

INVITATION TO HEBREWS

The author of the book of Hebrews doesn't give his name and doesn't say who he's writing to. But the book itself reveals much about who wrote it, and why, and who it's written to. The recipients are clearly Jews who've come to believe in Jesus as their Messiah. They are facing persecution and are in danger of falling away from the faith. The author expects them to be familiar with specific details of Israel's history and customs, and he also addresses them as followers of Jesus. They seem to have lived in Italy, since the author sends them greetings from those from Italy—that is, their friends from back home who are now traveling elsewhere in the Roman Empire. The book seems to have been written before AD 70, when Jewish sacrifices ended with the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, since it asks, if sacrifices could make us right with God, would they not have stopped being offered? Whatever the specifics of their situation, the recipients seem to have the option of escaping persecution by identifying themselves as Jews rather than as followers of Jesus. The author warns them not to do this. He explains that through Jesus, God has established a new covenant that reveals the meaning and fulfills the purposes of the covenant God previously established through Moses. God now wants people to belong to him through this new covenant. To convince his readers of this, the author of Hebrews alternates between teachings—such as reviews of Israel's history and the temple worship arrangements—and challenges based on the truths these teachings disclose. The book is essentially made up of four teaching-exhortation pairs (although it concludes with a further section that describes the practical implications of its truths for the community's life together). They develop these four topics: : Jesus is much greater than the angels, so the salvation he announced is much

greater than the message spoken through angels, that is, in the law of Moses (pp. 1745–1747). : Jesus is our apostle (meaning someone sent by God on a specific mission). The apostles Moses and Joshua brought the people of Israel into a promised land and into God’s rest, but the promised land and rest Jesus brings us into is a much greater one (pp. 1747–1748). : Jesus is our high priest, and his advocacy for us in that position is much more effective than that of the priests appointed by the law of Moses (pp. 1748–1755). : We must respond to all that God has done through Jesus by stepping out in faith, that is, by living in light of unseen heavenly realities. This is what faithful people have done throughout the ages, as they have waited for God to bring his heavenly realm back together with the earth once again (pp. 1755–1758). The first section is really a prelude, and the fourth section is an application of the earlier ones. The core of the book is therefore found in the second and third sections. These sections are introduced intentionally by the statement, Therefore, holy brothers and sisters, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, whom we acknowledge as our apostle and high priest. The goal of the whole book is to demonstrate that the final realities God has revealed in the new covenant are vastly superior to the temporary ones of the old covenant. Readers are encouraged to respond to every situation, including the threat of persecution, in light of the new reality revealed by Jesus the Messiah. This means not seeking refuge in a previous identity, but rather being willing to suffer if necessary to remain faithful to Jesus. The author encourages his readers to stay faithful by reminding them that they’re receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken.