

Tuesday Evening Bible Study at Tokyo Baptist Church
The Letter to the Hebrews – General Introduction
Notes from Tuesday July 7, 2009
Last Revised on July 15, 2009

Concerning This Group

For those of you who are new to it, welcome to the Tuesday Evening Bible Study at Tokyo Baptist Church.

For those who are not new, welcome back.

For many years this group has been meeting here at TBC, every Tuesday evening, to study the Bible.

The way we have always done this, is to pick a book of the Bible, one which we have never studied before, and read and discuss it together, from the beginning to the end, verse by verse.

We haven't run out of books yet!

Several weeks ago we finished a study of the Old Testament Book of Exodus, which took us one year.

Tonight we begin a study of the New Testament book of Hebrews, which will take more than 6 months.

Why in the world do we do this?! I mean why study the Bible? And why study the Bible as we have been doing here, book-by-book, verse-by-verse?

Well one should study the Bible, to give a short answer, because it is the Truth, as Pastor Takeshi explained so well in his sermon last week.

The Bible is not merely true. It is the Truth. The highest and the best and the ground for all other truth.

One should study the whole Bible, because it is the whole truth.

Of course no human being has the capacity to study the whole Bible all at once. So it will be necessary to have some method for selecting which parts of the Bible you will study when and how

There are various methods for doing this. The method of this class is not the only one, and it is not the best one for all people.

The principal advantage of our slow and steady approach to Bible study, is that we do not skip things --- particularly hard things. We do our best to read and to understand everything that is there.

Therefore we are protected from one of the mistakes which people commonly have made with the Bible, and that is the mistake of causing the text to say what we want it to say, or closing our ears to things that we do not wish to hear, by picking and skipping over certain texts in the Bible, based on some agenda of our own design.

But there are other mistakes that attend Bible study, and I feel the need to point to some of them now, before we begin this new study, if only to remind myself of what to watch out for.

First I am reminded of the time, following his baptism, when Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan. Do you remember the story?

Then you will also remember that theirs was an exchange grounded in Bible knowledge! Satan used his knowledge of the Bible in an attempt to tempt Jesus to disobey God. If I am reading the story correctly, he actually tried to trick Jesus into abandoning his primary mission here on earth. Of course Satan failed!

From this story we learn (among other things) that Satan has studied the Bible too! And I guess he has covered all of the books, from beginning to end, verse-by-verse.

I guess he knows more about the Bible than we ever will!

But despite all of his great knowledge and intelligence, he is still Satan. He is still headed for destruction.

By contrast the youngest and weakest and simplest and most foolish child who believes in Jesus, has more than enough knowledge to be free from Satan, sin and death and to ensure blessed eternal life!

And such is the Kingdom of Heaven. It is not a place that grants special honor to the intelligent or to those with a lot of Bible knowledge.

Consider the Pharisees and teachers of the law, about whom we read in the New Testament, whose great Bible knowledge and religious zeal brought them special honor in Jesus' day.

These holy men persecuted Jesus during his lifetime, conspired to have him killed and later (after Jesus' resurrection and ascension) they killed Stephen and chased the Christians out of Jerusalem.

Why did they do these terrible things? No doubt Satan had a hand in all of it, but it is also fair to say that these men were blinded to the truth by their great Bible knowledge, personal piety, and religious zeal!

We know this because one of these men later told us so. Originally known as Saul of Tarsus and later as the Apostle Paul, this man was the most enthusiastic persecutor of Christians and

an unwitting servant of Satan, until he had an encounter with the risen Lord Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus. That changed everything for Paul.

That changes everything for us too. It is only as we come to understand who Christ is (the Son of God and God) and who Christ is for us (our Savior and our Lord) that can we come to understand the Bible at all!

Jesus is Lord of the Bible as he is of all else. It is he who speaks to us in and through the Bible.

And he insists that we be doers of the word, and not hearers only.

