

STRAIGHT TO
THE HEART OF

Hebrews and James

60 BITE-SIZED INSIGHTS

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Part Two

A Better Glimpse of God

(Hebrews 1–7)

Twenty Years Later (1:1)

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways...

(Hebrews 1:1)

Twenty years is a long time. A lot of things took place between James writing the last verse of his letter in around 48 AD and another Jewish leader writing the first verse of Hebrews in around 68 AD. Nevertheless, the main thing that ought to strike us as we begin the second of the two New Testament letters written primarily to Jewish Christians is not their differences but their similarities. These two letters belong next to one another in the New Testament. They are similar letters, written by similar people and with a very similar message.

Like James, Hebrews emphasizes that the Christian faith is the true fulfilment of Old Testament Judaism. The ancient Jewish faith, which became corrupted by the high priests and the rabbis, has now been restored through the arrival of the long-awaited Messiah. It has been more than restored, because Jesus fulfilled all of the Old Testament prophecies which predicted that God would establish a new and better covenant with his People. The opening words of this second letter emphasize that *“In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.”* Christianity calls the world back to the religion of Abraham, but it also upgrades it, massively. The Messiah has moved the story on. Something far better has come.

Like James, Hebrews takes the form of a sermon rather than a letter. James begins like a letter but then quickly turns

into a series of sermon highlights from the church meetings in Jerusalem. Hebrews ends like a letter, with a few personal greetings and a proper sign-off, but it does not begin like a letter. It dives straight into the meat of the message and is far more like a long and in-depth sermon than any of the other New Testament letters. We do not know whether it consists of highlights taken from several different messages, like James, or whether it was originally one long sermon. All we know is that it reads more like the spoken than the written word, with all the vivid storytelling and threats that James taught us to expect from a first-century Christian preacher.

Like James, Hebrews was written in the midst of persecution. We discover that some Jewish Christians have had their property confiscated as a result of their faith in Jesus. Others have been thrown into prison. Some have even been killed. Since the letter tells us that Timothy has also been imprisoned and Paul says nothing about this in his final letter to Timothy, we can tell that it was written after early 67 AD.¹ We can also tell that the letter was written before the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD because the writer would surely have used that seismic event to prove his message that Temple Judaism was now obsolete and superseded. Since the writer uses the present tense when talking about worship in the Temple, this second letter must have been written between early 67 AD and the middle of 70 AD, with a date of around 68 AD most likely.²

This was therefore the period when Jewish Christians were on the receiving end of savage persecution on two separate fronts. The Jewish leaders had illegally executed James in 62 AD. When this led to open revolt against Roman rule in 66 AD, their hostility towards the Christians grew even more savage. At the same time, the Emperor Nero launched his own wave of persecution against the Christians, accusing them of having

¹ Hebrews 10:32–34; 13:7, 23.

² We find present tenses in 5:1–3, 7:23, 7:27, 8:3–5, 9:6–9, 9:13, 9:25, 10:1, 10:3–4, 10:8, 10:11 and 13:10–11.

started the Great Fire of Rome in 64 AD. During the six years between the fire and the sack of Jerusalem in 70 AD, scores of influential Christians were brutally executed. Peter was crucified. Paul was beheaded. The survivors were terrified but any Jewish Christian had an easy get-out plan. Unlike the Gentile believers, they could secure legal protection by renouncing Jesus as their Messiah and returning to the Jewish synagogues. Old Testament Judaism was officially tolerated by the Roman emperors, so it offered them relative safety. For many Jewish Christians, the lure was irresistibly tempting.

That's why James and Hebrews, for all their similarities, also have some differences too. The writer of Hebrews states much more strongly that first-century Judaism is not a form of Christianity. He warns his readers severely that if they return to the synagogues, they are not choosing safety at all. They are saving their skins at the expense of forfeiting their souls. Whereas James focuses on the practical outworking of the Gospel in order to show Jewish believers that Jesus offers us *a better way of living*, Hebrews focuses on the theological detail of the Gospel in order to teach us that Jesus is our sole source of salvation. He has given us *a better glimpse of God* (chapters 1-7), *a better way to know God* (chapters 8-10) and *better reasons to believe* (chapters 11-13). Old Testament Judaism and Christianity are similar and yet they are also fundamentally different. In Jesus, something far better has come.³

This background may also explain why the writer of Hebrews is unknown. Although it is possible that the first few lines of the letter have been lost, it is more likely that the writer failed to state his name because the times were too dangerous. Jerusalem was in revolt against Roman rule, so any letter between the two cities was politically explosive on both sides.⁴ Tertullian suggests that the author was Barnabas. Until

³ The words *better*, *greater* and *superior* occur 22 times in Hebrews.

