

A Unique Beginning

“We have never in the New Testament read a letter that begins in this manner.”

Download discussion questions: [Hebrews 1:1-4](#)

I encourage you to look at the passage in Hebrews before you read this Blog entry. What do you see in the text yourself? What questions come to your mind? How would you interpret what the writer says? After even a few minutes examining and thinking about the text you will be much better prepared to evaluate the comments in the Blog.

The “letter” to the Hebrews immediately departs from every other New Testament document. All the other twenty-six canonical entries contain either

- an introductory description (“The record of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah”⁵¹), or
- a statement of the context for the opening of the writing (“The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ”⁵²), or
- a standardized greeting of first-century letters (“Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus...to all who are beloved of God in Rome....”⁵³), or
- a generalized greeting naming the writer and a general audience without a specific geographic location (“James, a bond-servant of God...to the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad”⁵⁴).

In contrast

Hebrews does not possess the form of an ancient letter. The writer fails to identify himself or the group to whom he is writing. There is no opening prayer for grace or peace. There is no declaration of thanksgiving or blessing.... We have never in the New Testament read a letter that begins in this manner.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Matthew 1:1; cf Luke 1:1-4; Acts 1:1:1-2; Revelation 1:1-2.

⁵² Mark 1:1; cf John 1:1; 1 John 1:1.

⁵³ Romans 1:1-7, and every one of Paul’s letters to churches (1 Corinthians 1:1-2; 2 Corinthians 1:1; Galatians 1:1-2; Ephesians 1:1; Philippians 1:1; 1 Thessalonians 1:1; 2 Thessalonians 1:1), to individuals (1 Timothy 1:1-2; 2 Timothy 1:1-2; Titus 1:1-4; Philemon 1:1-2), and even to groups he had not met personally Colossians 1:1-2, 2:1); 3 John is also addressed specifically to an individual.

⁵⁴ James 1:1; cf. 1 Peter 1:1; 2 Peter 1:1; 2 John 1:1; Jude 1:1.

⁵⁵ William L. Lane, *Hebrews: A Call to Commitment* (Vancouver, British Columbia: Regent College Publishing, 2004), 15-16.

Does it make a difference?

Is the unique form of Hebrews in New Testament literature significant? Does it matter how the inspired writer presents his arguments and exhortations?

A common view among commentators is that the writer prepared a sermon that was delivered in writing, perhaps because a personal visit was prevented or at least delayed (Hebrews 13:23). The writing is characterized as “a sermon in search of a setting”⁵⁶ or “a masterpiece of early Christian rhetorical homiletics”⁵⁷ or even “a Christian synagogue homily.”⁵⁸ The “oral character” of the written document includes (in the original language) rhythmic sentences, alliteration, rhyme, wordplays, etc.⁵⁹ Like many pastors of today, the writer expended considerable effort to gain and maintain the attention of his audience.

How should the sermon form affect our understanding of Hebrews? What questions might we be asking as we read the text?

- Is it, like most of Paul’s letters, written in the context of close personal relationships?
- Or like Matthew and Mark is it intended to provide wide-ranging historical information to be disseminated generally? Or like Luke and Acts, is it intended for an individual?
- Is it like the gospel according to John with an explicit evangelistic goal for unbelievers (John 20:30-1).
- Did the writer, like James or Peter, address specific problems shared by a general audience?

How would you read a sermon differently from a letter, or a personal appeal differently from general problem-solving advice? Part of the process of interpreting Hebrews will be considering these questions. Hopefully they will help in understanding the writer’s purpose and how that purpose affects the application to the life of a present day reader. A general historical narrative can inform and hopefully motivate to action. A letter can instruct and exhort. But a sermon, perhaps most of all, has a sense of urgency, the necessity for a specific and immediate response. The goal is that the content of the sermon

⁵⁶ William L. Lane, *Hebrews: A Call to Commitment* (Vancouver, British Columbia: Regent College Publishing, 2004), 15.

⁵⁷ Harold W. Attridge, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), 1.

⁵⁸ Gareth Lee Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 15.

⁵⁹ Gareth Lee Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 11.

would both motivate the recipients and guide them into the appropriate reaction. This study hopes to understand how both that motivation and that reaction apply in our twenty-first-century setting.

Viewing Hebrews as a sermon means keeping a sense of the whole. Parsing out individual paragraphs in an inductive study will be a significant part of this blog. But reading (and re-reading) the entire book occasionally will be especially helpful. The writer sent his sermon in written form because his desire for a personal visit was delayed. Understanding the writer’s overall purpose in sending his sermon will help in accurately interpreting and applying the individual passages.

Hebrews is a composition that is meant to be heard as a discourse rather than seen as a text, experienced as a whole in its unfolding rather than studied in separate segments.⁶⁰

A Sermon With No Introduction

If the text of Hebrews does not begin like a first-century letter, neither does it begin like a twenty-first-century sermon. There is none of the common over-extended introductory illustration of modern sermons. There is no cute story or heart-warming anecdote to get the attention of the audience. The writer dives right into dense theology about God and His Son. (In the context of the emphasis on the Son, it would seem reasonable to assume that “God” in this context is God the Father.)

Consider the actions and attributes listed in those first four verses.