To the extent that we understand who Christ is and what he says, we will obey him. Otherwise we did not really understand anything! Just as Satan does not really understand anything. Just as the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law did not really understand anything.

It occurs to me that obeying the Bible and understanding it are like two sides of the same coin. They just cannot be separated.

So if this (or any) Bible study is to be a good one, its purpose can only be this: to help us understand and obey Jesus and his teaching. And this can only happen if God shows up! (i.e. with the help of the Holy Spirit)

Please join me in a word of prayer.

Heavenly Father, we hope and pray that what happens here in this Bible study will honor you and help us to understand and obey your son Jesus Christ and all of his teachings. Holy Spirit, please be present here among us, and in each of us, guiding us into this knowledge and understanding, which can never be obtained through human initiative or effort alone, but only as you graciously reveal these things to us in your Word, and only as you enable us to obey them. We ask these things in Jesus' Name. Amen.

Insofar as this is truly our prayer (and may God grant that is!) we are on the way to having a good Bible study. But the minute we proceed in our own initiative and effort, without the leading of God's Spirit, we will get into trouble. May God protect us from that!

Now to our Bibles.

The Bible

The word Bible, as most of you know, simply means book, and the book called the Bible consists of 66 smaller documents which are usually also called books.

The 66 books of the Bible are divided into two major groups, called the Old Testament and the New Testament.

Please have a look at the Table of Contents at the beginning of your Bible.

The Old Testament

The Old Testament contains 39 books, all of which were written long (centuries) before the birth of Christ.

What we Christians call the Old Testament was, and still is, the Bible of the Jews. Their ordering of the books is a little different from ours, but the contents are the same.

Jews everywhere (and some godly gentiles too) had read and studied this material long before the Christian New Testament was written.

Almost every character we read about in the New Testament and everyone who had a hand in writing the New Testament was familiar with the Old Testament.

Therefore to understand the New Testament, we must understand the Old Testament too.

And it is sometimes helps to try to understand the Old Testament from a Jewish perspective.

But this is more difficult than it might seem.

Because it is difficult even for Jews to read the Old Testament from a Jewish perspective.

By which I mean that there seems to be no single Jewish perspective from which to read!

Modern Judaism is characterized by the wide variety of ways in which different groups read and understand their Bible.

But this was already true among the Jews
in Jesus' day, and even long before the time of Jesus.

In the end, so far as I can see, the only view of the Old Testament that makes sense, is the Christian view.

The Christian view must, of course, be the view taken by Jesus himself --- he who was and is the King of the Jews, the Messiah, Son of God, and God! The principal author and subject of both Testaments. The only authority that counts.

And what was Jesus' view of the Old Testament?

Jesus said that the Old Testament was about Himself. It looks forward to Jesus. It is fulfilled in Jesus.

This fact, is the key which unlocks the meaning of the Old Testament.

One can only read and understand the Old Testament in light of the New Testament.

That is all I will say about the Old Testament for the moment. But rest assured we will be in and out of the Old Testament many times before our study of Hebrews is complete.

The New Testament

The New Testament consists of 27 books all of which were written fairly soon after the ascension of Christ, within say 100 years of that blessed event.

All of the authors and many of the original readers of these documents knew for a fact that this event (i.e. the ascension) happened, and they know that this was the culmination of a series of unique events that also really had happened, including the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Their primary "lens" for viewing the cosmos had become, not the Old Testament, but the risen and glorified Lord. Everything else now needed to be understood in the light of the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Whatever else they once believed, whatever their former understanding of the Old Testament, for example, they now needed to see it in the light of Christ.

And this must have been really confusing at first, if you think about it. But with the help of the Holy Spirit, several of these these men came to write the 27 books of the New Testament.

And who was it that read these documents initially?

It was men and women who had this same knowledge and experience and Spirit as the authors did. The community of believers --- the Apostles of Christ and their disciples--- filled with the Holy Spirit.

These people recognized the truth and the authority of these, and only these, 27 books, the New Testament.

