

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver Street
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001
www.fcfonline.org

GOD HAS SPOKEN

Hebrews 1:1-2a

By

Steven J. Cole

November 16, 2003

© Steven J. Cole, 2003

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture
Quotations are from the New American
Standard Bible, Updated Edition
© The Lockman Foundation

November 16, 2003
Hebrews Lesson 1

God Has Spoken Hebrews 1:1-2a

All of the world's religions and philosophies attempt to answer the fundamental questions of our frail and short human lives: Is there a God? Can we know Him? If so, how? How can we make sense of the trials of this life and the certainty of death? Does it really matter what you believe, as long as you're sincere?

The Letter to the Hebrews answers all of these basic questions. But I will warn you, its answers cut cross-grain to the popular views of our day. We live in a time when being tolerant and non-judgmental are primary virtues. Truth is viewed as subjective and personal, not absolute and universal. Thus, if Buddhism makes sense to you and gives you fulfillment, who am I to say that you are wrong? If you believe in Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, or any other of the world's religions (or any combination of them), as long as you're not hurting others, it would be judgmental of me to say that you are believing a lie. That is the prevailing mindset of our tolerant culture. The only person they will not tolerate is someone who insists that his view is the *only* true view.

The Letter to the Hebrews cuts across this modern mindset by affirming that God is, that He has spoken, and that His Son, who is the epitome of His revelation, is supreme over all. He demands total allegiance. He is not tolerant of any rivals. To turn away from Him to any other system or way of approaching God is to turn toward certain judgment. He alone will help us make sense of our trials. Thus we must consider Him more fully, submit to Him at all times, and trust Him in all the trials of life.

This is the theme, then, of Hebrews, that the absolute supremacy of Jesus Christ should motivate us to enduring faith in the face of trials. While almost all scholars agree with that theme, there are many divergent opinions on some of the background matters of this letter.

As you probably know, there is a debate over who wrote Hebrews. Many say that the apostle Paul wrote it (perhaps A. W.

Pink is the most convincing on this position). The earliest statement on the author is from Clement of Alexandria (c.155-c.220), who said that Paul wrote it in Hebrew and that Luke translated it into Greek (quoted in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 6.14.2, A.D. 325). But the language and thought forms are not like those of Paul. And, the statement in 2:3-4 seems to indicate that the author, like his readers, was a second-generation Christian who had believed the testimony of the apostles. But Paul heard the gospel directly from the risen Lord Jesus Christ (Gal. 1:12-17).

If Paul did not write Hebrews, who did? Other suggestions have included Barnabas (Tertullian, c. 225, is the earliest proponent), Apollos (Luther's view), and Priscilla (Harnack). All of the views have problems, and so we probably should conclude, with the early church father, Origen (died c. 254), that "God only knows the truth" about who wrote Hebrews.

Perhaps because of the lack of agreement about authorship, there is also a divergence of opinion about the date Hebrews was written and the place to which it was written. Clement of Rome seems to quote it in about A.D. 96. Most scholars agree that it had to be written before the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in A.D. 70. If this cataclysmic event had happened, it would have contributed to the author's argument about the supremacy of Christianity over Judaism, but there is no mention of this.

The recipients of the letter were suffering persecution, but not yet to the point of martyrdom (10:32-34; 12:4). This last fact seems to rule out the church in Jerusalem as the recipients of the letter, since both Stephen and James had been martyred there early on. At the conclusion of the letter (13:24), the author sends greetings from "those from Italy." This could mean those living in Italy, where the writer is also living, or those from Italy who are living away and sending their greetings back home. If the latter is the case, the letter was probably written to Christians in Rome just before the outbreak of the persecution under Nero in A.D. 64. But we must remain tentative in these matters.

To whom was Hebrews written? The title of the book "goes back to the last quarter of the second century, if not earlier" (F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* [Eerdmans], p. xxiii), but was not a part of the original manuscript. Most scholars

agree that it was written to a group of second-generation Jewish believers in Jesus Christ, who were tempted because of persecution to go back to Judaism. It is filled with Old Testament quotes and allusions, and presupposes a detailed knowledge of the Jewish sacrificial system.

