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INVITATION TO HEBREWS

The author of the book of Hebrews doesn't give his name and doesn't say who he's writing to. But the book itself reveals much about who wrote it, and why, and who it's written to.

The recipients are clearly Jews who've come to believe in Jesus as their Messiah. They are facing persecution and are in danger of falling away from the faith. The author expects them to be familiar with specific details of Israel's history and customs, and he also addresses them as followers of Jesus. They seem to have lived in Italy, since the author sends them greetings from *those from Italy*—that is, their friends from back home who are now traveling elsewhere in the Roman Empire.

The book seems to have been written before AD 70, when Jewish sacrifices ended with the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, since it asks, if sacrifices could make us right with God, *would they not have stopped being offered?* Whatever the specifics of their situation, the recipients seem to have the option of escaping persecution by identifying themselves as Jews rather than as followers of Jesus. The author warns them not to do this. He explains that through Jesus, God has established a *new covenant* that reveals the meaning and fulfills the purposes of the covenant God previously established through Moses. God now wants people to belong to him through this new covenant.

To convince his readers of this, the author of Hebrews alternates between teachings—such as reviews of Israel's history and the temple worship arrangements—and challenges based on the truths these teachings disclose. The book is essentially made up of four teaching-exhortation pairs (although it concludes with a further section that describes the practical implications of its truths for the community's life together). They develop these four topics:

: Jesus is much greater than the angels, so the salvation he announced is much greater than the *message spoken through angels*, that is, in the law of Moses (pp. 293–295).

: Jesus is our *apostle* (meaning someone sent by God on a specific mission). The apostles Moses and Joshua brought the people of Israel into a promised land and into God's rest, but the promised land and rest Jesus brings us into is a much greater one (pp. 295–297).

: Jesus is our *high priest*, and his advocacy for us in that position is much more effective than that of the priests appointed by the law of Moses (pp. 297–304).

: We must respond to all that God has done through Jesus by stepping out in *faith*, that is, by living in light of unseen heavenly realities. This is what faithful people have done throughout the ages, as they have waited for God to bring his heavenly realm back together with the earth once again (pp. 304–308).

The first section is really a prelude, and the fourth section is an application of the earlier ones. The core of the book is therefore found in the second and third sections. These sections are introduced intentionally by the statement, *Therefore, holy brothers*

*and sisters, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, whom we acknowledge as our **apostle** and **high priest**.*

The goal of the whole book is to demonstrate that the final realities God has revealed in the new covenant are vastly superior to the temporary ones of the old covenant. Readers are encouraged to respond to every situation, including the threat of persecution, in light of the new reality revealed by Jesus the Messiah. This means not seeking refuge in a previous identity, but rather being willing to suffer if necessary to remain faithful to Jesus. The author encourages his readers to stay faithful by reminding them that they're *receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken*.

| HEBREWS |

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, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.

For to which of the angels did God ever say,

“You are my Son;
today I have become your Father”?

Or again,

“I will be his Father,
and he will be my Son”?

And again, when God brings his firstborn into the world, he says,

“Let all God's angels worship him.”

In speaking of the angels he says,

“He makes his angels spirits,
and his servants flames of fire.”

But about the Son he says,

“Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever;
a scepter of justice will be the scepter of your kingdom.
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.”

He also says,

“In the beginning, Lord, you laid the foundations of the earth,
and the heavens are the work of your hands.

They will perish, but you remain;
they will all wear out like a garment.

You will roll them up like a robe;
like a garment they will be changed.

But you remain the same,
and your years will never end.”

To which of the angels did God ever say,

“Sit at my right hand
until I make your enemies
a footstool for your feet”?

Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?

We must pay the most careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. For since the message spoken through angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, how shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.

It is not to angels that he has subjected the world to come, about which we are speaking. But there is a place where someone has testified:

“What is mankind that you are mindful of them,
a son of man that you care for him?

You made them a little lower than the angels;
you crowned them with glory and honor
and put everything under their feet.”

In putting everything under them, God left nothing that is not subject to them. Yet at present we do not see everything subject to them. But we do see Jesus, who was made lower than the angels for a little while, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

In bringing many sons and daughters to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through what he suffered. Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters. He says,

“I will declare your name to my brothers and sisters;
in the assembly I will sing your praises.”

And again,

“I will put my trust in him.”

And again he says,

“Here am I, and the children God has given me.”

Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death — that is, the devil — and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham’s descendants. For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

Therefore, holy brothers and sisters, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, whom we acknowledge as our apostle and high priest. He was faithful to the one who appointed him, just as Moses was faithful in all God’s house. Jesus has been found worthy of greater honor than Moses, just as the builder of a house has greater honor than the house itself. For every house is built by someone, but God is the builder of everything. “Moses was faithful as a servant in all God’s house,” bearing witness to what would be spoken by God in the future. But Christ is faithful as the Son over God’s house. And we are his house, if indeed we hold firmly to our confidence and the hope in which we glory.

So, as the Holy Spirit says:

“Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts
as you did in the rebellion,
during the time of testing in the wilderness,

where your ancestors tested and tried me,
though for forty years they saw what I did.

That is why I was angry with that generation;
I said, 'Their hearts are always going astray,
and they have not known my ways.'

So I declared on oath in my anger,
'They shall never enter my rest.'

See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called "Today," so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. We have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original conviction firmly to the very end. As has just been said:

"Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts
as you did in the rebellion."

Who were they who heard and rebelled? Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt? And with whom was he angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies perished in the wilderness? And to whom did God swear that they would never enter his rest if not to those who disobeyed? So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief.

Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it. For we also have had the good news proclaimed to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because they did not share the faith of those who obeyed. Now we who have believed enter that rest, just as God has said,

"So I declared on oath in my anger,
'They shall never enter my rest.'

And yet his works have been finished since the creation of the world. For somewhere he has spoken about the seventh day in these words: "On the seventh day God rested from all his works." And again in the passage above he says, "They shall never enter my rest."

Therefore since it still remains for some to enter that rest, and since those who formerly had the good news proclaimed to them did not go in because of their disobedience, God again set a certain day, calling it "Today." This he did when a long time later he spoke through David, as in the passage already quoted:

“Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts.”

For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day. There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from their works, just as God did from his. Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will perish by following their example of disobedience.

For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.