As F. F. Bruce pointed out, these 27 documents were not deemed to be inspired because they had been selected by some committee. Rather they were selected because they were inspired and authoritative and the whole church could see that.

It is astonishing how various parts of the early church, separately and without consultation, had quickly come to the same conclusion that these 27 books were holy scripture, and that the

countless other similar documents circulating at that time were not. But that is what happened.

The church, the body of believers in Christ, simply recognized that these books had special authority.

At about this same time, the Christian Church also acknowledged that the books of the Jewish Bible, our Old Testament were inspired and authoritative.

This probably seemed obvious to them, for several reasons, including the fact that Christ, himself, had accepted the authority of the Jewish Bible and understood himself as the purpose and fulfillment of it.

Thus the young Christian church agreed, because it was to them self-evidently true, that Christian Bible consists of the 39 books of the Old Testament plus the 27 books of the New Testament --- 66 books in all. Our Bible. It's been that way for the past 17 centuries, or more.

OK then. We have talked a little bit about what the Bible is and how it is organized.

We have glanced at the Old Testament, so that we will all know what it is when we later need to refer to it.

We have talked, so far very generally, about what the New Testament is and how it came together.

Now we will dig down a little deeper into the New Testament.

The Books of the New Testament

As has been said, the New Testament consists of 27 documents which are generally called "books" --- the 27 books of the New Testament.

But what kind of documents are these "books" anyway? What do they tell us?

Well the first four books of the Bible are what we call the four "gospels." These are titled respectively the Gospel According to Matthew, The Gospel According to Mark, the Gospel According to Luke, and the Gospel According to John.

The word gospel can best be thought of as meaning good news. In the Bible, and by now in the English Language generally, this is understood to be the gospel (or good news) of Jesus Christ---that we are saved by the grace of God through our faith in Christ.

There is only one Gospel --- the Gospel of Jesus Christ ---and not four of them. So we understand that the first four books of the Bible are four different accounts of the one Gospel.

One nevertheless commonly hears people refer to the "four gospels" or to Matthew's or Mark's gospel and etc. There is no harm done by this loose manner of speaking, so long as we are all agreed on what is meant.

It is in the gospels that we receive almost all of the information that we have about the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. And it is there also that we receive most of the information that we have regarding the direct teachings of Jesus.

Very much more could be said about these books, of course, but we press on...

The 5th book in the NT is titled the Acts of the Apostles, and it is often referred to simply as Acts.

Acts may be thought of as the Gospel According to Luke, Part II.

Both of these books (Luke and Acts) were written by the same person, Luke, who was a traveling companion of the Apostle Paul.

Luke's gospel speaks of things that happened from just before the birth of John the Baptist and Jesus until just after the ascension of Christ (i.e. when the risen Lord ascended to heaven).

Acts basically begins where Luke left off, with the Ascension, and proceeds to tell about some of what the Apostles, particularly Peter and Paul, did thereafter. This is a very important book for our understanding of the rest of the NT, particularly our understanding of the letters which we shall discuss presently.

It is convenient, at this point, however, for me to jump quickly to the very end of the Bible.

The last book of the New Testament and therefore of the whole Bible is titled the Revelation to John and often referred to as Revelation for short. Revelation is a strange and wonderful piece of writing, unlike anything else in the New Testament. It is an important book which seems mostly to look forward to the return of Christ and the final judgment. I will not stop here now to talk about it. I mention it here, out of order, only because it is one of the 27 NT books and one that constitutes a literary category of its own.

We now begin to zoom in on our current area of study.

The Epistles

From the total of 27 New Testament books we have thus far spoken of 6: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Acts... the first 5 books of the NT and Revelation, the last one.

This leaves a group of 21 books in the middle

It is common to refer to all 21 of these books as letters, although some of them may not be.

The first 13 of these are all certainly letters and all or most of them are written by the Apostle Paul and/or someone close to him.

