

- Why should readers (then and now) pay even more careful attention to the Scriptures (old and new)?
- Reflect on the words of Jesus in Jn 5.39-40. How do we avoid the danger of studying the Scriptures and missing out on the life?

### Made Like Us

The Son is “the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being” (1.3). And now “we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honour because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone” (2.9).

Jesus, truly God the Son, truly became human – he “shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy 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” (vv. 14,15).

His true humanity also enables him to be “a merciful and faithful high priest” and to “make atonement for the sins of the people” – themes to which we return later in the letter.

“Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted” (v. 18).

- The grandeur and completion of God’s revelation is in the one who was “made like us.” What does that mean to you?



Studies in the Letter to the Hebrews

by Peter J Blackburn

## 1. A Sure Revelation

Reading: Hebrews 1-2

We live in a multicultural society. Because we are urged to tolerance, we seem increasingly to retreat from absolute beliefs and values. Sometimes it is even suggested that such Christian belief in absolutes – and therefore Christian missions and evangelism – is one of the ways in which Christianity attempts to “control” other people.

The basic issues are these: is there a God? and has he revealed himself? The belief in a supernatural being or beings appears to be found in every race and every period of human history. Even today, when many would claim to have “no religion”, we observe the rise of a variety of quests for “spirituality” of one kind or another. There is a renewed increase in the occult, and many gurus are teaching “meditation”...

In many ways we are reminded of the Athens Paul visited on his third missionary journey. He said to the meeting of the Areopagus, “Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked round and observed your objects of worship, I found even an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as unknown I am going to proclaim to you” (Acts 17.22-23).

Paul began with their obvious belief in a god or gods and went on to tell them in no uncertain terms that God has revealed himself. Religious belief and spirituality testify to our human awareness that there must be a spiritual reality beyond all we see and hear and feel. But we can only truly know God as he reveals himself to us. We have that “sure revelation” in Jesus Christ – God the Son who became a human being. We come to the Father only through him (Jn 14.6).

- Reflect on the religious pluralism of our society. In what ways do we observe this interest in “spirituality” in our area? How are we to relate to others with tolerance and yet remain true to the gospel?

### Background to Hebrews

There has been uncertainty about who wrote the epistle to the Hebrews for a very long time. Among the proposed authors have been Luke, Barnabas and Apollos. Origen (185-254) noted that there was some disagreement about

authorship in his time. The style and composition are clearly not Paul's, but the letter calls to mind aspects of the apostle's teaching. He concluded, 'If any church, therefore, holds this epistle as Paul's, let it be commended for this also. For not without reason have the men of old time handed it down as Paul's. But who wrote this epistle, in truth God knows.'

The epistle seems to have been written to Jewish Christians – possibly living outside Palestine – who have experienced persecution and are under intense pressure to revert to Judaism (note 10.32-39).

The writer calls them to consider the sure and certain faith they have in Christ. Their Jewish faith was incomplete – prefiguring the coming of Christ and pointing them forward to him. In particular, he speaks of the completeness of Christ's revelation (1.1-2.18), his superiority over Moses and Joshua (3.1-4.13), the superiority of his priesthood (4.14-7.28), the superiority of his covenant (8.1-9.22) and the superiority of his sacrifice (9.23-10.39).

Since Christ is the fulfilment (or completion) of all that their Jewish fathers had ever hoped for, they are now called to run the race of faith, looking only to him (11.1-12.29).

## A Sure Revelation

### Read: Hebrews 1.1-4; 2.1-18

The opening verses of Hebrews form an important introduction to all the themes of the letter. In the original the first verse has five words beginning with 'p' (the Greek letter π). The alliteration draws attention to this significant statement.

**“God has spoken”** We cannot know God unless he chooses to reveal himself. Our knowledge of God comes, not by human investigation or discovery, but by revelation. It comes about because God wants us to know about himself, because he wants us to know his love, because he wants to include us in his family.

**“Of old” “in these last days”** God's self-revelation has come in two major sections – the Bible is divided into Old and New Testaments. His revelation was progressive, as people were able to receive it. Some was preparation and promise while “in these last days” the revelation has been fulfilment. The writer to the Hebrews is very much focusing attention on the fulfilment “in these last days”.

**“In many and various ways”** Look at the way the Hebrew Bible is arranged. The words on its spine don't say, “Holy Bible”, but “Law, Prophets and Writings”. That arrangement holds some surprises for us. **Law** – that's surely all about God's rules for living, how God's people are meant to live. And yet we find it couched in the story of God's people, much of it under Moses' leadership as they escaped from slavery in Egypt. **Prophets** – to our surprise, the first section in the prophets is Joshua, Judges, I and II Samuel, I and II Kings – historical stuff! The

books we think of as the prophets are in a second section. So God is seen to be revealing himself in and through the history of his chosen people, the Israelites – through obedience and disobedience, through kings good and bad, through wars and struggles... as well as through special spokesmen who bring the Lord's word of guidance, warning and promise. And then **Writings**, beginning with the book of Psalms... So God has spoken through poetry and parable, vision and dream too.

**“By the prophets”** The words were not just immediate. They became “Scripture” – the Word of God written. The writings that we call the Bible were not just accepted “on the spot” as Scripture. Much of what the prophets said wasn't welcome at the time. But it was kept, and came to be recognised as the Word of God.

**“By his Son”** Revelation was progressive to “fulfilment” in the person and work of Jesus the Christ. He is the Word of God who “became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1.14). In the Epistle to the Hebrews there is a strong emphasis that what happened “of old” foreshadowed the reality that would come to be in Christ.

And who is this Son? He is “the radiance of God's glory” – God's glory shines out through him (Mt 17.1-5; Jn 1.14; 2 Pet. 1.17). He is “the exact representation of [God's] being” – the Greek word gives us our English “character” and was used of the stamp which faithfully represented the Emperor's signature in clay documents.

- Think about the Scriptures as we know them. We are inclined to prefer to go to the New Testament and the stories of Jesus. Hebrews is telling us that God was revealing himself to humankind right from the beginning. And we have this revelation in Scripture right from Genesis 1. But now that revelation is “fulfilled” or completed in the person (not just the words) of his Son.

## Pay Even More Careful Attention

As we move into chapter 2, we have the first hint of the pressure under which the readers were living – “We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away” (2.1). Why? Because now it has come to us through the Son himself.

Hebrews by no means suggests that the first part of the revelation could be ignored – “the message spoken by angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment” (v. 2). If that was so, “how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation?” – a salvation announced by the Lord, confirmed by those who heard him, attested by signs, wonders, miracles and gifts of the Holy Spirit (vv. 3-4).