God (the Father)	Son
Spoke long ago (v. 1)	
Has spoken recently (v. 2)	Is the agent of God’s most recent revelation (v. 2)
Appointed the Son as heir (v. 2)	Is honored as heir (v. 2)
Made the world (v. 2)	Is the agent of God in creation (v. 2)
Is glorious (v. 3)	Perfectly displays the glory of God (v. 3)
	Perfectly displays the nature of God (v. 3)
His* word has power (v. 3)	Agent of God upholds all things (v. 3)
	Agent of God made purification of sins (v. 3)
He has majesty (v. 3)	Honored to sit at right hand (v. 3)
	Is better than angels (v. 4)
	Has a better name than angels (v. 4)

(*“His” power in verse 3 could be taken grammatically as referring *either* to the power of the Son upholding all things, or the power of God exercised through the Son to uphold all things. The writer uses the same language in Hebrews 11:3 but with the explicit designation of God’s power instead of the

⁶⁰ Luke Timothy Johnson, *Hebrews: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 11.

pronoun “His” (τοὺς αἰῶνας ῥήματι θεοῦ). That usage, along with the immediate context of this passage, leads me to take the verse as saying that the Son is the agent administering God’s power to uphold all things.)

In comparing the relationships and roles of God (the Father) and the Son in this passage, the writer appears to be emphasizing the initiative of God and the agency of the Son. The Son is explicitly designated the agent by or in whom (“in a Son”, ἐν υἱῷ) God spoke and through whom (δι’ οὗ) God made the world (v. 2). In His incarnation the Son is the agent who manifests God’s glory and God’s character. The Son is the agent who “made purification of sins” (v. 3).

Does this view in any way minimize the Son or reduce His status? On the contrary, the Son as God’s agent was an emphatic part of Jesus’ teaching about Himself during the Incarnation. Over forty times in the gospel according to John, Jesus or others make categorical statements that the Father sent the Son. The greatest desire of the Son was to do the will of the Father (John 6:38). That will was His very nourishment, like food itself (John 4:34). He wanted only to do what He had seen the Father do (John 5:19). Fulfilling God’s purpose by being the agent of the Father’s defined the mission of the Messiah.

The evidence that this view in no way reduces the role of the Son is embedded in this very passage. He is “the radiance of [God’s] glory and the exact representation of [God’s] nature” (two unambiguous pronouns in verse 3). Whatever is true of God is true of the Son in their “nature” (ὑποστάσεως, *hupostaseōs*) Their essence (CJB), being (NIV), character (NLT), substance (WYC), subsistence (YLT)⁶¹ is indistinguishable, or in the words of the Nicene Creed, the Son is “very God of very God.” The writer of Hebrews, like the framers of the Creed, wanted to ensure that a difference in roles was not a difference in deity. Exalting Jesus as the agent of God’s will would prepare the recipients for the remainder of the sermon.

Summing Up at the Beginning

The writer did not bother with a friendly greeting or a gentle introduction so he could get right to the point. “*God has spoken.* This initial affirmation is basic to the whole argument of the epistle, as indeed it is basic to Christian faith.”⁶² Apparently the author saw the need his audience had (and we have)

⁶¹ <https://www.biblegateway.com/verse/en/Hebrews%201:3>

⁶² F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), 1.

to be reminded of that central point. In fact, the entire passage, all four verses, comprise a single Greek sentence:

There one independent clause: “God has spoken to us in a son,” with every other clause and phrase dependent on, and in various ways modifying, that basic assertion.⁶³

Understanding the emphasis of this opening sentence will likely be important since it “encapsulates many of the key themes that will develop in the following chapters.”⁶⁴ The Puritan theologian [John Owen](#) also emphasized the centrality of the core statement that “God has spoken to us in a Son.” Owen described that clause as “the main hinge on which all the arguments [of the book of Hebrews] turns.”⁶⁵

When the relevance of Hebrews begins to seem a bit hazy amid discussions of Melchizedek and Israelites’ failures and warnings about remaining faithful, remember the writer’s starting point. “God has spoken to us in a Son.” When circumstances cause faith to waver and trust becomes increasingly difficult, the starting point of Hebrews is indeed a good place to start.

A Foundation for Trust

What better starting point could the writer to the Hebrews have chosen? His purpose (as suggested in a previous post) was to encourage people [facing faith-threatening trials](#). Vague platitudes about “everything will be OK” or nonspecific advice to “just trust God” are insufficient for struggling believers facing ridicule, economic losses, and worse. Those responses to difficulties are as common today as they were in the first century, and they are equally inadequate. Just as the first recipients of Hebrews, we also need a more substantial basis for a trust that stands firm in the faith.

The simple yet profound core of the writer’s message can remind us of that foundation: “God has spoken to us in a Son.” The rest of the book of Hebrews will expand on that core truth and provide even more solid substance for trust that holds fast and does not drift away.

⁶³ Luke Timothy Johnson, *Hebrews: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 63.

⁶⁴ Harold W. Attridge, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), 36.

⁶⁵ John Owen, *Hebrews*, in *The Crossway Classic Commentaries*, series editors Alister McGrath and J. I. Packer (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1998), 13.