

when I will make a new covenant .. in their minds I shall plant my laws, writing them in their hearts. I shall be their God and they shall be my people” (8:9-12 and 10:11-18). Importantly for all Christians, Jesus’ exaltation as High priest shows his continuing work for all the faithful on earth.



- **A direct exhortation is made for perseverance and trust in Jesus** in the face of any difficulties (10:19-39 and ch.12), and by so doing mirroring the faith shown in God by the readers’ Jewish ancestors (ch.11), and urging them to take particular care not to be led astray by strange doctrines (13:9-10).

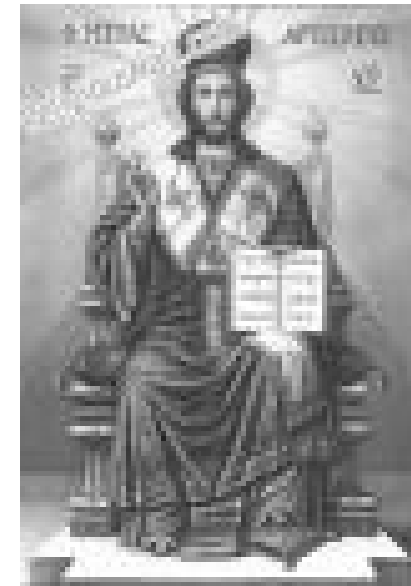
### Authorship and Audience

There are several places where the writing shows a closeness with the philosophic thought of Alexandria “The reflection of God’s glory and impress of God’s own being” (1:3), “Soul divided by spirit ..” (4:12f), and especially where reality is expressed in dual terms of heavenly and earthly counterparts (8:5f, 9:1-5, 11, 23). Someone like Apollos (Acts 18:24-19:1, 1 Cor.1 etc), who would also know Timothy (Heb.13:23), is a likely candidate. However, some scholars have proposed Priscilla, the wife of Aquila, who met St. Paul at Corinth, went with him to Ephesus and who instructed Apollos (Acts 18). This is on the basis of the reference in Hebrews to “Those from Italy greet you” (13:25) and the fact Priscilla was from Rome and well respected (Rm.16). This may also explain the switch from “I” to “We” used by the author (Priscilla and Aquila together), and the fact that the letter has no standard introduction (name of author etc) for a letter but a standard ending. The argument being that later editors wished to hide the fact that its main author was a woman.

The intended audience are clearly Jewish Christians, possibly former priests who had been persecuted for adopting Christianity. Their potential for returning to Temple worship may indicate they were located in Palestine, and the early period of the Jewish revolt (66AD), giving hopes for Jewish independence, may have raised the concern of the author that their departure from the Church was imminent.

## The Non-Pauline Letters of the New Testament

### 4. The Letter to the Hebrews



### Questions For Reflection

1. Why is it important to know whether the Jewish Temple still stood when the letter was written?
2. How important to the central argument of the author is the reference to Melchizedek?
3. What relevance, if any, has the central argument of the letter got for Christians today?

## The Importance of the Date of Writing

Because the general purpose of the letter was to prevent its audience from abandoning Christianity, and the core of the argument used concerns the contrast between the Jewish priesthood of the Old Testament and the eternal Priesthood of Jesus in the New Testament, a full understanding of the letter (e.g. who were the recipients?) can only be obtained if there is an accepted date for its writing, which is itself based on the status of the Jerusalem Temple.

It is important to know that the magnificent Jewish Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in 70AD following a major Jewish revolt from 66-73AD. After that date there no longer existed a Jewish Priesthood. If the letter was written after that date then it would be expected that the author should make reference to it as this would reinforce his argument (see below). In fact, the evidence is to the contrary:



- “For the Law .. can never by the same sacrifices which they **offer continually year by year ..**” (10:2-3) implies the Temple sacrifices are continuing
- “by speaking of a new Covenant he implies that the first one is old, and anything old and aging **is ready to disappear**” (8:13) implies it has not yet disappeared.
- The whole argument about the superiority of Jesus’ New Covenant and his eternal priesthood over that of the Levitical priesthood (ch.8-10) implies that reversion to the latter is still a viable option (N.B. the use of the present tense here does **not** necessarily imply the present time, as ancient writers often used the present tense when describing past events. Its use, therefore, can not be assumed to support the point in question)
- “We do not have an abiding city but we seek one that is to come” (13:14) implies that Jerusalem has not yet been destroyed

## The Purpose and Contents of the Letter

The letter sets out to persuade its readers not to return to traditional

Judaism with its Temple worship and religious sacrifices. In doing this the range of thinking of the author is remarkable. In sequence the following areas of Jewish belief are countered which, by implication, must refer to the doubts raised by the intended apostates:



- **Jesus is the Son of God and infinitely above the OT angel messengers** of God and so, if their message is revered, so much more should Jesus’ message “if a message spoken through angels proved to be so reliable .. then we shall certainly not go unpunished if we neglect such a great salvation”. The argument for Jesus’ Sonship and superiority over angels is made by several references from the OT, especially the Psalms (2:7, 97:7, 45:6, 102:25, 104:4, 110:1)
- **Jesus as Son of God (4:14) is greater than Moses** (ch.3) and Christians must be wary of turning away from the truth as the Israelite did when they began to complain in the Wilderness “do not harden your hearts as at the rebellion at the time of testing in the desert” (Ps.95:7-11 from Ex.17 and Nb. 20).
- The author then cleverly argues **how Jesus, from the tribe of Judah, should be accepted as the supreme High Priest** when Jewish priests traditionally must be descendants of Aaron and be from the tribe of Levi (ch.7). This is achieved by relating Jesus’ priesthood to that of Melchizedek, by applying to Jesus, for the first time, the words of Psalm 110:4 “You are a priest forever, of the order of Melchizedek” (5:6 and 7:17), and by arguing that Abraham’s giving of a tithe to Melchizedek proved that the latter’s priesthood was, therefore, necessarily greater than that accorded to Levi, the future great grandson of Abraham.
- **Jesus’ self-sacrifice as supreme High Priest (9:11-28) abolishes the need for daily sacrifices as in the Jewish Temple** (7:26-28 and 10:1-10) because his exaltation at the right hand of God (8:1 referring to Ps.110:1) proves that he is a mediator not only of a new covenant, a covenant of the heart, but one that is infinitely greater than that of the Mosaic covenant, and reflects Jeremiah’s prophecy (Jer. 31:31-34): “The days are coming