⁴ A group of Christians *from* Italy (not *in* Italy) interject their greetings in 13:24. Such an authoritative letter sent to Rome about the Jewish religion was most

the Reformation, most people assumed that it was Paul (which is why Hebrews comes before James in the New Testament even though it was written later), but the style and language is so unlike Paul's that few people believe that now. Some suggest that it was written by Priscilla, although a Greek masculine participle in 11:32 makes such a theory unlikely. Others argue for Apollos. All we can say for certain is that it was written by a Jew with a brilliant command of Greek. It is the only truly anonymous letter in the New Testament.⁵

Knowing who wrote Hebrews is not essential. Knowing what Hebrews teaches is far more important. The Jewish Christians who received the letter evidently knew who wrote it and they trusted his comprehensive explanation of what the Messiah had achieved for God's People.⁶ They believed that they needed this letter every bit as much as they needed the gospels to understand the significance of the ministry of Jesus.

They believed that this letter would make them strong to persevere in their faith through the most savage of storms. They believed the writer's message that the arrival of Jesus has changed everything. Something far better has come.

likely to have originated in Jerusalem.

⁵ Tertullian *On Modesty* (20). The Early Church leader Origen was forced to conclude that "*who wrote the epistle, only God knows*" (quoted by Eusebius in *Church History*, 6.25.11–14).

⁶ They knew who he was because he asks them to pray for him in 13:18. If he deliberately omitted to sign the letter, he must have given proof of his authorship to the messenger who delivered it.

Better Than Angels (1:1–14)

He became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.

(Hebrews 1:4)

Henry Ford boasted that Americans loved his cars because he knew what they wanted better than they did: *“If I had asked people what they wanted, they would have said faster horses.”* Most first-century Jews wanted God to help them but only if he was willing to do it their way. When God sent Jesus as their Messiah, they were offended by his motor-car way of thinking. They rejected Jesus and told God they were happy with their horses.

That’s why the writer of Hebrews begins his letter with fourteen verses that celebrate how different Jesus is from the very best that Israel’s past has to offer. Hebrews has been nicknamed “the fifth gospel” because it puts the spotlight on Jesus every bit as much as do Matthew, Mark, Luke or John. The words “Jesus” and “Christ” occur four times in James but thirty-four times in Hebrews. James never uses the word “blood” but Hebrews uses it twenty times. James does not explain much about what Jesus has done for us. He focuses more on what it truly means for us to follow him. Hebrews redresses the balance by telling us who Jesus is and what his great sacrifice has achieved for us.

In verses 1–3, the writer tells us that Jesus is far better than all of the Old Testament prophets. This is some of the best Greek in the whole of the New Testament, because the writer crafts

these words of worship very carefully.¹ He affirms the ancient Jewish faith by emphasizing that he is as Jewish as his readers (it is the faith of “*our ancestors*”), but he also points out that the Old Testament prophets only received a limited revelation of the Lord. Jesus has opened up a whole new way of knowing God because he is more than just a prophet. He is God’s one and only Son.²

Muslims are offended when they read these opening verses because they think that “Son of God” implies that God had intercourse with Mary. Of course this is not what the writer is saying at all. Any Jew would instantly recognize it as one of the Messiah’s titles in the Old Testament.³ The true offence in these opening verses is that the writer tells us that there is far more to this title than initially meets the eye. It is much more than an affectionate affirmation of a great human king who has been born to the family of David. It is a statement that the Messiah is the second person of the Trinity.

