

Hebrews 11:1-3 “Faith is the Assurance of Things Hoped For” August 10, 2025

The message of the book of Hebrews is that Jesus Christ and the New Covenant are superior and more glorious than the Sacrificial system of the Old Covenant. The whole book is an argument for this position.

Here are the background items that would give us some foundational perspective that are unknown about the Book of Hebrews.

Is it a letter, as presented in many translations—The Epistle to the Hebrews? Is it a sermon, as the all-out persuasion indicates? Is it a formal thesis prepared for a particular audience?

Who wrote Hebrews? Generally, the Early Church did not recognize anonymous works as part of the Spirit-inspired Canon, but Hebrews was included. It is generally accepted that Paul did not write Hebrews, for one, because the Early Church did not make any such claim, as well as the thinking and writing being distinct. The author is well educated and writes well, but may not have known Hebrew, using the Greek translation, the Septuagint, exclusively, as seen in the numerous quotations that follow the Greek. Since the author isn't named, early feminist Bible scholars liked to posit that Priscilla of the Priscilla and Aquila team in Acts wrote it, but there is no evidence for this, and the early church did not mention this.

Did the person who wrote Hebrews write any other things that we could read in order to understand his thinking more fully? Was he influenced by the Essenes, by Philo, by the Alexandrian school of scholars? We have no idea.

The once-for-all sacrifice of Christ is contrasted to the necessity of continual offerings for sins in the Jerusalem Temple. Was Hebrews written before or after the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD and is the presence or absence of the actual Temple meant to be part of the author's argument?

Was Hebrews written from Rome, from Palestine, or from some other place, and would that matter for the stance we see the book taking?

Is Hebrews primarily meant to help Jewish Christians who are considering returning to Judaism, or meant to steady Gentile Christians who are getting restless with the delay of the Lord's return, or some other target group entirely?

Various viewpoints on Christ and the Old Testament in the Early Church

The “parting of the ways,” during which faith in Christ came to be seen and operate as a separate religion from Judaism took about two hundred years. Hebrews, whatever its background, shows how the Early Church wrestled with understanding Jesus Christ in relationship to the Old Testament.

Proof texting

Since we don't know all these background things, Hebrews seems to float above a particular situation and be universal. Only in the final three verses of the final chapter (13:22-23) do we find specific names and greetings. The writing is dramatic and sweeping with detailed examples to prove the general principles. Hebrews is a great book for proof texting. Memorable statements can be lifted out to show a high view of Christ, or the necessity of patience, or the glory of the New Covenant. Hebrews is a giant proof text using the OT/Hebrew Scripture.

God's work builds on the words and actions of the Old Testament

Hebrew takes the perspective that everything God has done and is doing in Christ comes out of and from the work of God from Creation through the call of Abraham, the Exodus, the kingdom of Israel, the divided kingdoms, good and bad kings, the prophets, the exile and the return. The Greek translation of the Old Testament is plentifully quoted to prove and persuade the statements of the author about Jesus Christ. We may take that for granted, but Hebrews shows us how teaching about Christ builds on what God has said throughout his relationship with humans, with his chosen people the Israelites, and with Jesus and his disciples.

Each person does not start from scratch in understanding what is true about the world and about God and about Christ.

God spoke and still speaks.

Another way of learning from Hebrews is to anticipate that God will continue speaking as he has in the past. Lucky you! God will speak to you as you listen for him and intend to obey. It's not over.

The transition from Temple to Church was surprising and painful for faithful people. The author of Hebrews isn't afraid to state, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow,” (13:8) while leaving God's command to sacrifice animals behind.

Perspective of Faith

Hebrews doesn't just use the Old Testament stories. It takes the position of faith in God. It stands within the people of God to hear what God is saying in Christ. It doesn't stand outside analyzing or critiquing, but listens with faith.

Moving on in maturity.

Hebrews presents life with Christ as a process of maturing. Knowing Christ is not mastering certain correct teachings, but living with Christ and moving closer to Christ and the community of faith. Readers are to thrive and become bold and courageous, not just endure or survive.

Our text this morning (11:1-3) is from the Lectionary, although the lectionary continues with the Abraham and his family (vv. 8-16) as an example of the statements about faith.