You will very often hear these referred to as Paul's Letters or sometimes the Pauline Epistles (Epistles being another word for Letters)

Compared to most other forms of writing, a letter is something very real and personal. It helps us to see what people are really thinking and doing and saying to one another.

Letters between Christians help us to understand how well they understood and obeyed the gospel and what sort of problems they had.

As Paul pastors the Christians of his own era through these letters, he also pastors us, and teaches us how to pastor others.

Clearly the Apostle Paul had a big impact on the Church for all time through these letters, through his ministry as recorded in Acts, and through his impact on the writing of Luke and other NT authors.

The Pauline Epistles are, by the way, arranged in order of their length, starting with Paul's very large letter to the Romans and ending with the very small letter of Paul addressed to a man named Philemon.

The next letter after Philemon is...what? (Look in your Bible)

It is The Letter to the Hebrews which we will be studying in this class for many weeks to come.

I won't stop and say too much about Hebrews at this moment, other than to point out that Hebrews is a pretty long document and it comes after the small letter of Paul to the Philemon.

From this you might infer, if you are very clever, that people no longer think that The Letter to the Hebrews was written by Paul.

If they thought so they would have put Hebrews between Romans and 1 Corinthians.

It may interest you to know that there are some very old Bibles that do put it there, reflecting the belief, once very common in the early church, that Paul wrote Hebrews. But hardly anybody has believed that since the time of the Reformation.

Before coming back to Hebrews (where we will be for the next 6 months) let me quickly finish discussing the remaining seven epistles. These are, in order, James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2, and 3 John, and Jude.

As will not surprise you, these are grouped and titled according to someone's idea of authorship. For some of these letters there have been continuing discussions and disagreements down through the years about authorship. We will not digress on that here.

All of these seven documents, except for 1 John, are fairly standard letters, about which we could say the same sorts of things we said above about Paul's letters. These are no less important.

1 John is a wonderful document which neither begins nor ends as a letter and really doesn't read like one. Perhaps it is a sermon to be read out in various churches or, perhaps, just a very unusual letter. I mention this because something similar may be said about Hebrews.

And now we come to the feature presentation: The Letter to the Hebrews.

Before I proceed, does anyone have any questions or comments regarding the overview I just gave?

The Letter to the Hebrews

The first thing we must do is discuss the title of this document, which may be misleading.

Most of us are in the habit of referring to this document simply as Hebrews, which is a convenient shorthand for the longer title appearing in most of our Bibles: The Letter to the Hebrews. (Does anyone have a different title in their Bible?)

This by the way is an even shorter version of the titles found on some of the manuscripts on which our modern translations are based.

Some of those manuscripts have titles like The Letter of Paul to the Hebrews, and so forth

The thing to understand is that the sacred document, itself, has no title at all.

Various titles were attached by various scribes and translators for the convenience of those who read and study the Bible.

I mean, let's face it, they had to call it something!

In the same way, other things have been placed alongside the sacred text over the years: things like chapter and verse numbers and chapter and section heading.

This is kind of the same as when a modern publisher attaches page numbers.

All of these things are useful but none of them are part of the Bible.

We need to be careful not to let such things control our interpretation of the text.

So then for our immediate purposes we must remember that the title, The Letter to the Hebrews, is not an inspired utterance but a human classification.

We are free to question it, just as the church questioned the long held belief of Pauline authorship and eventually set it aside.

Genre

Nevertheless the current title expresses somebody's opinion that this document is a letter and that it is addressed to a certain group of people described as Hebrews.

Perhaps their opinion is correct?

Let's examine that possibility

As we shall see, the ending of Hebrews is more letter-like than that of 1 John.

But like 1 John, Hebrews does not begin like an ordinary letter.

Hebrews just begins... more like a sermon and it refers to itself (internally) as a Word of Exhortation.

Hence it would be reasonable to conclude that Hebrews is not a letter, but some kind of a sermon.