The writer tells us that Jesus is God’s heir.⁴ He was with God in the beginning creating the universe.⁵ He still sustains the universe today with the powerful sound of his voice.⁶ He

¹ It is excellent Greek but it was clearly written by a man who thought like a Jew. He refers literally in 1:3 to “*the word of his power.*” That is how a Jew would talk. A native-born Greek would say “*his powerful word.*”

² The writer tells us in 1:2 that when the Old Testament prophets spoke about “*the last days*” they were prophesying about the whole of AD history. Peter also tells us this in Acts 2:16–17. The last days have begun.

³ See 2 Samuel 7:14; Psalm 2:7; 89:26; Matthew 16:16; 26:63; John 11:27; 20:31.

⁴ He reaffirms this in 1:6, since the Greek word *prōtotokos* does not mean *born first* (Jesus was never created), but *born foremost*. The word is used in the Septuagint for younger sons who became their father’s heir (Exodus 4:22; Jeremiah 31:9). Paul also uses it in the same sense in Romans 8:29 and Colossians 1:15.

⁵ John 1:1–3; 17:5. Genesis 1:26 hints at this when God says “*Let us make mankind in **our** image, in **our** likeness.*”

⁶ The voice of Jesus carries world-changing power. That’s why it is such a privilege to be permitted to pray and issue commands in his name. Our voices become as powerful as his whenever he backs up our words.

is the perfect image of God the Father and he radiates God's undiluted glory.⁷ He is the great Saviour who has fulfilled all the salvation prophecies of the Old Testament so completely that he has now sat down at the right hand of God the Father in heaven. His work is finished. He is sovereign over the entire universe. The first-century Jews might be comfortable referring to the Messiah as the "Son of God", but the writer tells them that this is only because they have not truly understood what it signifies.

In verse 4, the writer spells it out. It means that Jesus is not just superior to any of the prophets. He is also vastly superior to any angel. They are creatures, whereas he is the Creator. More than that, he is the victorious Saviour who has been given a throne and a name (both of these things speak of authority) that are far above those held by any angel, demon or human.⁸ False teachers might deny the divinity of Jesus,⁹ and some practitioners of Jewish folk religion might encourage people to pray to angels,¹⁰ but this is of secondary importance to the writer of this letter. He is writing against mainstream first-century Judaism, which has become so corrupted by the priests and rabbis that it has rejected its own Messiah. It is stuck in the past, demanding a faster horse from God instead of embracing his motor-car Messiah. The Jewish Christians must not go back to the synagogues in order to escape persecution. The synagogues are preaching a different religion altogether. Christianity proclaims that something far better has come.

The writer emphasizes this by quoting seven times from

⁷ The Greek word *charaktēr* in 1:3 means *exact likeness*. John 14:9 affirms that to see Jesus is to see God.

⁸ We are also told this in Acts 2:36 and Philippians 2:9–11. It is repeated in Hebrews 2:9.

⁹ We see this in other books which were written in 62–67 AD: Titus, 1 and 2 Timothy, 1 and 2 Peter, and Jude.

¹⁰ False teachers influenced by Jewish folk religion preached this in Colossians 2:18.

the Old Testament in verses 5–14.¹¹ These are the first of thirty-five direct quotations in the book of Hebrews, because the writer is determined to prove that the Christian Gospel, and not corrupted synagogue religion, is the true fulfilment of the ancient faith of Israel. A first quotation from Psalm 2:7 and a second from either 2 Samuel 7:14 or 1 Chronicles 17:13 both prove that the title “Son of God” is far more than a term of affection. The Old Testament sometimes refers to the angels as “sons of God”, but it never declares any of them to be the “Son of God” in the same way that it does the Messiah.¹²

A third quotation from Deuteronomy 32:43 demonstrates that the Messiah is God (he is worshipped) and yet somehow not God (since it is the Lord who tells the angels to worship him).¹³ A fifth quotation from Psalm 45:6–7, which uses Solomon’s wedding day to prophesy about the Messiah, does the same, addressing the Messiah as God while proclaiming that God has anointed him King! In between, a fourth quotation from Psalm 104:4 makes a stark contrast between the Messiah and the angels, since the Lord treats angels as servants and not as equals. A sixth quotation from Psalm 102:25–27 reveals that the Messiah is the Creator.¹⁴ A seventh quotation from Psalm 110 reveals the Lord both as Messiah and as the one who invites

¹¹ Some of these quotations seem quite loose because our Old Testaments are translated from the Hebrew text. However, like James, the writer is quoting from the Greek Septuagint because this is what his readers used.

