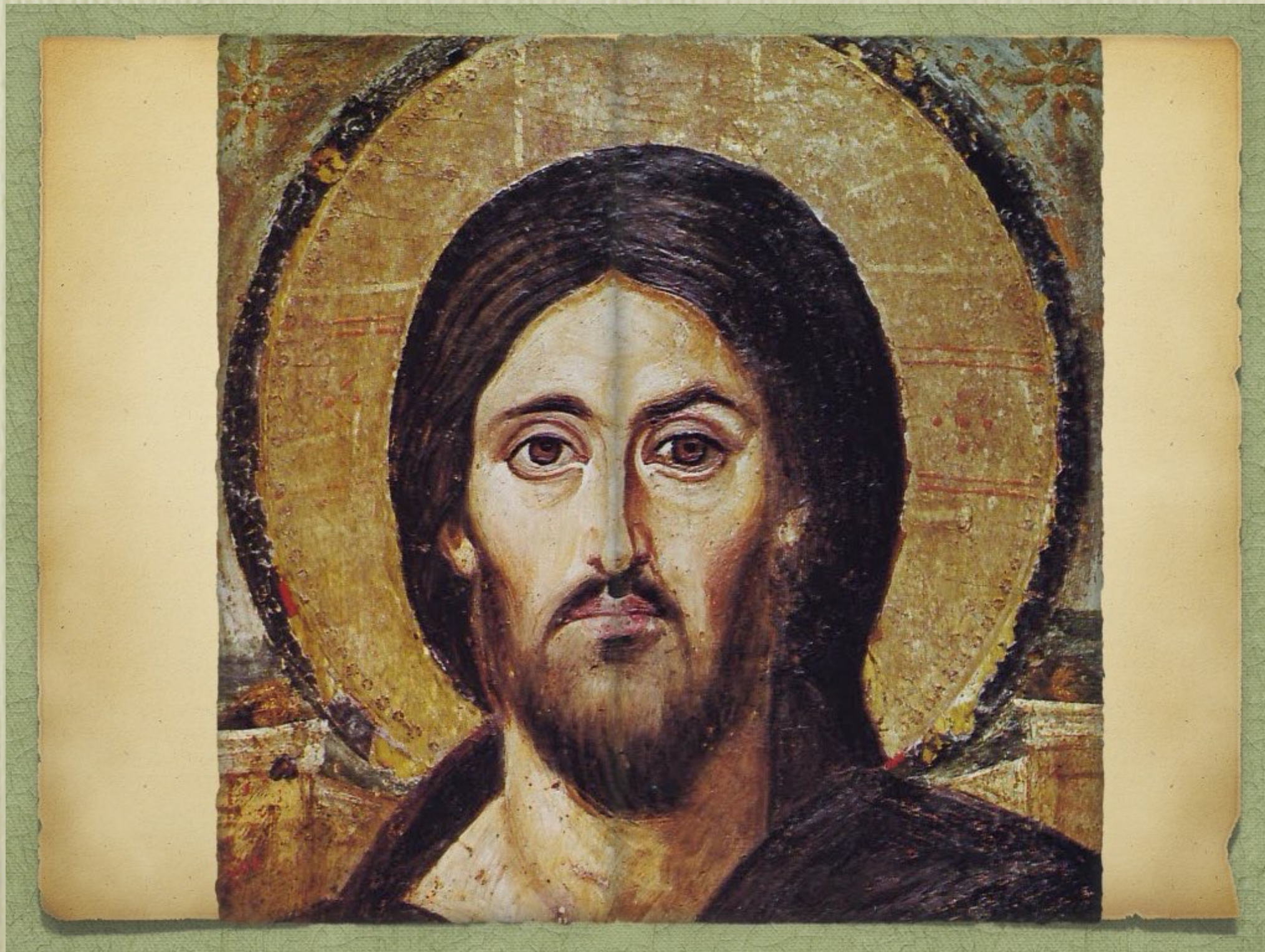


The Letter to the Hebrews

01. Introduction



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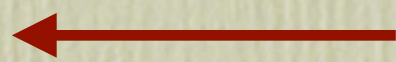
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The last sentences of this work reveal that it was sent from Italy as a letter - hence the traditional title which speaks of it as a 'Letter'.

