

The Book of Hebrews



Lesson 1: Overture

Introduction

Hebrews begins not as a letter but as what it most probably is—a homily exhorting Jewish Christians to remain faithful to the New Covenant that has been recently revealed. In masterful fashion it opens with a brief argument that encapsulates themes that will be expanded upon throughout the book. These themes are going to be founded on the inspired Scriptures the audience knows best (the Hebrew Bible), and the author wastes no time in placing before his audience a text which was universally recognized as referring to the Messianic Son of David, Psalm 110. That Psalm shall, as we will see in later lessons, figure very prominently in making the case that Jesus is the fulfillment of all that the audience's native Jewish faith had taught them to hope for in their longing for the Messiah.

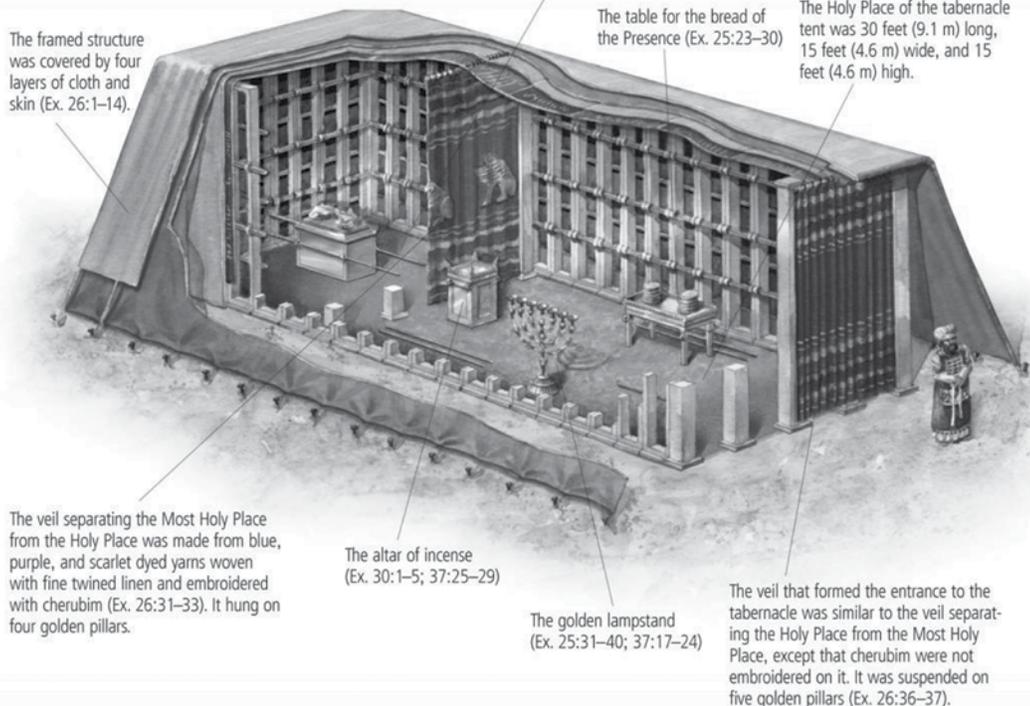
Hebrews 1:1-4

¹ In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. ³ **He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power.** When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, ⁴ having become as much superior to angels as the name he has obtained is more excellent than theirs.

THE TABERNACLE TENT

The entire tent was 45 feet (13.7 m) long, 15 feet (4.6 m) wide, and 15 feet (4.6 m) high. It was a wooden skeletal structure, overlaid with gold, with no solid roof or front wall (Ex. 26:15–29). Five wooden bars (overlaid with gold) passed through rings attached to each frame (Ex. 26:26–30).

The Most Holy Place was a 15-foot (4.6-m) cube, containing only the ark of the covenant (Ex. 25:10–22; 37:1–9). It was here that Yahweh would descend to meet with his people in a cloud theophany (divine appearance). The high priest could enter only once a year, on the Day of Atonement (see note on Heb. 9:7).



Points to Ponder

The Situation of Hebrews

Though a carefully constructed and polished homily, Hebrews is not an abstraction. It is written, in fact, in the midst of white-hot racial and religious tension on the eve of a war that would visit the greatest calamity on the Jewish nation until the Holocaust: the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. It is necessary to understand this in order to appreciate what was at stake for the author and readers of Hebrews.

As we read in Acts 6:1, the Church faced ethnic and nationalist tensions at its birth just as it does today. Among other tensions was the stress between “Hellenists” and “Hebrews,” as St. Luke calls them, that is, between Greek-speaking Jews of the Diaspora and Palestinian Jews who lived in the Holy Land and who spoke Hebrew and/or Aramaic. This tension was only exacerbated when not just Greek-speaking Jews but Gentiles began to come into the Church in greater and greater numbers.