¹² The Septuagint of Deuteronomy 32:43 refers to “*sons of God*”, which the writer changes to “*angels*” in 1:6 in order to remove any ambiguity. He quotes Psalm 2:7 again in 5:5 to reaffirm the uniqueness of God’s Son.

¹³ This verse does not immediately strike us as having been spoken about the Messiah, but the Holy Spirit inspired the writer to spot what others miss. John 12:41 does the same with a similar passage in Isaiah.

¹⁴ Again, the Holy Spirit revealed to the writer that this psalm talks about Jesus, even though it might not be immediately obvious to all. Although we should look after the environment, this psalm tells us not to panic. As our planet wears out, it prophesies that our Messiah’s return is drawing near.

the Messiah to sit at his right hand.¹⁵ This bombardment of Old Testament quotations reaches its excited conclusion in verse 14. The writer wants us to understand that the Jewish Scriptures testify from start to finish that angels are spirits and servants but never saviours. Jesus is unique. In him, something far better has come.¹⁶

This opening chapter warns us that Hebrews will not be an easy read. It will not allow us to splash around in the shallow end of knowing Jesus. The writer dives into the deep end at the start of his letter and he invites us to dive in with him. The Jews rejected Jesus as their Messiah because they expected a faster horse and not a motor car, yet their own Scriptures had warned them that the Messiah would be far greater than all the prophets and the angels put together. Put aside your own preconceived ideas and dive into the glorious Gospel of God's Son.

¹⁵ Jesus quotes this verse to prove his divinity in Matthew 22:41–46, Mark 12:35–37 and Luke 20:41–44.

¹⁶ We see this contrast in 1:3 and 14. He sits; they are sent. He sustains; they serve.

What Jesus Hates (1:9)

You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy.

(Hebrews 1:9)

You'll have noticed that Hebrews feels very different from the book of James. I don't just mean that the opening chapter contains as many Old Testament quotations as all five chapters of James put together. I mean the way in which the writer drills down deep into the inner workings of the Gospel in order to explain who Jesus is, what Jesus did and why the work of Jesus has changed everything. James assumed that we understood this, so he chose sermon highlights that majored far more on Gospel application than on Gospel explanation. This is not assumed in Hebrews at all, but don't let that make you think that it is therefore a book of abstract teaching. Even as he explains the Gospel, the writer fills every single page with practical challenge and application.

Paul often spends several chapters explaining the Gospel before he applies it. The writer of Hebrews cannot wait that long. He calls us to action even as he teaches profound truth, as is clear from his quotation in verse 9 from Psalm 45:7. Hebrews agrees with James that nobody is saved through professing faith in Jesus unless their faith results in obedient action.

Verse 9 tells us that *Jesus loved righteousness*. Few readers are very surprised by this, since the Old Testament prophesied that he would be the "*King of Righteousness*", the "*Branch of*

Righteousness” and the “*Sun of Righteousness*”.¹ But the writer isn’t simply saying that Jesus was righteous. He is saying that he loved righteousness. That’s different. He uses the same Greek word as John 3:16 when it tells us that “*God so loved the world that he gave.*” Saving faith in Jesus means far more than smiling with approval at the idea that God’s righteousness is good. It means far more than nodding at the virtues of a Christian lifestyle. It means loving God’s righteousness so much that we sacrifice everything in order to lay hold of it. It means responding to Jesus’ challenge: “*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.*”² Hebrews reminds us that Jesus was hungry and thirsty for righteousness. The question is, are we?

I have found that one of the easiest ways to answer this question is to put my own name in Paul’s description of God’s love in 1 Corinthians 13:4–8. Am I as passionate for these words to be true of my life as Jesus was of his?

I am patient. I am kind. I do not envy. I do not boast. I am not proud. I do not dishonour others. I am not self-seeking. I am not easily angered. I keep no record of wrongs. I do not delight in evil but rejoice with the truth. I always protect, always trust, always hope, always persevere. I never let people down.

