

## Reading Hebrews

### Key Historical Background

- The author of the book is anonymous. There have been many guesses through history, the most common suggestions being Paul or Barnabas or Apollos. But nobody actually knows. The view expressed by Origen in A.D. 254 remains correct: “Who actually wrote this letter, only God knows” (cited in Eusebius’ *Church History* 6.25.14).
- The title “to the Hebrews” reflects an early view that the recipients of the letters were all Jewish Christians, which seems correct given that the author continually argues for the superiority of Jesus over against ancient Israel’s institutions (temples, priests, sacrifices, festivals, etc.). His common and often sophisticated quotations from the Old Testament assume a thorough knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures, which would not be common among recent gentile converts to Christianity.
- The original audience is also unknown. The author knew the recipients well (13:19), and Timothy, Paul’s co-worker, was a mutual friend (13:23). The author was not an eyewitness of Jesus and came to believe in the Gospel through the testimony of the Apostles (see 2:3-4). He passes on greetings “from Italy” (13:24).
- The author and readers have experienced persecution for being Christians, and even imprisonment (10:32-34; 13:3, 23). Because of these hardships, the author calls the audience to persevere (2:1-4; 10:19-39). Some have begun to neglect basic Christians teaching (5:11-14) and had stopped meeting regularly with other Christians (10:25). The author calls the book a “word of exhortation” (13:22)

### Key Themes

- Jesus is the unique self-revelation of the one true God (1:1-4; 2:5-9). The entire letter is aimed at showing Jesus’ uniqueness over against all other past revelations of God in the history of Israel. Jesus is ‘better than’...
  - ...**angels** (chs. 1-2): they were the mediators of the Torah from Sinai (see Deuteronomy 33:2-3), but the revelation of the good news through Jesus is superior to the Torah
  - ...**Moses** (ch. 3): he was the revealer of God’s will and salvation to Israel, but Jesus reveals God’s will and salvation for the whole world
  - ...**the Sabbath** (chs. 4-5): Israel’s rest in the promised land was a symbolic pointer to the ultimate rest found in Messiah Jesus in the new creation
  - ...**priests** (chs. 6-7): they mediated between God and the people of Israel, but Jesus is the ultimate mediator between God and humanity
  - ...**sacrifices** (chs. 8-10): these were inadequate to truly accomplish atonement for the sins of the people, but Jesus’ death was the true sacrifice for the sins of all humanity
- The audience is in danger of turning away from Christ and rejecting his work done on their behalf. The author continually warns them that apostasy from Christ will result in ruin: 2:1-4; 3:7-4:13; 5:11-6:12; 12:1-29
- Faith is crucial in the journey of following Christ, especially when our circumstances seem to contradict our belief in God’s character and goodness: 4:2-3; 6:1; 6:12; 10:22, 38-39; 11:1-40.
- Because of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection for us, we can have confidence in God’s character and promises to save and heal his people: 4:14-16; 6:13-20; 10:19-25.



## Reading James

### Key Historical Background

- The author of the book (“Jacob” in Greek) was the brother of Jesus (see Matthew 13:55), who became a key leader in the first years of the Jesus movement in Jerusalem (Acts 15). He was arrested and executed in A.D. 62.
- The audience of the letter was Jewish Christians living throughout the ancient Greek and Roman world (1:1). He mentions their gathering in a ‘synagogue’ (“assembly” in English, see 2:2), and is constantly referring to the Torah as a common source of authority.
- The audience is poor and has been facing persecution as Christians. Some have fallen away from Christ and the churches have splintered along economic and social lines. He writes as a challenge and encouragement that they remain faithful to follow Christ.

### Key Themes in James

- God is a gracious giver and Creator who will nonetheless hold us accountable for our behavior, especially our treatment of others: 1:5, 17-18; 2:5, 13; 4:5-6; 5:1-3, 9, 15.
- We should expect hardship and difficulty in life (1:2-4) and should see them as opportunities to grow in godly wisdom (1:5), and patient trust in God (1:13, 13-14; 4:7; 5:7-8).
- The primary trial for the original audience is poverty and exploitation by corrupt, wealthy people. The poor are the special focus of God’s care and His people must go above and beyond to care for the poor: 1:9, 27; 2:1-5, 15-16; 4:13-17; 5:1-6.
- All religious belief and practice is worthless if it does not fundamentally change our day-to-day behavior and how we treat other people: 1:19-27; 2:14-16; 3:1-4:12
- Prayer is the proper response to trials and hardship: 1:5-7; 4:2-3; 5:13-18
- True faith in God is demonstrated by our actions motivated by that faith. All so-called “belief” that does not result in changed behavior is hypocrisy: 2:14-16.

