

Gospel Doctrine
Lesson: Hebrews
Reading: Hebrews

[PDF version of the lesson notes.](#)

I. Introduction

This lesson the letter to the Hebrews. Despite being called a letter it lacks the standard formulas we have encountered so far among the Pauline epistles. For example, there is no greeting. I think Hebrews is a fun book to read because of its use of the homily. The homilist quotes Old Testament scriptures and then provides commentary which includes a discussion of how the scripture should be applied (often in practical ways).

Authorship: The book does not name its author. The authorship of the book is traditionally attributed to Paul, but there is evidence of dispute as far back as the second century. For example, Origen famously wrote that "Only God Knows" who was the author[1], and Tertullian in the late second century attributed Hebrews to Barnabas.[2] Pauline authorship is primarily doubted because of differences in style and theological focus relative to the undisputed Pauline letters.[3] LDS commentators often point out that Joseph Smith believed or accepted Pauline authorship of Hebrews. It is certainly true that Joseph Smith referred to Paul as the author, but Joseph Smith may have just accepted the traditional attribution and it may go too far to use such statements as evidence for Pauline authorship from an LDS point of view. Finally, I am not sure the question authorship is important. I'm with Origen on this one. It's scripture; it deserves to be read closely and it is wonderful in many ways.

Date Written: The date of the letter is also quite uncertain. Scholarly estimates range from 60 to 95 CE.[4]

The Recipients: "The designation of the addressees as 'Hebrews' seems to be a later scribal inference based on the contents of the text." [5] Hebrews does contain many references to Jewish institutions and practices. This is consistent with a Jewish Christian audience, but maybe not an exclusively or primarily Jewish Christian audience. Paul, in other letters, makes arguments based on Jewish traditions to possibly primarily Gentile audiences in his letters to Galatia and Corinth.[6]

II. Jesus and Moses

Read Hebrews 3:1-6:

(1) Wherefore, holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling, consider the Apostle and High Priest of our profession, Christ Jesus; (2) Who was faithful to him that appointed him, as also Moses was faithful in all his house. (3) For this man was counted worthy of more glory than Moses, inasmuch as he who hath builded the house hath more honour than the house. (4) For every house is builded by some man; but he that built all things is God. (5) And Moses verily was

faithful in all his house, as a servant, for a testimony of those things which were to be spoken after; (6) But Christ as a son over his own house; whose house are we, if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end.

- These six verses are usually seen as the introduction of homily that extends from 3:1 to 4:13. Can you tell what the homily is about from these verses? What is and how is the main theme introduced? How is that theme supported in the introduction?
- Why introduce a theme of "faith" or "faithfulness" and then contrast Jesus and Moses? What is the point of the contrast? Are you surprised the comparison is between Moses and Jesus when Jesus is referred to as the High Priest?
- In what explicit ways is Jesus different than Moses?
- The language in verse 1 is interesting. I like the phrase, "partakers of the heavenly calling." The NRSV translates the Greek as, "holy partners in a heavenly calling." [7] What is meant by this phrase? What does it emphasize?
- Is the use of the word holy notable? What does it refer to in this context and how is it connected to the declaration that Jesus is the High Priest?
- How is the word profession being used here? Does it make sense to replace profession with confession?
- The NIV translates verse 1 so it includes the explicit command or reminder, "fix your thoughts on Jesus:"

(1) Therefore, holy brothers, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess.

How does this affect your understanding of the verse?

- This is the only place in the New Testament where Jesus is called an apostle. What does it mean to call to Jesus an apostle? Do you think it has a technical meaning or a more general meaning of "one sent out?" Why call Jesus both the apostle and high priest?
- Verse 6 indicates the we (collectively) are the house of God. The homilist argues (like Paul in 1 corinthians 3) that we are the temple. What do you think of this imagery? Why might this imagery been important to first century Christians? Is it still important and impactful imagery for us today?
- What do you think of the contrast between Jesus as the son over the house and Moses as the servant in the house?
- Why are confidence and rejoicing link to being members of God's house (or of God's temple)? Does it have implications in terms of the way we should behave and act today?

III. The Scriptural Text of the Homily: Psalm 95

Read Hebrews 3:7-13:

(7) Wherefore (as the Holy Ghost saith,

To day if ye will hear his voice,

(8) Harden not your hearts, as in the provocation,
in the day of temptation in the wilderness:

(9) When your fathers tempted me, proved me,
and saw my works forty years.

(10) Wherefore I was grieved with that generation,
and said, They do alway err in their heart;
and they have not known my ways.

(11) So I swear in my wrath,
They shall not enter into my rest.)

(12) Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God. (13) But exhort one another daily, while it is called To day; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.

The homilist quotes the Greek translation (LXX) of Psalm 95:7-11 (scholars note the quote does differ from the Greek translation at a number of points).[8] In verses 12-13 the homilist begins his commentary and starts to discuss application. The homilist only quotes verses 7-11 of the Psalm, but it is likely important to keep all of the psalm in mind as we read this part of the book of Hebrews. Psalm 95 begins with the command to sing out joyful in praise of God; to worship him gratefully. The beginning of the Psalm emphasizes God's greatness; he is the King above all other gods. "But with verse 7 the mood changes. The Psalmist writing many centuries after the Exodus, warns that a new day is dawning in which it will matter decisively whether or not the people who hear this call to worship obey it or not." [9]

- What is the connection between the introduction and the quoted passage from Psalms? How does the quoted scripture extend the theme of faith or faithfulness?
- What do we learn about the nature of scripture and about early Christian use of the Old Testament?
- Does the quoting of this scripture help us understand how early Christians understood the role and mission of Jesus Christ? Did they understand it in some sense as a new exodus?
- What part of the exodus does this quoted scripture focus on? How is that related to the theme of faith or faithfulness?
- The word "today" seems to be emphasized in these verses. Why? Why the focus on "today?" How is "today" related to the Psalm and the comments by the homilist? Is the homilist arguing that the promised day has arrived, and so it becomes imperative to act

today?