Verse 9 also tells us that *Jesus hated wickedness*. That’s interesting, because we tend to talk far more about Jesus’ love than we do about his hatred. The writer of Hebrews wants to ensure that we have grasped what the Old Testament teaches us: that loving righteousness and hating wickedness are simply two sides of the same coin. Solomon warns that “*To fear the*

¹ Jeremiah 23:5–6; 33:15–16; Malachi 4:2; Hebrews 7:2.

² Matthew 5:6. James kept pointing us back to the Sermon on the Mount. So does Hebrews.

*Lord is to hate evil.*³ Following Jesus therefore means hating sin as well as loving sinners. Anything less than this is less than true Christian repentance.

Verse 9 tells us that *Jesus succeeded in his mission because he loved righteousness and hated wickedness*. These were not incidental aspects of Jesus' ministry. The word "therefore" signifies that these two things were primary factors in God the Father's decision to anoint him with the Holy Spirit. The Greek verb *chriō* means *to anoint* and is the root of the word *Christ*, so we could even translate verse 9 to read that God *Christed* Jesus or *made him his Messiah* because he saw that Jesus loved righteousness and hated sin. This may be the answer to our question, "Why isn't God using my life more?" It is certainly the answer to the question, "Can I become a Christian but still hold onto this one area of sin?" We cannot follow the one who loved righteousness and hated wickedness unless we allow the Lord to change our values so completely that we begin to love righteousness and hate wickedness ourselves. Unless our faith in Jesus unleashes major changes to our lifestyle, it is unlikely to be saving faith in Jesus at all.

Verse 9 tells us that *Jesus was full of the Holy Spirit*. If you were surprised that James says little about our need to be filled with the Holy Spirit, then Hebrews certainly makes up for it.⁴ The writer promises us that God will help us make these major lifestyle changes if we allow him to fill our hearts. Jesus did not attempt to live a life of obedience to his Father without being filled with the Holy Spirit, so we must not attempt to follow in his footsteps on our own. We need to know Jesus in the same way as John the Baptist: *"The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is the one who will baptize with the Holy*

³ Proverbs 8:13. See also Job 28:28; Psalm 97:10; 119:104, 128; Amos 5:15; Zechariah 8:17; Romans 12:9; Revelation 2:6.

⁴ I personally do not understand why so many people make this complaint. James tells us we need to be filled with the Spirit of Wisdom in 1:5–8 and 3:15–18. He assumes we have been filled with the Spirit in 4:5.

*Spirit.*⁵ Anyone can follow Jesus if they allow him to go on filling them with God's Spirit every day.

Verse 9 tells us that *Jesus was full of joy*. Again, that's very interesting. The writer does not tell us that the key sign of our being filled with the Holy Spirit is prophesying or speaking in tongues or healing people. He tells us that the Holy Spirit is "*the oil of joy*". We can tell who is full of the Holy Spirit by the smiles on their faces, because he grants us an unshakeable gladness that is rooted in God alone. Jesus suffered so horribly that Isaiah 53:3 calls him "*a man of sorrows*", yet the Holy Spirit made him a man of joy. King David experienced countless trials and afflictions, yet he wrote many joyful psalms through his tears. Paul was the target of bitter persecution, yet he tells us that "*The fruit of the Spirit is joy*" and that "*I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice.*"⁶ That's the power of the Holy Spirit.

So as we enjoy the tremendous insights that the writer of Hebrews gives us into the work of Jesus, let's not miss the equally tremendous insights that he also gives us into the character of Jesus. Gospel explanation must lead to Gospel application. Let's love righteousness and hate wickedness. If we do, God will fill us with the Holy Spirit and give us joy in the midst of our sufferings. He will enable us to follow the one who has been given the name which is above every other name.⁷

We are never more like Jesus than when we hate the sin that lurks in our hearts and lovingly embrace his better way of living.

⁵ John 1:32-34; 3:34; 7:37-39.

⁶ Galatians 5:22; Philippians 1:18. Other verses that link being filled with the Holy Spirit is being joyful include Psalm 46:4, John 15:11, Acts 13:52, Romans 14:17 and 15:13, and 1 Thessalonians 1:6.

⁷ Hebrews 1:9 echoes the teaching of James 3:13-4:17. Earthly wisdom cannot promote anybody. A person is only set above their companions if they ask God humbly to fill them with his Holy Spirit.