

# Jesus: The Glorious King Who Speaks

## HEBREWS 1:1-3

**Main Idea:** God has spoken to his people in many ways, but he has now spoken to us by his Son, Jesus Christ, who is the exact imprint of his Father's glory, the agent of creation, the purifying sacrifice for our sins, and the King who rules the cosmos from his rightful place at the right hand of his Father.

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## Introduction

**H**ebrews is certainly one of the most intriguing books of the New Testament. It poses unique challenges, particularly when it comes to answering introductory questions regarding its author and original audience. Hebrews is peculiar in this sense. For example, the letters of Paul not only explicitly state that Paul was the author of each epistle, they also often explicitly or implicitly indicate the historical context, the audience, and the situation surrounding the origin of the letter. Of course, similar statements could be made about the epistles of Peter, Acts, Revelation, and even the Gospels.

Yet the book of Hebrews—so rich in its biblical theological exploration of the work of Christ and the gospel—provides very little information about its own origin. In fact, we know almost nothing about who wrote it, its original audience, or the context behind it. In order to set the stage, we will examine the following introductory issues:

- Title
- Original Audience

- Date of Composition
- Author

### *Title*

We typically refer to this book simply as “Hebrews.” The title found in most ancient manuscripts reads, “to the Hebrews,” thus identifying this book as a letter or an epistle. Hebrews, however, is unique in that it does not begin with a salutation, as in the case of Paul’s epistles. Yet, while the book does not have a typical epistolary salutation, other features of this book (particularly its end) share similarities with other epistles in Scripture.

### *Original Audience*

Who were the original recipients of this letter? As already stated, in ancient manuscripts the epistle is addressed “to the Hebrews.” The tone of the book assumes that the readers were Christians. This indicates that the book must have been meant for a Jewish community that had converted to Christianity. But this does not necessarily answer every question about the original audience. Some in the early church suggested that the letter might have been intended for converts who were formerly Jewish priests, since Hebrews assumes a great deal of knowledge about the Old Testament Scriptures and the Levitical priesthood. As intriguing as this suggestion may be, there is no evidence that the letter is intended for such a specific group.

The most detailed description we can give of the overall audience is that they were converted Jews. Other clues in Hebrews also reveal some traits of the original recipients. Hebrews is obviously written to people who have a significant amount of knowledge of the Old Testament. At the same time, the author of Hebrews frequently quotes from the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament), demonstrating that this is the version of the Scriptures most familiar to the original audience. Since they were depending on the Septuagint, it is likely that the audience was made up of Hellenistic Jews. They composed part of the cosmopolitan areas in the Greco-Roman Empire outside of Palestine. Their primary language was Greek, and they mainly resided in Alexandria and Rome.

Ultimately, we must exercise a certain reluctance to be dogmatic in our historical reconstructions. Three things we do know about the

Epistle to the Hebrews are that it was written to the church of the Lord Jesus Christ (2 Tim 3:16-17), it plays a unique role in the canon, and it instructs all Christians on how to read the Old Testament in proper relation to Christ.

### *Date of Composition*

Hebrews was probably written prior to AD 70 and the destruction of the Jewish temple. The epistle was almost certainly penned prior to this date because the book mentions the sacrificial system in Jerusalem as if it were still in place (7:27-28; 8:3-5; 10:1-3). Furthermore, the book mentions Timothy (13:23), who we know from elsewhere in Scripture was a contemporary of the apostle Paul. These clues point to the fact that Hebrews was written sometime before the Romans destroyed the Jerusalem temple in AD 70.

### *Author*

Who wrote Hebrews? Ultimately we do not know. Biblical authority and inerrancy require that we affirm the authorship of every book as it is attributed within the Scriptures. Therefore, we must contend for the fact that Peter wrote 1 and 2 Peter because that claim is made within the inerrant text itself. The same applies for the epistles of Paul. When it comes to anonymous authors of New Testament books (e.g., Matthew, Mark, Luke, Acts), we have good historical and textual reasons to continue to affirm the traditionally proposed authors. Hebrews, however, does not give any hints as to who wrote it. Furthermore, there is no unanimous historical tradition that testifies to a specific author. In fact, scholars have posited several possible authors for the letter.