These people had begun well, submitting joyfully to trials and persecution (10:32-34). But as the trials continued, some of them were stalled in their Christian growth. They were thinking back to the good old days, when they could go through the motions of their Jewish religion without much interference. (Judaism was a tolerated religion in the Roman Empire, but Christianity was not.) Their foreboding about the looming persecution tempted them to abandon their faith in Christ and go back to Judaism. They were tempted to opt for temporary relief, but at the expense of abandoning the supremacy and uniqueness of Jesus Christ.

So the author writes, very strongly at times, to warn the readers against this danger. He refers to his letter as “a word of exhortation” (13:22). It contains several strong warning sections (2:1-3; 3:12-19; 6:4-8; 10:26-31; 12:25-29). We all are prone to drift into our former ways of life, especially when it is difficult and costly to follow Jesus. Also, second generation believers are often more prone to fall into an outward, go-through-the-motions kind of religion, as opposed to a vital, personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Hebrews exposes the inadequacy of that kind of formal religion and shows that we must have an enduring faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Hebrews is the only New Testament document that expressly calls Jesus a priest, although it is implied in others (Bruce, p. lii). It shows how Jesus fulfilled the entire Old Testament ceremonial system of the temple and sacrifices. Perhaps the Book of Hebrews is the closest thing we have to an inspired expansion of what Jesus must have told the two men on the Emmaus Road: “Then beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures” (Luke 24:27).

Gleason Archer observes, “The Church must ever revert to this sublime Epistle in order to bring the two Testaments into focus with each other. More than any other single book, *Hebrews* serves to demonstrate the underlying unity of the sixty-six books of

the Bible as proceeding ultimately from one and the same divine author, the blessed Holy Spirit" (*The Epistle to the Hebrews* [Baker], p. 4). The author of Hebrews has an unusual way of citing Old Testament scriptures, in that he almost always neglects the human author and instead ascribes the quotes to God (Leon Morris, *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. by Frank Gaebelein [Zondervan], 12:7). (See, for example, 1:5, 6, 7, 13; 2:11-12; 10:5 [ascribed to Christ]; 3:7; 10:15 [ascribed to the Holy Spirit].) As Leon Morris (*ibid.*) puts it, "The effect is to emphasize the divine authorship of the whole OT. For the author, what Scripture says, God says."

Again, the overall theme is that because Jesus Christ is supreme over all, Christians must endure their current trials by faith. A brief outline of the contents is:

1. Jesus Christ is superior to all in His person (1-4).
 - A. Jesus Christ is superior to the prophets (1:1-3).
 - B. Jesus Christ is superior to the angels (1:4-2:18).
 - C. Jesus Christ is superior to Moses (3:1-19).
 - D. Jesus Christ is superior to Joshua (4:1-16).
2. Jesus Christ is superior to all in His priesthood (5-10:18).
 - A. Jesus Christ is superior to Aaron and his priesthood (5:1-7:28).
 - B. Jesus Christ is superior to the Old Covenant (8:1-10:18).
 - 1) Jesus Christ offers better promises (8:1-13).
 - 2) Jesus Christ offers a better tabernacle (9:1-14).
 - 3) Jesus Christ offers a better sacrifice (9:15-10:18).
3. Christ's superiority should stimulate us to enduring faith in the face of trials (10:19-13).
 - A. Enduring faith obeys God when under trials (10:19-39).
 - B. Enduring faith is illustrated throughout the Scriptures (11:1-40).
 - C. Enduring faith looks unto Jesus and submits to His discipline (12:1-13).
 - D. Enduring faith expresses itself in practical holiness with God's people (12:14-13:25).

With that as an overview and general introduction, let's examine in more detail Hebrews 1:1-2a, which shows...

God has spoken to us in His Word, with His Son being the supreme and final revelation.

“God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, ...” The text falls into two sections, God’s speaking in the past, and God’s speaking in the present.

1. In the past, God spoke to the fathers in the prophets.

The author begins without any formal greetings or comments with two key assumptions: *God is*, and *God has spoken*.

A. God is.

Hebrews 1:1 reminds us of Genesis 1:1, “In the beginning, God ...” It doesn’t mess around with speculation or philosophizing. It doesn’t compile arguments to persuade the skeptic that God exists. It starts with the fact of God. For the author of Hebrews, God is central. He uses the word 68 times, an average of about once every 73 words throughout the book. “Few NT books speak of God so often” (Morris, 12:12).

