

Anonymous Letter to the Christian Community in Rome – Part 1 (c. 63–64)

Hebrews 1:1–4:13

God Has Spoken Through His Son

- 1 After God spoke long ago in various portions and in various ways to our ancestors through the prophets,
 2 in these last days he has spoken to us in a son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he created the world.
 3 The Son is the radiance of his glory and the representation of his essence, and he sustains all things by his powerful word, and so when he had accomplished cleansing for sins, *he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.* [cf. [Ps 110:1](#)]
 4 Thus he became so far better than the angels as he has inherited a name superior to theirs.

Superiority of the Son to the Angels

- 5 For to which of the angels did God ever say, *“You are my son! Today I have fathered you?”* [[Ps 2:7](#)] And in another place he says, *“I will be his father and he will be my son.”* [[2 Sam 7:14](#)]
 6 But when he again brings his firstborn into the world, he says, *“Let all the angels of God worship him!”* [[Deut 32:43](#) (LXX)]
 7 And he says of the angels, *“He makes his angels spirits and his ministers a flame of fire,”* [[Ps 104:4](#) (LXX 103:4)]
 8 but of the Son he says,

*“Your throne, O God, is forever and ever,
 and a righteous scepter is the scepter of your kingdom.*

- 9 *You have loved righteousness and hated lawlessness.
 So God, your God, has anointed you over your companions with the oil of rejoicing.”* [[Ps 45:6–7](#) (LXX 44:7–8)]

10 And,

*“You founded the earth in the beginning, Lord,
 and the heavens are the works of your hands.*

- 11 *They will perish, but you continue.
 And they will all grow old like a garment,
 12 and like a robe you will fold them up
 and like a garment they will be changed,
 but you are the same and your years will never run out.”* [[Ps 102:25–27](#)]

- 13 But to which of the angels has he ever said, *“Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet?”* [[Ps 110:1](#)]
 14 Are they not all ministering spirits, sent out to serve those who will inherit salvation?

First Warning—The Danger of Drifting

- 2:1 Therefore we must pay closer attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away.
 2 For if the message spoken through angels proved to be so firm that every violation or disobedience received its just penalty,
 3 how will we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was first communicated through the Lord and was confirmed to us by those who heard him,
 4 while God confirmed their witness with signs and wonders and various miracles and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.

Superiority of Jesus to the Angels

- 5 For he did not put the world to come, about which we are speaking, under the control of angels.
 6 Instead someone testified somewhere:

“What is man that you think of him or the son of man that you care for him?”

- 7 *You made him lower than the angels for a little while. You crowned him with glory and honor.
 8 You put all things under his control.”* [[Ps 8:4–6](#)]

For when he *put all things under his control*, he left nothing outside of his control. At present we do not yet see *all things under his control*,

9 but we see Jesus, who was made *lower than the angels for a little while*, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by God’s grace he would experience death on behalf of everyone.

10 For it was fitting for him, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, to make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings.

11 For indeed he who makes holy and those being made holy all have the same origin, and so he is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters,

12 saying, *“I will proclaim your name to my brothers; in the midst of the assembly I will praise you.”* [[Ps 22:22](#) (LXX 21:23)]

13 Again he says, *“I will be confident in him,”* [[Isa 8:17b](#) (LXX)] and again, *“Here I am, with the children God has given me.”* [[Isa 8:18](#) (LXX)]

14 Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, he likewise shared in their humanity, so that through death he could destroy the one who holds the power of death (that is, the devil),

15 and set free those who were held in slavery all their lives by their fear of death.

16 For surely his concern is not for angels, but he is concerned for Abraham’s descendants.

17 Therefore he had to be made like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he could become a merciful and faithful high priest in things relating to God, to make atonement for the sins of the people.

18 For since he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are tempted.

Superiority of Jesus to Moses

3:1 Therefore, holy brothers and sisters, partners in a heavenly calling, take note of Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess,

2 who is faithful to the one who appointed him, as Moses was also in God’s house.

3 For he has come to deserve greater glory than Moses, just as the builder of a house deserves greater honor than the house itself!

4 For every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God.

5 Now Moses was *faithful in all God’s house* as a servant, to testify to the things that would be spoken. [[Num 12:7b](#) (LXX)]

6 But Christ is faithful as a son over God’s house. We are of his house, if in fact we hold firmly to our confidence and the hope we take pride in.

Second Warning—The Danger of Unbelief

7 Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says,

“Oh, that today you would listen as he speaks!

8 *“Do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, in the day of testing in the wilderness.*

9 *“There your fathers tested me and tried me, and they saw my works for forty years.*

10 *“Therefore, I became provoked at that generation and said, ‘Their hearts are always wandering and they have not known my ways.’*

11 *“As I swore in my anger, ‘They will never enter my rest!’”* [[Ps 95:7b–11](#) (LXX 94:7b–11)]

12 See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has an evil, unbelieving heart that forsakes the living God.

13 But exhort one another each day, as long as it is called *“Today,”* that none of you may become hardened by sin’s deception.

14 For we have become partners with Christ, if in fact we hold our initial confidence firm until the end.

15 As it says, *“Oh, that today you would listen as he speaks! Do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.”*

16 For which ones heard and rebelled? Was it not all who came out of Egypt under Moses’ leadership?

17 And against whom was God provoked for forty years? Was it not those who sinned, whose dead bodies fell in the wilderness?

