gate. Let us go forth therefore unto Him without the camp, bearing his reproach.”*** (Hebrews 13 vv 12 & 13) In other words, let us no longer focus on Jerusalem, the Temple and all its sacrificial and priestly rituals. Let us go to Christ, outside the camp, bearing His reproach and being identified with Him.

As we read through Hebrews, we shall find that these Jewish people (some already Christians, some moving towards acceptance of Christ) had been a bit slow in leaving the old.

- By now they should have been teachers but, in fact, still need to be taught again the first principles of the oracles of God. (Hebrews 5 v 12).
- Further, they were not meeting together in fellowship together on a regular basis. ***“Let us consider one another... not forsaking the assembling of yourselves together, as the manner of some is!”*** Paul rebuked (Hebrews 10 vv 24 & 25). Perhaps they were ashamed to fellowship with Gentiles; maybe they were reluctant to separate from other Jews or to leave the synagogues. In that context, it is interesting to note that the Greek verb which is translated by "the assembling together" is *την ἐπισυναγωγην* (ten episunagogen - i.e. assemble = synagogue upon).
- Then, they were reluctant to follow the guidance of their leaders. ***“Obey them that have the rule over you!”*** - not in a dictatorial way for it really means, ***“Obey them that guide you, ...for they watch for your souls...”*** (Hebrews 13 v 17). They were in danger, even those who had become Christians; they were in danger of drifting from precious truth. Those who had not yet come to full commitment were in danger of missing it altogether and perishing.

Thus the book was sent, in the first place to Jewish people of the Diaspora and written in a style and with a content suitable to that end. We have good grounds for believing that it was written by Paul. As the apostle to the Gentiles, he urged them to consider the “Apostle and High Priest of our profession, the Lord Jesus Christ.” They must look away unto Jesus; look away to the reality, the fulness of what God has spoken from heaven itself.