Many in the history of the church have proposed that Paul wrote Hebrews, but there is no evidence that Paul wrote this letter. As a matter of fact, the grammar, syntax, and phraseology found in Hebrews are not characteristic of Paul's writing. What is characteristic of Paul's writings, however, is a salutation in which Paul makes clear that he is the author! Moreover, Paul often indicates that he writes as one with apostolic authority. The author of Hebrews, however, never makes such claims. Instead, the author of Hebrews communicates as one who is affirming the truth of what was revealed to the church through the apostles.

Other suggestions as to who wrote the book include Apollos, Barnabas, and Luke. The reason these names crop up is because the author of Hebrews seems to have known Timothy intimately, thus linking him with the apostolic circle. There are, however, problems with each of these proposals. Luke, for example, comes from a Gentile background—a background that has obviously influenced the way he wrote both his Gospel and the book of Acts. Hebrews, on the other hand, seems more likely to have been written by someone immersed in Judaism. Barnabas is an attractive choice since he was a Levite. His Levitical status would explain the book's attention to priestly issues, but there still remains a lack of evidence for assigning authorship to Barnabas. The eloquence of the letter could point to Apollos as the author, but again, there is insufficient evidence to ascribe Hebrews to Apollos. Proposed authors for the book of Hebrews are simply appealing guesses.

Ultimately, we need to limit our imaginations and trust that the Holy Spirit has given us all that we need. God, in his providence, did not reveal to us the human author or the original recipients. Evidently we are not meant to know these things and can still understand this book. Perhaps God did not reveal that data because with it we might read the book differently from the way the Holy Spirit has intended for us to read it. What is clear is that the Holy Spirit desires for us to read this book—along with all of Scripture—as written to “the church.” Therefore, we must approach the book of Hebrews understanding that it is God's word to all Christians, and we must allow the book to shape how we read the Old Testament after the reality of Christ's sacrificial work on the cross.

### *Prolegomena: Keeping Our Old Testaments Open*

Many Christians find Hebrews a very challenging book to understand. This is most likely because Hebrews assumes a certain amount of knowledge of the Old Testament. Hebrews discusses most of the major figures, covenants, and biblical-theological themes found there. The book even spends a significant amount of time discussing minor characters in the Old Testament such as Melchizedek. Therefore, in order to understand this New Testament letter we must become familiar with the history, themes, and theology of the Old Testament. Hebrews will guide us along this journey, but it is important that we keep our Old Testaments open as we read this epistle.

## Hearing God's Revelation from Long Ago

### HEBREWS 1:1

**H**ebrews 1:1 begins with the words “long ago.” Just like Genesis and the Gospel of John, Hebrews opens with a chronological reference taking readers back to the beginning of creation. This is a remarkable feature of Hebrews, one that sets a trajectory for how the book needs to be interpreted. These introductory verses set the context for how the author of Hebrews will explain the gospel. It is significant that he begins his retelling of the gospel not with Jesus's birth in Bethlehem, but with the creation narrative and the covenants in the Old Testament. Why is this so weighty? Because the Holy Spirit, through the author of Hebrews, is placing the story of Christ within the context of God's entire redemptive plan—a redemptive plan that spans from creation to new creation. The person and work of Christ can only be rightly understood when given proper place at the center of history's metanarrative. The story of God's saving work in Jesus Christ begins not just during the age of the Roman Empire but “long ago” in the narratives of the Old Testament. The account of God's saving work in Jesus Christ begins at the very beginning of creation.

The writer also highlights that understanding the story of Jesus and his work on the cross means grasping that the incarnation of Christ was not the first time God intervened in history. The incarnation is certainly unique among God's acts in history, but God has been active in unfolding the drama of redemption and setting the stage for the incarnation of his Son since the dawn of creation. Specifically, God has been active in speaking. The gospel comes to us in the context of a revelation that has already been delivered to us by God. The gospel is not God's first word to humanity, nor does it arrive in a vacuum. For centuries Yahweh “spoke to the fathers by the prophets.” This revelation came “at different times and in different ways.” Sometimes God spoke through dreams, in visions, by inspiring Scripture, and even through a donkey (Num 22:28-30)! In all this, what has been preserved for us in the Old Testament is the inerrant record of God's word and its faithful transmission to his people.

The use of the phrase *the fathers by the prophets* not only establishes the theological and redemptive-historical context for the epistle but also subtly introduces the author's apologetic argument for the superiority

of Christ over the old covenant. The fathers and the prophets were the reference point for any type of theological argumentation for the Jewish community. The ultimate authority was God's revelation found in Israel's Scriptures. In fact, as early as the very next verse (1:2), the author will begin demonstrating how Jesus has fulfilled (not abolished, see Matt 5:17) God's revelation given in the Old Testament.