One early manifestation of that tension was the question that arose in the late 40s and which occasioned the “Council of Jerusalem” chronicled in Acts 15. “Hebrew” Christians from the Church in Jerusalem, perhaps nervous at the sight of so much that was familiar changing so quickly (a feeling not unknown to many Catholics after the Second Vatican Council), began to take it upon themselves to insist to Gentiles interested in the gospel, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved” (Acts 15:1). This precipitated the major crisis of the apostolic period: the question of the role the law of Moses still played in the life of the Church and the necessary corollary to that question: the exact relationship of the Church with Israel. The Church ruled and Paul tirelessly taught that Christians are “not under law, but under grace” (Rom 6:14). This did not mean that Christians could feel free to kill and commit adultery but rather that the ceremonial and ritual elements of the law (such as circumcision and keeping kosher) had been intended to point us to Christ who alone could enable us to fulfill the moral law (Gal 3:23-26). Having led to Christ, the Mosaic Law no longer binds us, nor could Jewish Christians impose its rites and rituals on Gentile Christians.

The result of the Council, as of all councils in the Church’s history, was twofold: theological development for those who obeyed, and schism and heresy for those who did not. The factions that resisted apostolic development of doctrine were known as Judaizers, and their influence persisted for decades, particularly in the Holy Land. It is against this faction that Paul writes several years after the events of Acts 15 in his letter to the Galatians, and his opposition to them marks several other letters, such as Philippians. What angers Paul and merits the condemnation of the apostolic college is the idea that our obedience to the law “earns” the justifying grace of God: that if we just do the right things we can force God to love us and save us. On the contrary, the Church teaches there is nothing we can do to “make” God love us because he loves us already. His love called us into being, and his love sent Jesus into the world to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins while we were still sinners (Rom 5:8). The corollary of the Judaizers’ teaching is this: if our works make God love us, then when we stop doing those works he will not love us anymore. The truth revealed by God is that he does not love us any less no matter what we do. His purpose is always to save, and we receive that salvation by faith in Christ. Our obedience to him is the fruit, not the cause, of justifying faith in Christ. His grace is the cause of our faith and our works.

The complaint of the Judaizers was the common fear of the Jews—a fear that was particularly acute to “Hebrew” Christians living in the Holy Land. It is summed up in the complaint of the men who accused St. Stephen: “This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law: for we have heard him say that “this Jesus of Nazareth” will destroy this place, and will change the customs which Moses delivered to us” (Acts 6:13-14). As the Church diverged from the immemorial practices of Jewish piety and exempted Gentile converts from them, a certain portion of Hebrew Christians began to fear that the Church was going off the rails and making a huge mistake.

This fear could only become more acute as the conflict grew, not only between Church and synagogue but between Judea and Rome. By the time the letter to the Hebrews is being composed in the mid 60s, that conflict has become acute. This means that Hebrew-speaking Christians in the Holy Land are being confronted with a stark choice by fellow Jews; are you with us or against us? Many Jews, feeling the Temple to be invulnerable to attack by the Gentiles, were actually eager for war with Rome since they believed that it would result in a miraculous deliverance for Israel and a defeat for Rome. Tremendous social and psychological pressure was being felt by Hebrew Christians to side with their beleaguered countrymen in their hour of national trial, and there was a strong temptation to abandon this newfangled sect and return to the way of their fathers.



Hebrews is written to say that the believers who had chosen to follow Christ—the Christ who had prophetically warned them of judgment, not deliverance, for Israel, who had bid them not to remain in Jerusalem when they saw the “eagles” of the Roman standard coming and who had said of the Temple that “there will not be left here one stone upon another, that will not be thrown down” (Mt 24)—had not made a mistake. It is written to assure them that the Christ in whom they believed was not a traitor to the nation but the fulfillment of all that the Temple, the sacrificial system, and the priesthood had meant. It aims to show these Jewish Christians that Christ is now reigning on high in the heavenly Jerusalem as the New Kingly High Priest offering a New and Eternal Sacrifice of a New Covenant in the New Temple.

Overture

The first four verses of Hebrews are a sort of overture of the whole book containing basic themes that will be elucidated for the whole book the way an orchestral theme to a musical contains melodies from songs in the musical. Some of the themes in this densely packed passage include the following:

1. The Superiority of the New Over the Old

This is a major theme in Hebrews. The Old Covenant is a provisional covenant given in preparation for the new. At no time during the Old Testament does God give a definitive self-revelation. Rather he speaks in various and fragmentary ways while constantly directing Israel to look for the coming of a mysterious figure called by various titles (“Star out of Jacob,” “Messiah” (or “Anointed One”), “shoot of Jesse,” “The Prophet,” etc.). Many of his signs are utterly mysterious. We sense that they signify something, but we do not know what.