18 And to whom did he swear they would never enter into his rest, except those who were disobedient?

19 So we see that they could not enter because of unbelief.

“Let us fear”—Unbelief Will Keep You From Entering God’s Rest

4:1 Therefore we must be wary that, while the promise of entering his rest remains open, none of you may seem to have come short of it.

2 For we had good news proclaimed to us just as they did. But the message they heard did them no good, since they did not join in with those who heard it in faith.

3 For we who have believed enter that rest, as he has said, *“As I swore in my anger, ‘They will never enter my rest!’”* And yet God’s works were accomplished from the foundation of the world.

4 For he has spoken somewhere about the seventh day in this way: *“And God rested on the seventh day from all his works,”* [[Gen 2:3](#)]

5 but to repeat the text cited earlier: *“They will never enter my rest!”*

6 Therefore it remains for some to enter it, yet those to whom it was previously proclaimed did not enter because of disobedience.

7 So God again ordains a certain day, *“Today,”* speaking through David after so long a time, as in the words quoted before, *“O, that today you would listen as he speaks! Do not harden your hearts.”*

8 For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken afterward about another day.

9 Consequently a Sabbath rest remains for the people of God.

10 For the one who enters God's rest has also rested from his works, just as God did from his own works.

11 Thus we must make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by following the same pattern of disobedience.

12 For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any double-edged sword, piercing even to the point of dividing soul from spirit, and joints from marrow; it is able to judge the desires and thoughts of the heart.

13 And no creature is hidden from God, but everything is naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must render an account.

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Chronological Notes

1) Dating Hebrews.

A) Internal Evidence.

- (1) The audience had come to faith indirectly through those who were eyewitnesses of Christ's ministry (2:3–4). The exhortation to remember those who first led them and "spoke the word of God" to them implies that some of their leaders had died (13:7). The expectation that "by this time [they] ought to be teachers" (5:12) indicates additional time had passed. The earliest date that could account for these factors would seem to be AD 60 (some 27 years after Christ's resurrection).¹
- (2) According to 10:32–34, the audience had persevered in a time of persecution in the past. They had not yet faced martyrdom (12:4), but a more severe time of trial was coming (11:35–12:3; 12:7; 13:3, 12–13) and some had begun to abandon group meetings (10:25). The situation indicated by the data above suggests a date in the mid-60s AD, just prior to the extreme persecution of the Roman church under Nero. At this point the Roman church had been in existence for about three decades. The expulsion of the Jews by Claudius (Acts 18:2) in AD 49 would account for the earlier time of testing experienced by this community. Also, Nero's rising threat to the church accounts for the fear of death and the warning of commitment indicated in Hebrews.²
- (3) The allusion to "Timothy" in Hebrews 13:23 leads to the assumption that this Timothy is the same person known to us through Paul's letters. Although the exact span of Timothy's life is not known (he joined Paul in ministry in the summer of AD 49; Acts 16:1–5), it could scarcely have outlasted the century. If Hebrews was written within Timothy's lifetime, it could not be dated later than AD 100.³
- (4) It has been argued that an upper limit of the date for Hebrews can be set confidently at AD 70, the year in which the temple of Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans. The basis for this confidence is that the writer of Hebrews refers to cultic⁴ activity in the present tense (e.g., 7:27–28; 8:3–5; 9:7–8, 25; 10:1–3, 8; 13:10–11), presumably reflecting contemporary cultic practice in Jerusalem.⁵ This argument, however, fails to consider four key observations:⁶
 - (a) The focus of the author's comparisons with the sacrificial work of Christ is not the Jewish temple but the Israelite tabernacle.

¹ Lane, 1:lxii.

² Guthrie, 22–23.

³ Merrill C. Tenney, "A New Approach to the Book of Hebrews," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 123:491 (Jul 66): 231.

⁴ The term "cult" stems from the Latin word *cultus*, which carried the meaning of worship or praise-adoration. The *Oxford Dictionary* defines it, among other ways, as "a system of religious worship especially as expressed in ceremonies; devotion to or homage to a person or thing." It is often used in theological and religious scholarship to refer to the sacrificial system and ceremonies that were part of the Mosaic Covenant.

⁵ Lane, 1:lxiii.

⁶ Griffith, 240.

- (b) Present tense indicative in the Greek does not necessarily refer to present time (recall the “historic present” in Greek).
- (c) Skilled rhetoricians frequently use the present tense as a literary device designed to persuade their audiences by emphasizing the timeless nature of their subjects.
- (d) Other authors, including Josephus and Clement of Rome, use the present tense to discuss the tabernacle long after the destruction of the temple.

B) External Evidence.

- (1) An upper limit in the range for a date is established by the fact that Hebrews was already being appropriated without explicit quotation in *1 Clement* (cf. *1 Clem* 17:1 with Heb 11:37; *1 Clem* 36:2–6 with Heb 1:3–5,7; *1 Clem* 36:3 with Heb 1:7). Although some argue that Hebrews and *1 Clement* simply share a common tradition, it is broadly recognized that Clement was, in fact, literarily dependent upon Hebrews. A conventional date of AD 95–96 has been assigned to *1 Clement*, but on insufficient grounds. Internal evidence and external attestation indicate *1 Clement* was composed at some point between AD 80 and 140.⁷

C) Summary.

- (1) Most contemporary scholars date Hebrews somewhere between AD 60 and 100, and are unwilling to try to pinpoint the date more precisely. I personally favor c. 63–64 AD.

⁷ Lane, 1:lxii.