Obviously, the author of Hebrews carefully crafted this introductory verse. He affirms the authenticity and authority of the Old Testament. The Old Testament continues to function authoritatively for God's people. Yet at the same time, as the next verse will show, there is something more. The Old Testament is a story in need of a conclusion—a messianic conclusion. The fathers and the prophets indeed spoke the word of God, but that word was not the final word.

### Excursus: The God Who Speaks

One of the most important assertions made by the author of Hebrews in these initial verses is that God is a speaking God. The Bible regularly affirms this fact, and Hebrews 1:1-3 reminds us that few things are more important than the notion that God has spoken throughout history and has now given his final revelation in Jesus Christ. The Bible also regularly reminds us that God's revelation is part and parcel of his amazing grace to us. We regularly think of God's grace in the context of salvation, but we must also think about God's grace in the context of revelation.

If God did not reveal himself to us in his Word, we would have no knowledge of the meaning of the cross and resurrection of Christ, nor would we have any knowledge of the appropriate response to the gospel. In other words, we could not know God without revelation. Carl F. H. Henry describes this beautifully when he speaks of revelation as God's willful disclosure, through which he forfeits his own personal privacy so that his creatures might know Him (*God Who Speaks*, 405). We have no claim on God. There is no necessity for him to forfeit his own personal privacy. More simply, in the words of Francis Schaeffer's book title, "he is there and he is not silent." It is nothing but pure grace on God's part for him to speak to us. We do not deserve his life-giving words. If God could not or did not speak, we would be left in darkness and ignorance.

The Bible also clearly indicates that there are two types of revelation. First, God has spoken to us in nature. This is called *general* revelation. Psalm 19:1-2 clearly affirms this reality:

*The heavens declare the glory of God,  
and the expanse proclaims the work of his hands.  
Day after day they pour out speech;  
night after night they communicate knowledge.*

Romans 1 also clarifies the nature, extent, and purpose of general revelation. In general revelation, God's "invisible attributes, that is, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen . . . through what he has made" (Rom 1:20). Yet at the same time, general revelation is not sufficient to give us any understanding of salvation available in Christ.

The second type of revelation spoken of in Scripture is *special* revelation. This is the type of revelation referred to by Hebrews 1:1-3. This type of revelation is direct, verbal revelation that comes from the very mouth of God. Special revelation is what we have in Scripture: when Scripture speaks, God speaks.

## Listening to God's Revelation in the Last Days

### HEBREWS 1:2

In this verse the author is contrasting two different periods of time: what took place "long ago" among the fathers and prophets (in the former days), and what has now taken place in Christ Jesus ("in these last days"). Verses like this help shape our biblical theology and remind us that the overarching schema of reading the Old and New Testaments in relation to one another is one of promise and fulfillment. As the writer of Hebrews will meticulously demonstrate in the coming chapters, the New Testament fulfills the Old Testament. The climax of God's redemption is found only in Jesus Christ.

In one sense, the fact that God has spoken is not new. As we already discussed, the gospel must be understood within the context of the revelation already provided by God. Jesus is the conclusion to an already existing story found in the Old Testament. Yet, in another sense, God's revelation through his Son is new. The gospel story is the long-awaited conclusion that fulfills all promises and realizes all types and shadows of the Old Testament.

A clear qualitative difference exists between a prophet and a son. Further, this Son is defined in Hebrews in a way that demands that readers recognize the divine character of the Son. God is no longer merely speaking through the prophets; he is now speaking through a son—*his* Son. The Son is the fullest, most complete revelation of the Father possible since he shares the Father's divine nature as the second member of the Trinity.

This Son is designated as the "heir of all things." The writer of Hebrews is using traditional categories of Hellenistic Judaism that his audience would have understood. To be an "heir" was to be invested with everything. The son is given full authority. To do business with the son means to do business with the father. Moreover, if you are going to know this Father, you can only do so through his Son (John 14:6-7).

The next phrase, he "made the universe through him," recalls the language of John's prologue:

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. All things were created through him, and apart from him not one thing was created that has been created. (John 1:1-3)*

The Son is not only the fulfillment of the Old Testament and the pinnacle of God's saving works in history, he is also the agent of creation. Jesus is, thus, the beginning and the end. He is the *Creator* and the *telos* of creation. It is significant that the author of Hebrews connects the doctrines of redemption and creation. This is because the God who creates is the God who redeems. As followers of Jesus Christ, we must recognize that if we do not have the right doctrine of creation, we will not have the right doctrine of redemption. Creation and the gospel are inextricably linked.