Somebody may say, “But I’m an agnostic; I’m not sure whether or not God exists.” Or, “I’m an atheist; I don’t believe in God.” To all such persons, the Bible says, “Your doubts or your beliefs do not affect the fact that God is.” The Bible thrusts God in your face as a prime reality. You ignore Him to your own peril and final destruction. Unbelief is not a matter of rationalism. It is a matter of sin.

B. God has spoken.

He is not silent! He has chosen to reveal Himself to the human race. In Romans 1:18-23, Paul shows how God reveals Himself generally through His creation. People should be able to look at the amazing complexity and design of creation and conclude that there is an awesome Creator. But because people love their sin, they suppress the truth that God reveals through His creation.

The author of Hebrews, writing to Jews who accepted God as the Creator, focuses rather on God’s special revelation through the written Word of God. God spoke to the fathers (their Jewish ancestors) in the prophets, a term for all of the Old Testament writers who received and recorded God’s message to His people. Thus the author is affirming here what he repeats throughout the book, that the Old Testament was inspired completely by God.

The inspiration of Scripture does not mean that God dictated the very words, although on occasion He did that (*e.g.* the Ten Commandments). Rather, using the different personalities and styles of the various authors, God superintended the process so that the authors recorded without error God's message to us in the words of the original autographs. The apostle Peter put it, "no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (2 Pet. 1:21). Charles Hodge defined inspiration as "an influence of the Holy Spirit on the minds of certain select men, which rendered them the organs of God for the infallible communication of his mind and will. They were in such a sense the organs of God, that what they said God said" (*Systematic Theology* [Eerdmans], 1:154).

It is important to understand that if God had not chosen to reveal Himself, no one could know Him. Men can speculate and philosophize about what they think God is like, but even the most brilliant discourses on the subject would be mere guesses. Furthermore, the Bible is clear that because of the fall, Satan, "the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (2 Cor. 4:4). The "natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised" (1 Cor. 2:14).

There is a common misconception among evangelicals that anyone can choose at any time to understand the gospel and believe in Jesus Christ. Our job is to explain the gospel, but then people are free to decide whether to believe it or not. But this view seriously underestimates the effects of the fall and it goes directly against the very words of Jesus. He said, "I praise You, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and have revealed them to infants. Yes, Father, for this way was well-pleasing in Your sight. All things have been handed over to Me by My Father, and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, and who the Father is except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him" (Luke 10:21-22).

Those words do not make sense if Jesus wills to reveal the Father to everyone. Clearly, the primary factor in whether or not a

person knows God lies with Jesus' choice of that person, not with the person's choice of Jesus. To say anything different denies the plain statement of our Lord and exalts proud, fallen man. The Bible humbles the pride of man by showing that if God had not chosen to reveal Himself to you through His Word, you would be in complete spiritual darkness. You could not know Him at all!

The author of Hebrews directly says two more things about God's specific revelation in the Old Testament prophets, plus he implies a third fact. First, God spoke "in many portions." This refers to the 39 different books of the Old Testament: the law of Moses, the different prophets, and the writings, which included the poetic and historical books.

Second, God spoke "in many ways." Sometimes He revealed Himself through angels. He spoke to Moses through the burning bush, and later directly on the mountain. He revealed Himself to the Israelites through fire, thunder, earthquake, and clouds. He also revealed Himself through the miracles that He did through Moses. He spoke to Isaiah in the vision of His glory and to Ezekiel in the vision of the wheels and creatures. He sometimes used dreams, object lessons, natural events and other means. All of these things are recorded in His written Word for our instruction.

Third, it is implied here that God's revelation in the Old Testament was progressive. All of it was true, but it was incomplete, or else there would have been no need for His final and complete revelation in His Son. The Old Testament was like a developing mosaic, with each part adding more until the totality pointed clearly to Jesus Christ. The picture continued to grow more clear, but it was not complete until the New Testament revealed Jesus Christ to us. Thus to understand the Old Testament correctly, we must view it through the completed revelation of the New Testament. God spoke in the past through His written Word.

2. In the present, God has spoken supremely and finally in His Son.

As the divine voice from heaven boomed on the Mount of Transfiguration, "This is My Son, My Chosen One; listen to Him!" (Luke 9:35). The Greek phrase, "in these last days," is found in the Septuagint, where it often refers to the day of Messiah. F. F. Bruce

(p. 3) says, "His word was not completely uttered until Christ came; but when Christ came, the word spoken in Him was indeed God's final word.... The story of divine revelation is a story of progression up to Christ, but there is no progression beyond Him."

