Hebrews: Consider Yeshua

Introduction

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Who is speaking?

Hebrews opens without a greeting. That's unusual in the New Testament. Before we learn anything about the person writing or the people receiving it, we read that God has spoken. He spoke to the ancestors through the prophets, and He has now spoken to us in His Son (1:1–2). That opening gives us our bearings. We can spend a good deal of time asking who wrote Hebrews, which I think is appropriate. But the book itself puts a more immediate question to us: now that God has spoken, are we listening?

I've called this commentary *Consider Yeshua* after the appeal in 3:1. There the writer calls Him both the apostle and the high priest of our confession. The two titles give us a useful way into the book. Yeshua is the One God sent to us, and He is the One through whom we come to God. Hebrews wants us to give Him our attention when we're drifting, when we're ashamed to draw near, and when we're tired of holding on. This book will encourage anyone who is listening.

Who wrote Hebrews?

The writer calls it a "word of exhortation" (13:22). It reads like a sustained sermon, meant to be heard, and it closes with ordinary news about Timothy, greetings, and a blessing. Yet it never gives us the author's name. Many associate Paul with the book, but its vocabulary and style differ from his acknowledged letters. In 2:3 the writer also speaks of the message being confirmed to "us" by those who heard the Lord. Compare Paul's account of receiving the gospel by revelation in Galatians 1:11–12. The difference gives me reason to hesitate before calling Hebrews a letter from Paul.

Others have been considered. Apollos is an appealing possibility: Acts 18:24–26 describes him as eloquent and well versed in the Scriptures. Barnabas and Priscilla have also been proposed. A person's gifts may fit what we find in Hebrews, but they cannot establish who wrote it. Origen, as quoted by Eusebius, came to the point where he left the answer with God. I personally hold to one of those options, but like Origen, I'm content to remain without conclusion. The writer's argument is available to us in full, even if the signature is missing.

Who first heard it?

The traditional title, To the Hebrews, fits a book that expects its audience to follow an argument with references to Moses, the wilderness, priesthood, and sacrifice. A congregation with many Jewish believers in Yeshua makes sense to me. The book itself does not give us a membership list, though, and Gentile believers also learned to read Israel's Scriptures. The greeting from people associated with Italy (13:24) makes a connection with Rome possible without settling where the congregation met.

What we know about their experience matters more for reading the book. Whoever is intended to receive this 'sermon' had already endured public abuse, stood beside others who suffered, cared for prisoners, and accepted the loss of property (10:32–34). Yet they had become slow to hear (5:11), and some had made a habit of missing gathering with one another (10:25). A congregation can have a brave history and a sluggish present. The writer reminds them of the courage they once showed because they need it again.

I think it likely that the Temple was still standing when this was written. Hebrews describes priestly service in the present tense and does not appeal to the Temple's destruction. But its discussion focuses on the tabernacle and can be read as an exposition of the Torah. The use of Hebrews in First Clement, commonly dated near the end of the first century, gives us a firmer outer boundary. We will not need an exact date to follow the argument.

Reading Hebrews with the Tanakh open

Hebrews begins with the same God speaking through the prophets and in His Son. Keep that in view when the book speaks of something "better." The earlier promises and institutions are how the writer teaches us to recognize what God has done in Yeshua. Psalm 110 gives us the language of the enthroned priest. Jeremiah 31 gives us the promise of a new covenant made with Israel and Judah. The Torah supplies the language of the sanctuary and sacrifice. If we close the Tanakh, we lose the very words by which Hebrews explains the Messiah's work.

Sometimes a quotation in Hebrews differs from the wording in your English Tanakh. The writer frequently draws on the ancient Greek Scriptures, commonly called the Septuagint. When the wording makes a difference to the argument, we'll stop and look at it. We'll also ask why a passage appears where it does. For instance, Psalm 95's "today" becomes an urgent word to a later congregation (Hebrews 3:7–15). The writer expects the people listening to respond while there is still a "today."

What the writer asks of us

The book moves between explaining what God has done and asking what we will do in response. The movement is especially clear in 10:19–25. Because Yeshua has opened the way into God's presence, we can draw near. Because the One who promised is faithful, we can hold fast. And because we are doing this together, we can consider how to stir one another to love and good works. The invitation is addressed to people who need each other, especially when faithfulness becomes costly.

The warnings belong in that same conversation. I think of a congregation that had once stood beside prisoners and now needed to be reminded to show up for one another. The writer has good reason to warn them about drifting, and equally good reason to speak of confidence, mercy, and hope. As we go chapter by chapter, we'll give both their due. We begin in Hebrews 1, where the author wants us to see the Son clearly enough to understand why His voice deserves our attention.

Takeaways

- God has spoken in His Son. Will He speak to me?
- Keep the Tanakh open as you read Hebrews. It's one book!
- Draw near and help one another hold fast.

Sources for the introduction

Eusebius, Church History 6.25.11–14 (Origen on the authorship of Hebrews)

First Clement 36 (early use of Hebrews 1)

Introduction to Hebrews, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, https://bible.usccb.org/bible/hebrews/0.