Hebrews 13:22-25

I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, bear with my word of exhortation, for I have written to you briefly. I want you to know that our brother Timothy has been set free; and if he comes in time, he will be with me when I see you. Greet all your leaders and all the saints. Those from Italy send you greetings. Grace be with all of you.

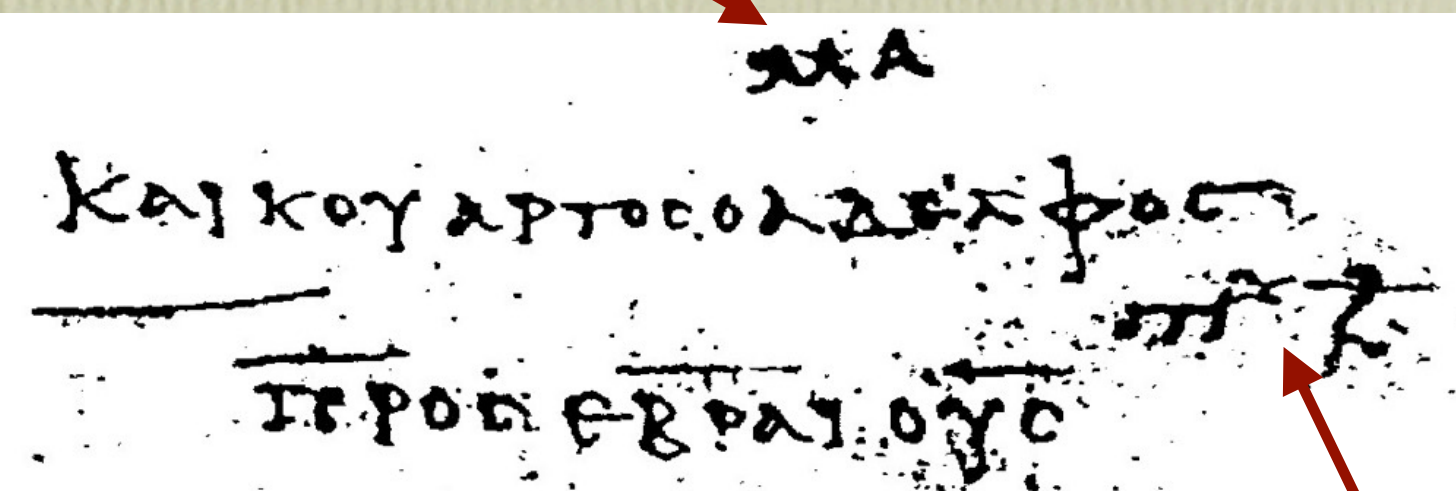
This sound very much like Paul, and he could have been the one who sent this 'letter' out.

Like other letters of the Newer Testament, it is composed to be proclaimed to the assembled community. However this is special in that it is constructed as a speech, an oration, 'a word of exhortation' (13:22) by an author skilled in rhetoric.

The author

The earliest extant papyrus manuscript which has the complete text [P⁴⁶ Chester Beatty c.200AD] places the 'Letter to the Hebrews' immediately after Paul's Letter to the Romans, and for many centuries it was taken as being written by Paul.

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καὶ Κούαρτος ὁ ἀδελφός.
and Quartus, our brother'
(= Romans 16:23)

(Romans 16:24ff placed after 15:33)

πρὸς Ἑβραίους
to the Hebrews

(Number of lines of 16 syllables
= payment!)

No author is named in the text, but from the fifth century to modern times this work has been associated with [Paul. Jerome](#)'s mentioning Paul as the author in his Latin Vulgate helped to consolidate this association.

However, the great Alexandrian scholar, [Origen](#), writing in the first half of the third century, remarked: 'Who wrote the epistle, in truth God knows!' (see Eusebius, History of the Church, 6.25.14).