So in Christ there is both continuity and contrast. The continuity is that God spoke through the prophets and God spoke through Christ. But the contrast is, the prophets were many and fragmentary; Christ was one and complete. The prophets were all sinners; Jesus alone was perfectly holy. The prophets were preparatory; Jesus is the final fulfillment.

There is also a contrast of being. The prophets were mere men, but Jesus was God's Son. In the Greek, there is no word "His" and no definite article before "Son." The construction emphasizes the Son's essential nature (Morris, *ibid.*). Jesus is the Son of God in two aspects: eternally, He is the Son, one with the Father, the second person of the Trinity. Temporally, He is God's Son incarnate, born of the virgin Mary, taking on our human nature so that He could bear our sins (Luke 1:38). It is in this second aspect that He is referred to here. Jesus, who is eternal God in human flesh, supremely and finally reveals God to us.

A. W. Pink (*An Exposition of Hebrews* [electronic ed.] Ephesians Four Group: Escondido, CA, p. 27) explains the use of Son here this way: "Were a friend to tell you that he had visited a certain church, and that the preacher 'spoke in Latin,' you would have no difficulty in understanding what he meant: 'spoke in Latin' would intimate that that particular language marked his utterance. Such is the thought here. 'In Son' has reference to that which characterised God's revelation. The thought of the contrast is that God, who of old had spoken prophetwise, now speaks sonwise."

Why did the author mention Jesus' Sonship without mentioning Him by name (he doesn't use Jesus' name until 2:9)? Perhaps these Jewish believers, under pressure, were tempted to deny the Trinity and go back to the strong Jewish unitarianism. He will go on immediately to show that the Son is the eternal Creator and that the Old Testament affirms Him to be God (1:2, 8). To go back to their old way of thinking would be to turn their backs on God's supreme, complete and final revelation of Himself in His Son. To deny the Trinity is to deny the very being of God!

Conclusion

I conclude with three applications: *First, we should interpret the Bible Christologically.* That is to say, we must understand the Old Testament to be looking forward to fulfillment in Jesus Christ. The New Testament shows us how He is the complete and final revelation of God to us. Christ fulfills the Old Testament types. He is God's final and sufficient sacrifice for our sins. The Old Testament law is our tutor to bring us to Christ (Gal. 3:24). Many Old Testament prophecies point ahead to Him. All of this implies that if you do not read and study the Old Testament, you will miss much that God is saying to you.

Second, we should not look for or expect any new revelation from God after the completion of the New Testament. Anyone who claims to have further revelation is a false prophet. This includes everyone from Mohammed and the Koran to Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon to Mary Baker Eddy and her teachings. God has spoken definitively and finally in the Old and New Testaments which point to Jesus Christ, His Son.

Finally, if we are not using the Bible to come to know Jesus Christ in a deeper, more personal way, we are not using it correctly. That is not to say that we should not study theology, Bible history, prophecy, and many other biblically related subjects. But it is to say that our study of all these areas should lead us to know Christ better and to submit more completely to Him. As the title of a book by W. H. Griffith Thomas put it, *Christianity is Christ* [Moody Press]. After beginning by pointing out that no other world religion rests on the person of its founder, he states (p. 6), "Christianity is nothing less and can be nothing more than relationship to Christ."

And so the most crucial question in life for every person is the one Jesus asked the disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" (Matt. 16:15). The Book of Hebrews will help us to grow in our understanding of that question as we consider Jesus (3:1). If you've never heard God speak, bow before Him and ask Him to reveal Himself to you through His Son, as revealed in His written Word.

Discussion Questions

1. Why is the correct identity of the person of Jesus Christ the most important question in life? How would you answer a critic who said that the gospels are fabrications about Jesus?
2. Why is philosophy useless when it comes to knowing God?
3. Does God give any extra-biblical revelation in our day? How can we evaluate such claims ("I have a word from God," etc.)?
4. What pressures tempt you to abandon Christ and go back to the world? How (practically) can knowing Him more fully strengthen us to stand firm in the face of trials?

Copyright, Steven J. Cole, 2003, All Rights Reserved.