It may not matter very much, in and of itself, whether Hebrews is a letter or a sermon. But our study of Hebrews will be greatly affected by the lack of information normally found in a proper letter.

Specifically we are not told who wrote Hebrews, who it was written for or to, why it was written, or on what occasion.

The lack of such information, in turn, makes it difficult to determine precisely when Hebrews was written.

I mean we can know that it was written late in the 1st century or early in the 2nd century, and we can maybe refine that a bit, albeit speculatively, but we can't really pin it down.

This, in turn, makes it difficult to connect the circumstances of those who wrote and initially read the document with particular events of world history in the First and Second Centuries, about which we know much.

For example, and significantly for the subject matter of this document, we cannot even know if this letter was written before or after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD.

Almost everything we think we know about such external circumstances will need to be inferred from what is internal to the text, which is just the opposite of what usually happens when we read a proper letter.

Anyway, regardless of what this document is, whether a letter or something else, our exegesis will need to be different than what we do when we exegete a letter.

And in passing let me note that our exegesis will need to be different than what we do when we exegete a sermon spoken by Peter or Paul or someone else in the NT or by Moses or some other prophet in the old, because here the speech is not closely connected to an external narrative that helps to explain it.

To a much greater extent than we are used to when reading the Bible, we will need to rely on the text of the oration itself, rather than reading the text in light of what we know or think we know about the context within which it was delivered

We will often find ourselves swimming in the text far from any worldly shore with the help only of the Holy Spirit and of all the other words spoken in the Bible!

What a great place to be! And completely safe! The only really unsafe place to be when reading the Bible is away from the Holy Spirit.

Intended Audience

Whoever attached the current title to this document, in addition to calling it a letter, also seemed to think that it was written for/to a group of people called Hebrews.

Why did he think so and what did he mean by that? And was he right?

I can tell you one thing: the word Hebrew(s) appears nowhere in the text of the New Testament book of Hebrews!

For that matter, the word Hebrew(s) appears only three times in the entire new Testament to describe a particular person or group of people. (All of the other occurrences are descriptions of the Hebrew Language.)

In Acts 6:1 as some of you will recall, the word, Hebrews, is used to describe the Jewish Christians who did not speak Greek. Steven and some others were made deacons to sort out a dispute involving care for the widows of those two groups, there called Hebrews and Hellenists.

The other two occurrences of the word Hebrew(s) in the New Testament are found in 2 Corinthians 11:22 and Philippians 3:5 both on the lips of the Apostle Paul and in both places he is pointing out that if anyone is a Hebrew, then Paul himself is preeminently such a one --- a "Hebrew" among "Hebrews" he says.

In those three places the term seems to be describing Christians who are (also) --- not just Jews --- but real Jews --- linguistically and culturally authentic Jews.

Now it may have been (and I think probably was) in the mind of whomever affixed the title, that this document was written for/to Christians who happened also to have been Hebrews in the sense that Luke and Paul meant in the three passages just cited.

Maybe this was just because of the subject matter of this text, which may have seemed to some early scribe as being intended primarily for such an audience.

But we must not let our reading of the text be biased by the opinions of this scribe, because I think the case that this document was written for a particular, especially Jewish, component of the early Church is far from certain

We move now to the text of the document itself. Before we do, does anyone have any questions about the things we have covered so far?

Language

I read this text in English. You read it in English or Japanese or possibly both (Question: Is anyone in this class reading the Bible in a translation other than English or Japanese?)

One thing is absolutely certain about the New Testament book of Hebrews: It was not written in English, or in Japanese, or inyour language.

What we are reading are translations into our language from ancient manuscripts, written in Greek.

Of course the original document is no longer before us. None of the original autographs of any of the books of the Bible still remain.

Our translations are based on a fairly large number of ancient Greek manuscripts, essentially multiple copies of the original text, most of which correspond well with each other.

We can be reasonably confident, therefore, that our study goes forward based on a text that closely follows the inspired original.