What better to have in mind as you welcome Pastor Andrew, who has “Heavenfire” in mind for his first sermon as your pastor, than faith?

Verse 1. Attempts to prove, or guarantee, or safeguard, or protect, the Kingdom of God are never enough. This congregation, and every Christian gathering, comes with hope in things not seen. There is assurance and conviction, but it is always hope, not a visible proof.

Verse 2. This congregation or another congregation is not going to outdo the ancestors. Every faithful congregation has stories about how the legalism or deadness or misguided thinking of past generations were overcome by faith and action in Christ. Well, now, you and I are the past generation, the stick in the muds, the old guard resisting change, that need to be renewed. Those who went ahead of us tried their best to be faithful to God as they understood it, and were as dodgy at times and as brave at times as we ourselves are. You’re not going to outdo them, beat them, show them up. You’re going to follow in their footsteps and receive the attestation, the credentials of God’s approval again, if you follow Christ now.

Verse 3. Things are not only as they appear. Whether this statement intends to teach creation ex nihilo, from nothing, or whether it wishes to teach Platonic ideals behind the material things we see, is not certain. However, we hear clearly that there is more to the world than what we see. Many times in Scripture, God declares that “righteousness and justice are the foundation of the throne,” (Ps 89:14) and that is part of what is not visible except by faith. The goodness and mercy and grace of God are right there in our world, but not visible. Oh, this is a painful thing in life, but there is no other choice than to go ahead with faith in God’s creation and in God’s word.

Stay aware that not everything is what it looks like. God has created the world from what is unseen, and we live by faith in this world that God has created. What we see is real, but it isn’t the whole story. By faith we hope for the world created to be good.

Background on Hebrews

Hebrews by Alan C. Mitchell. Sacra Pagina Series, Volume 13, Liturgical Press, 2007.

Hebrews: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition by Kevin L. Anderson.

New Beacon Bible Commentary, Beacon Hill Press, 2013.

Hebrews by Thomas G. Long. Interpretation Series, John Knox Press, 1997.

The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews by Harold W. Attridge.

Hermeneia Series, Fortress Press, 1989.

Attridge is a granddaddy of current Hebrews study. The Hermeneia Series is excellent.

The Letter to the Hebrews by Daniel J. Harrington. New Collegeville Bible Commentary, New Testament, Volume 11, Liturgical Press, 2006.

Perseverance in Gratitude: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle “to the Hebrews” by David A. DeSilva. Eerdmans, 2000.

Essays on Perspective and Interpretation

A Cloud of Witnesses: The Theology of Hebrews in its Ancient Contexts Edited by Richard Bauckham, Daniel Driver, Trevor Hart and Nathan MacDonald. Library of New Testament Studies 423, t & t clark, 2008.

Especially stimulating essay

“The New Covenant and Christian Identity in Hebrews,” by Peter Grabe, pp. 118-127.

Christology, Hermeneutics and Hebrews: Profiles from the History of Interpretation Edited by Jon C. Laansma and Daniel J. Treier. Library of New Testament Studies 387, t & t clark, Bloomsbury, 2012, paperback edition, 2023.

Especially stimulating essay

“Hebrews: Yesterday, Today, and Future; An Illustrative Survey, Diagnosis, Prescription,” by Jon C. Laansma, pp.1-32.

Hebrews: Contemporary Methods-New Insights edited by Gabriella Gelardini with a Foreword by Harold W. Attridge. Biblical Interpretation Series, Volume 75, Brill, 2005.

Especially helpful for perspective

“Foreword,” by Harold W. Attridge, pp. vii-viii.

“Introduction,” by Gabriella Gelardini, pp. 1-9.

“The Living Word Versus the Proof Text? Hebrews in Modern Systematic Theology,” by Daniel J. Treier and Christopher Atwood, pp. 173-201.

“Hebrews and the History of Its Interpretation: A Biblical Scholar’s Response,” by Harold W. Attridge, pp. 202-212.

“Hebrews: A Book for Today—A Biblical Scholar’s Response,” by Donald A. Hagner, pp.213-224.

“Hebrews: Yesterday, Today, and Future—A Theologian’s Response,”

by Kathryn Greene-McCreight, pp 225-237.