## Seeing the Supremacy of God's Final Revelation

### HEBREWS 1:3

Verse 3 is an exposition of how the Son reveals the Father to us. The idea of "radiance" goes back to the notion of the *shekinah* glory in the Old Testament. The *shekinah* was a shining, visible glory that demonstrated the majesty of God, as in the exodus (Exod 13:21; 40:34-35) and at the dedication of Solomon's temple (1 Kgs 8:10-11). Looking at Christ is the way we see most fully the glory of God. More than that, Christ is the

exact expression of the Father's nature. Christ shares the divine nature with the Father as the Second Person of the Trinity. This is where the divine Son is different from a human son. No human son is the exact representation of his father. There is a close relation, but not an exact representation. Christ, however, is an "*exact representation*." He and God are of the same divine essence.

There are almost innumerable applications to the doctrine of the Trinity as expressed here in Hebrews 1. For example, this is one of the reasons Protestants have been opposed to the use of icons. There is no need to hang icons on a wall when you believe in the One who was hung on a cross. A Trinitarian Christology is of vital importance to the health of the church. The author of Hebrews is clear: we only understand Christ rightly when we see him in a redemptive-historical context as the climax of God's revelation, and in a theological context as the Second Person of the Trinity.

As this important divine figure, the Son is not only the active agent of creation, but he is also active in the preservation of creation. He sustains "all things by his powerful word." If the Son ever ceased to will the universe to remain, then the universe would cease to exist. The power to create is also the power to preserve, the power to control, and the power to bring to an end. Hebrews tells us the Son possesses this kind of power.

These are deep waters. The inner workings of the Trinity are indeed a profound and glorious mystery. Martin Luther, the great Reformer of the sixteenth century, was once asked by a young theology student a speculative question about the nature of God. Luther responded, "I think an angel would be scared to ask that question." Similar reverence should accompany our own study of the doctrine of the Trinity. There are certain questions we simply cannot ask since God has not revealed an answer to us. What is revealed, however, is that the Father through the Son accomplished creation and continues to sustain it.

The transition to "purification for sins" happens rather suddenly. Yet we must see in this how tightly the Bible intertwines the person and work of Christ. The word *purification* is not one we typically use to summarize the gospel. This word encapsulates the priestly work of Christ and recalls the sacrificial system of the Old Testament. The rest of Hebrews, particularly Hebrews 9–10, will further expound on the significance of purification. The author introduces the term here in order to prepare readers for the trajectory of the rest of his argument.

The final statement highlights the kingly authority of Christ. To be at someone's "right hand" is to be in a place of favor and authority. For Christ to be at the right hand of the heavenly "Majesty" means he is above all powers and he rules over the cosmos. The place of Christ in heaven at God's right hand also alludes to his work of intercession for us (Rom 8:34).

In short, the first three verses of the Epistle to the Hebrews are some of the most remarkable in all of Scripture. Consider the doctrines embedded in them:

- Revelation
- Creation
- The Trinity
- The Relationship of the Old and New Testaments
- Christology
- Atonement

Even more, consider the wonderfully high Christology that the author has presented in just a few words. Christ is the . . .

- Son of God
- Revelation of God
- Fulfillment of God's Revelation in the Old Testament
- Heir of All Things
- Agent of Creation
- Radiance of God's Glory
- Expression of God's Nature
- Preserver of All Creation
- Purifier of God's People
- Mediator for God's People

Hebrews is not for the theologically faint of heart. Hebrews is for those whose endurance will be richly rewarded with a remarkable portrait of Christ. Let us treasure him, our Creator and Redeemer. He is worthy, for he is supreme over all things.

### Excursus: Reading the Old Testament as Christians

Christians have often been troubled by the question, How do we rightly read the Old Testament? Thankfully, the book of Hebrews provides us with important directions on how to interpret the Old Testament

rightly, now that Christ has fulfilled all things. However, the history of theology and the history of the church demonstrate that there are disastrously wrong ways to read the Old Testament.