A very long time ago, there were some who speculated that maybe Hebrews was originally written in Hebrew (possibly by Paul some thought) and subsequently translated into Greek (possibly by Luke).

However this is one of those theories, like Pauline authorship itself, which has been firmly set aside.

For centuries all of the best and most orthodox scholars have agreed that the original language of this document was Greek and not Hebrew or some other language.

Final Introductory Remarks

It is interesting that this document was once thought to have been written for/to a group of people called Hebrews, when, as we have seen, it was written not in Hebrew or Aramaic but in Greek.

Furthermore the author of Hebrews quotes extensively from the Old Testament, as we shall see, but almost exclusively from the Greek (LXX) version of the Old Testament and not from a Hebrew or other version.

Finally the scholars tell us that this document was written in Greek by somebody familiar with Greek rhetorical forms and philosophical categories --- i.e. Greek ways of writing and thinking---albeit someone also familiar with Jewish exegetical techniques ---i.e. Jewish ways of interpreting the Old Testament.

So it seems more than possible to me that this document was written by, for, and to a diverse group of Christians, certainly including Greek speaking Jews and probably also including gentile Christians familiar with the Jewish Bible (our Old Testament).

In short I am inclined to view this document as having been written for/to the whole Christian Church, and in the larger sense this must certainly be true, regardless of the particular intent of the original author, which is hidden from us in any case.

I find it interesting and somehow important that this document was well accepted by all parts of the Church as being inspired and authoritative despite how little has ever been known about its provenance.

We tend to think of the NT Canon in terms of apostolic authorship. At least that is how I have often taught on this subject. Jesus chose the Apostles, they received the Holy Spirit, they proclaimed the gospel boldly and with great effect, and at some point they and those close to them started writing the documents which eventually came to comprise our New Testament

That explanation is essentially correct, and we can do things to smooth it out, but the fact is there are books in the NT that have uncertain authorship, and chief among these is Hebrews. Ancient and modern commentators, liberal and orthodox commentators, everyone agrees. We just don't know who wrote it.

So how can we say that it is canonical? Maybe it got into the canon in the days when people were willing to believe that Paul wrote it. Later they changed their mind and just left Hebrews in there. Is that what is going on?

I have been really worried about this. But now I am not. I have recently come to understand that the NT consists of those documents which the Apostolic church recognized to be authoritative, and such recognition was not necessarily or perhaps even primarily determined by how these document were written or by whom but, rather, by whether these documents, once written, were self-evidently true, inspired, and authoritative.

This is certainly true of Hebrews. From the earliest time until the time of the Reformation and beyond, the consensus has been broad and deep and rather emphatic that the NT book of Hebrews is an inspired and authoritative work, DESPITE the fact that nobody has ever been sure how it was written or by whom. The text itself is enough authority to win for it the universal approbation of the Church.

The degree of confidence which the Church has in this text is all the more evident when you realize how many different Apostles and saints have been put forward as possible authors: Paul, Luke, Barnabas, and Apollos to name a few. They can't all have written it, of course, but any of them might have, without compromising his witness.

So there you have it. We are ready to study a block of text, transmitted and then translated out of the original Greek. The church has always know and loved it and regarded it as the inspired word of God, even though the church has never known what kind of document it is (i.e. letter, sermon, or something else) who it was written for or to, how it was written, by whom, where, where, or on what occasion.

This can only mean that, independent of all those considerations, the document is teaching something that God wants us to learn. It is the breath of God. It has, to quote J.B. Philips, "the Ring of Truth."

And it must be very, very important!

Let's pray

Dear God, we dedicate ourselves and this study to you. May yours be the only voice we hear speaking to us through this inspired text. Please forgive and protect us from mistakes in our understanding and draw us into a better understanding of this text than we have ever had before. When we make mistakes, Lord, please cause us to forget them quickly. When you reveal your truth to us, help us to grasp it and remember it forever, and to be changed by it. In Jesus Name we pray, Amen.