However, in these Last Days, God has now given that definitive disclosure. He has spoken not by a servant, but by a Son. This is the same imagery our Lord uses in the Parable of the Vineyard (Mt 21:33-43). The Son, unlike mere servants, comes with the authority of the Father himself.

2. The Last Days

The writer of Hebrews, like Jesus in Mt 24, speaks of the “last days” which raises the question of what is meant by that term. Did Jesus really believe the world was coming to an end “soon,” and did he teach his disciples to think this way? The answer is “yes and no.” Jesus makes clear that a world—the world of the Old Covenant—is about to end in his Olivet Discourse (Mk 14, Mt 24, Lk 21). The Temple is about to be destroyed in judgment and as the definitive sign that the New World of the Messianic Age has arrived. But that judgment will itself be a sign of the Last Day when Jesus will return in judgment for the whole world and salvation for the Church since the Temple is a microcosmic cosmos just as the universe is a macrocosmic Temple. The fate of the Jerusalem Temple and the salvation of the Church from destruction in 70 AD prefigure the final salvation of the Church at the end of time.

3. The Inheritance of the Son

For the author of Hebrews, as for the apostle John, the world was made “through” the Son and also for the Son (Jn 1:3). He is the “heir” of all things because he “reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature” (Heb 1:3). (Interestingly, the “stamp” Hebrews speaks of is the same Greek term the Church uses to describe the “character” that is stamped on our souls in Baptism, which makes us co-heirs with Christ.) This passage, again, closely reflects John’s understanding that “the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (Jn 1:1). Particularly notable as well is that God is depicted, not only as creating but “upholding” the universe by his “word” of power. The conception is not that God created the universe long ago and now it spins on by itself, but rather that the universe is held in being, moment by moment, by the active power of God. In short, if God wanted to destroy the world, he would not have to do anything. He would have to stop doing something.

4. The Royal Priesthood of Melchizedek in the Heavenly Temple

Heb 1:3 briefly summarizes the results of Jesus’ passion, death, resurrection, and ascension in a way that will evoke an image that would have been immediately recognizable to the Jewish Christian (and one which will dominate a large portion of the book of Hebrews): the Priest King in the line of Melchizedek.

Verse 3 tells us that Jesus “sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.” This is a clear allusion to Ps 110: “The Lord says to my lord: “Sit at my right hand, till I make your enemies your footstool.” This Psalm, one of the most popular messianic texts in the New Testament, was commonly understood to refer to Messiah or “son of David.” It was cited by Jesus himself in arguments with the Pharisees (cf. Mt 22:41-46) and forms the basis for the

major argument of Hebrews: that Jesus is the long-prophesied son of David who is a “priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek” and that his eternal sacrificial offering of himself in the heavenly Temple is the reality that the earthly temple, priesthood, and sacrifice foreshadowed.

Catechism Connections

- For more information on how Christ is the “unsurpassable Word” of God, see CCC 65.
- CCC 328-333 explains the nature of angels and their relationship to Christ.
- CCC 206-211 describes the significance of the divine name “I Am” from the Old to the New Covenant.

Rome to Home

From an attentive reading of the Gospels we learn that Jesus lives and works in constant and fundamental reference to the Father. He frequently addresses him with the word full of filial love: “Abba”; even during the prayer in Gethsemane this same word is again on his lips (cf. Mk 14:36 and parallel passages). When the disciples ask him to teach them to pray, he teaches them the “Our Father” (cf. Mt 6:9-13). After the Resurrection, at the moment of his departure from earth, he seems once again to make reference to this prayer when he says: “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God” (Jn 20:17).

Thus by means of the Son (cf. Heb 1:2), God is revealed in the fullness of the mystery of his paternity. Only the Son could reveal this fullness of the mystery, because only “the Son knows the Father” (Mt 11:27). “No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known” (Jn 1:18).

– **Pope John Paul II**, *General Audience, October 23, 1985*

Study Questions

1. What are some of the “many and various ways” God spoke before the coming of Christ? (See Heb 1:1, Rom 1:20)



Summary

In lesson one, we observed:

1. Hebrews opens with a brief “overture” that encapsulates the themes to be explored in this homily.
2. God has spoken in “various” ways in the past, but has now revealed himself definitely in Christ.
3. These earlier revelations pointed to Christ.
4. The Son is “heir of all things” and the One through whom the world was created.
5. He “bears the stamp” of the nature of God himself, and through him God maintains the universe in existence.
6. After his passion, death and resurrection, Jesus “sat down at the right hand of the Majesty”—just like the Messianic “son of David” in Psalm 110:1.
7. The Son is superior to the angels.