- The homilist warns of the danger of an evil and unbelieving heart? How is that warning related to the Homilists' use of Psalm 95?
- Harold Attridge, points out that the phrase, "heart of unbelief" is better translated as "faithless heart." [10] What do you think about that distinction? Does it change how you understand the verse and why the word "evil" is connected with it? How is your understanding of the passage changed if you replace "unbelief" with "faithless" throughout the passage?
- What does it mean to depart from the living God? What is meant by the living God? Is this a point of emphasis?

IV. Hear His Voice

Read Hebrews 3:14-19:

(14) For we are made partakers of Christ, if we hold the beginning of our confidence stedfast unto the end; (15) While it is said, To day if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts, as in the provocation. (16) For some, when they had heard, did provoke: howbeit not all that came out of Egypt by Moses. (17) But with whom was he grieved forty years? was it not with them that had sinned, whose carcasses fell in the wilderness? (18) And to whom sware he that they should not enter into his rest, but to them that believed not? (19) So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief.

- How is the quoted scripture used and interpreted in these verses (also notice how the homilist uses phrases from the quoted text)? How is the scripture applied to the present situation?
- What does it mean to be partakers of Christ? Does it mean, for example that "We share the life of the Messiah?" [11]

We share the life of the Messiah, you see, only if we keep a firm, tight grip on our original confidence, right through the end.

- What is the people's confidence and why do they need to hold on tight to it?
- Does this discussion lead to practical application? Does the practical application apply to us or should it be left to 1st century congregations?
- Is it fair to say that the homilist is giving advice on what to do when life or being a Christian is difficult?
- Do you think the following is a fair summary of this pericope? [12]

Once you stop believing either in the God who called you, rescued you and guides you, or in the future he has promised you, you may simply go round and round in the wilderness and never get anywhere.

Fair summary? Incomplete?

V. Rest

Read Hebrews 4:1-5:

(1) Let us therefore fear, lest, a promise being left us of entering into his rest, any of you should seem to come short of it. (2) For unto us was the gospel preached, as well as unto them: but the word preached did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in them that heard it. (3) For we which have believed do enter into rest, as he said,

As I have sworn in my wrath,
if they shall enter into my rest:

although the works were finished from the foundation of the world. (4) For he spake in a certain place of the seventh day on this wise,

And God did rest the seventh day from all his works.

(5) And in this place again,

If they shall enter into my rest.

(6) Seeing therefore it remaineth that some must enter therein, and they to whom it was first preached entered not in because of unbelief: (7) Again, he limiteth a certain day, saying in David, To day, after so long a time; as it is said,

To day if ye will hear his voice,
harden not your hearts.

(8) For if Jesus had given them rest, then would he not afterward have spoken of another day. (9) There remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God. (10) For he that is entered into his rest, he also hath ceased from his own works, as God did from his.

- How does the focus of the homilist shift in these verses and how is it related to the quoted scripture?
- What does verse 2 emphasize? How does it connect the old with the new?
- Do you think the word "gospel" is being used as a formal reference or would it be better

understood as "good news" in this verse? What "good news" was preached?

Notice the change in verse 8 using a modern translation (NRSV):

8 For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not speak later about another day. 9

How does this change your understanding of the pericope and is it an important change in your understanding?

- How does the homilist compare the old and new exodus? What is different about the two situations?
- The homilist makes the point that Joshua didn't really give the people "rest." And the evidence for that, in the homilist's view, is clear because David (the homilist assumes David wrote the Psalm 95) wrote about the hope of entering into God's rest. The people haven't yet entered into God's rest. Therefore, Psalm 95 must be pointing forward to rest provided by the similarly named Jesus.
- What is meant by the word "rest?" What images does it bring to your mind? What is meant by a promise of rest? How do verses 4-5 affect your understanding of what is meant by rest?
- Why does the homilist mention that works of God are completed (in fact, finished since the foundations of the world)?
- Do the later verses explain what the homilist means by rest? Is there more than one type of rest mentioned in these verses? Do chapters 11 and 12 of this book explain fully what is meant by rest?
- Why is obtaining rest and not working so important to the homilist?
- How was rest used in Psalm 95?
- Do you think it is important that "rest" is explicitly connected with the Sabbath day?

VI. Double-Edged Sword

Read Hebrews 4:11-13:

(11) Let us labour therefore to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief. (12) For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. (13) Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in his sight: but all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do.

- What do you think about the imagery in these verses? What does the imagery emphasize? What does the imagery bring to your mind?
- How is this imagery connected with the discussion of Psalm 95? Specifically, how is it connect with entering into God's rest, the Exodus, and wandering in the wilderness?
- What is meant by God' word in this context?

Endnotes

1. *The HarperCollins Bible Commentary*, 1149.
2. *Oxford Bible Commentary*, 1236.
3. *Oxford Bible Commentary*, 1236.
4. *The HarperCollins Bible Commentary*, 1149.
5. *The HarperCollins Bible Commentary*, 1149.
6. *The HarperCollins Bible Commentary*, 1150.
7. *The New Jerome Bible Commentary*, 926.
8. *The New Jerome Bible Commentary*, 926.
9. Wright, NT, *Hebrews for Everyone*, 28-29.
10. *Oxford Bible Commentary*, 1241.
11. Wright, NT, *Hebrews for Everyone*, 30.