

## HEBREWS - 1 - W5

Television watchers readily recognize the 5Ws of journalism: Who? Where? When? What? Why? Applying these to the Letter to the Hebrews we come up with a lot of uncertainties and plenty of suppositions. In short, we know very little about the author, the audience, where they lived, when the letter was written. The letter itself tells us why.

From the internal evidence of what the document contains we can infer the character of the text and the circumstances the audience was experiencing. A more appropriate name for it is not a letter, but a sermon which may have been written down later for transmission to a distant group of second generation, Greek-speaking, Jewish Christians.

In some respects it is a persuasive rhetorical document somewhat like a theological essay. The core message is that quite simply “Jesus is best because he is the Messiah/Christ, the Son of God.” The occasion for this message appeared to have been to encourage the members of this community to remain faithful despite reduced circumstances, public shame and in real danger of open persecution.

Scholars have offered several possibilities in a range of years from 49 to 96 CE. There were three persecutions during that period by Emperors Claudius (49), Nero (64-68) and Domitian (sometime between 81-96). Many scholars select a time just prior to the Neronian persecution and Rome as the most likely place where these Jewish Christians lived. Before the temple was destroyed by the Roman in 70 CE is the most probable date. To be frank, no one really knows for sure. The author was not named in the original text.

The study we shall be following is another of the Westminster Bible Companion series by Frances Taylor Gench, Professor of Biblical Interpretation at Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond, VA. Her analysis of Hebrews is that it has the form of a sermon addressed to “fatigued and beleaguered Christians who suffer from what has aptly been described as ‘tired blood.’ They have grown weary in the Christian way and are on the verge of abandoning Christian faith.”

The author of Hebrews prescribed that “in their state of arrested development as Christians, (they) seem ready only for ‘milk,’ – what they get is ‘solid food’ – a heavy dose of theological reflection.” There is no question that the book was intended described in Exodus 28 and 39. described in Exodus 28 and 39. “to encourage, strengthen and motivate its readers – to call them to faithfulness.” (Gench, 5.)

This was done by means of two central themes: priesthood and pilgrimage. Jesus is presented as high priest and enthroned Son of God, the mediator between God and humans. He “opens us to the holy, cleanses our conscience, removes our sin, and intercedes for us before the throne of grace.” Using the form of an exhortation sermon, it envisions Christian life as a journey by a pilgrim people.

The book reflects both continuity and discontinuity with Judaism. Some Christians still hold that it expresses superiority toward Judaism as a less worthy tradition. Gench believes that while appreciating the Hebrew Scriptures and interpretations, the author made “no effort to dissuade people of the attractions of Judaism.” The book dates from a time when Christians were

“in the midst of a process of self-definition and differentiation” from the Jewish tradition.

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Are you ever intrigued by the different and often contradictory scholarly opinions regarding the origin and background of various books of the Bible?
2. Do these discrepancies help or hinder your understanding of the Bible, your personal faith, or your participation in the church?
3. Is it important for preachers to share their knowledge and interpretation of biblical texts in their sermons as well as in Bible study?
4. What conclusion would you come to about the who, where, when, what, and why of the Letter to the Hebrews?

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### OPENING PRAYER

**Gracious God, as we renew our studies of Holy Scripture, open to us the Word of Life that we may go forth with renewed faith and courage following our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen**

### CLOSING PRAYER

**Go before us, O Lord, in all our ways, that our living each day may begin, continue and**

**end in you and to the glory of your holy name, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**

### THE HIGH PRIEST OF ISRAEL

(As described in Exodus 28 and 39.)



**Jesus, the Sympathetic High Priest.**

**Hebrews 4:14-16.**