The first major error made in approaching the Old Testament comes down to reading it as if it is a book that does not belong to the church. This way of reading the Bible assumes that the Old Testament belongs to the Jews, whereas the New Testament belongs to the church. Sometimes the way we describe our congregations can unintentionally lend to this type of understanding. For example, Protestants (and Baptists in particular) are very concerned about ordering their church life so that they are legitimately a “New Testament church.” By this we mean that we are seeking to follow the ecclesiology modeled in the New Testament by the apostles of the Lord Jesus. Of course, this is certainly right and good, but we must be careful that when we describe ourselves as a “New Testament church” we do not give the impression that our Bibles begin in Matthew as opposed to Genesis. Instead, the Old Testament Scriptures belong to the church because they bear witness to and provide the redemptive-historical context of the gospel of Christ (Rom 3:21).

Marcion, a famous heretic in the days of the early church, epitomized the worst form of this type of Old Testament interpretation. He posited that the God of the Old Testament was not the same as the God of the New Testament. He ultimately tried to do away with the Old Testament and almost everything in the New Testament that was in any way favorable toward Judaism. The early church quickly smelled the scent of heresy in Marcion’s teachings—the stench of deadly error. Many of Marcion’s heresies, however, are perpetuated in modern liberal theology, which asserts that the Old Testament portrait of God is crude and rudimentary. Regrettably, this way of thinking often sinks into certain sections of evangelical churches as well.

A similar though less pernicious version of this error, perhaps more common within evangelicalism, is simply to ignore the Old Testament. The temptation to ignore it is quite strong for many Christians. Many simply do not understand the Old Testament because it seems so alien to our culture and difficult to comprehend. Anchoring our quiet times in Philippians is easier than trying to focus them on Leviticus. Yet, as we will discover in the rest of Hebrews, the Old Testament cannot be ignored, for it provides us with the theological and redemptive-historical context for understanding the gospel.

The second major error associated with reading the Old Testament is equal and opposite to the first. This erroneous hermeneutic assumes that Christian theology is primarily grounded in the Old Testament without recognizing the significant redemptive-historical transitions that have occurred because Christ has inaugurated God's eschatological kingdom. To be certain, there is continuity between the Old and New Testaments, but there is also significant discontinuity. We are a New Testament people and a new covenant people. Therefore, when we read the Old Testament, we must read it in light of its fulfillment in Christ; that is to say, we must employ a distinctively Christological hermeneutic.

Christians, therefore, must not resent, ignore, dismiss, or uncritically exalt the Old Testament. Christ did not come to abolish the Old Testament but to fulfill it (Matt 5:17). His followers must always remember that our Bible begins with Genesis, not Matthew. The Old Testament was written for our instruction and is profitable even now in the new covenant era "for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness" (2 Tim 3:16). Further, in Romans 15:4, Paul writes,

*For whatever was written in the past was written for our instruction, so that we may have hope through endurance and through the encouragement from the Scriptures.*

The Old Testament, which was "written in the past," is for our "instruction," "hope," and "encouragement." In order to live faithfully before God, we must not only read the Old Testament, but also learn to read it rightly in relation to Christ. Hebrews will help us to that end.

### Reflect and Discuss

1. Why is it so important to remember that the gospel message begins with the creation narrative and the covenants of the Old Testament? Do you think it is necessary to incorporate the Old Testament into presentations of the gospel? Why or why not?
2. How does the Old Testament set the context for how we should share the gospel? How do the first few verses of Hebrews help us in considering the relationship between the Old Testament and the gospel? Do these verses change the way you think about presenting the gospel? Explain.
3. In what significant ways did God speak to his people in the Old Testament? How do those ways relate to the way God has spoken to us in Jesus Christ?

4. In what ways does the author of Hebrews present Jesus Christ as superior to the old covenant in the first three verses of the letter? What does Christ's superiority over the old covenant mean for the old covenant?
5. How does the fact that God speaks to us fuel our complete confidence in Scripture and serve our knowledge of God and our understanding of his character? What does it say about his relationship to us?
6. How does the doctrine of creation affect the doctrine of redemption? In what ways are the two doctrines inextricably linked?
7. Why is the doctrine of the Trinity such an essential doctrine for the health of the church? How do these verses help inform our understanding of Christ's sonship?
8. How do the theologically rich contents of Hebrews 1:1-3 impact the way you view Christ? Does your everyday life and theology reflect the worth of Christ? Explain your response.
9. Which of the two major errors we discussed concerning reading the Old Testament do you think is most prevalent in our churches and our culture today? How can you combat and prevent the spread of these errors in your church?
10. Why is it so essential that we be students of the Old Testament just as much as we are of the New Testament? What is the danger of being students of the New Testament alone? In what ways does the New Testament give us tools for reading the Old Testament rightly?