[Eusebius](#) , writing in the first half of the fourth century, has this to say: 'It is not indeed right to overlook the fact that some have rejected the Epistle to the Hebrews, saying that it is disputed by the church of Rome on the ground that it was not written by Paul' (History of the Church, 3.3).

Besides the differences in vocabulary and style (already noted by Origen), it is hard to imagine Paul never using the expression 'Christ Jesus' (The Messiah Jesus) and referring to the resurrection only once (13:20). It is impossible to think of Paul speaking of God's salvation as something which was 'declared at first through the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard him' (2:3; compare Galatians 1:11-12). It is the work of a second-generation Christian.

Scholars today are unanimous in recognising that the author is not Paul. Various suggestions are made as to who the author may be. The fact that it is the finest Greek of any New Testament writing, and that the author is trained in rhetoric, and is steeped in the cultic language of the Septuagint and in Hellenistic Jewish Wisdom literature, makes the 'eloquent' Apollos of Alexandria (see Acts 18:24) a favourite candidate, but any suggestion is no more than guesswork.

To the Hebrews

The oration is addressed to a Christian community with strong roots in Judaism, such as one would find in Palestine, **Rome** [see 13:24], or Cyrene. It is not the kind of work one would expect to find directed to the largely Gentile Pauline churches of Asia or Greece.

Some scholars favour the Christian communities in Rome as those for whom the work was intended. These communities in Rome kept close links with the mother church in Palestine (see Acts 28:21). and knew of The Letter to the Hebrews quite early. This favours this suggestion, as does the fact that the author sends greeting from ‘**those from Italy**’ (13:24).

Time of composition

- The failure to mention the terrible events of the persecution under Nero favour a date in the early 60s.
- Another cataclysmic event that is not mentioned is the Jewish-Roman war which broke out in 66AD and reached its climax in the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 70AD. If this happened before our work was written it is difficult to see how it would not have been mentioned since these events would have been pertinent to the author's argument.

Situation

At the time of writing, they are ‘**enduring trials**’ (12:7), but have not had to resist ‘**to the point of shedding your blood**’ (12:4).

However, they have lost their earlier fervour, and are discouraged in the struggle to live their faith in a hostile environment.

Some have given up attending the community assemblies: ‘**neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some**’ (10:25).

Our author is writing to revivify their awareness of who Jesus is to whom they have committed their lives: ‘**Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart**’ (12:3).

The rapid growth of the Christian movement witnesses to the attraction which the lives of the Christians had for many of their contemporaries.

At the same time, by not taking part in worship of the gods, and so by staying away from public festivities which involved such worship, Christians were perceived as dishonouring the gods (as being 'atheists') and so as incurring divine disfavour. They were an easy target for blame when things were not going well. It did not take much for harassment to spill over into outright denunciation and persecution.

- The Christians for whom he writes are not recent converts: ‘By this time you ought to be teachers’ (5:12).

- The author recalls former times when they suffered for their faith: ‘Recall those earlier days when, after you had been enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and persecution, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion for those who were in prison, and you cheerfully accepted the plundering of your possessions, knowing that you yourselves possessed something better and more lasting’ (10:32-34).

As Jewish Christians they may have been losing heart because Christianity was growing in Gentile communities, while their Jewish brothers and sisters on the whole remained closed to the gospel.

They may also have been troubled by the build up of tension between Jewish nationals in Palestine and the Roman occupiers, and have had to face the accusation of disloyalty from their compatriots. Were they wondering whether they should rejoin their Jewish brothers and sisters? If so, the author is assuring them that it is they who are being faithful to their roots, not those who refuse to accept the gospel. He sets out to demonstrate from the Jewish scriptures that God promised to bring Judaism to its fulfilment and that Jesus in whom they have put their faith is the Messiah in whom God has brought about this fulfilment.

The Jewish Scriptures show that God promised a [new covenant](#):

‘The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt – a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, ‘Know the Lord, for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more’ (Jeremiah 31:31-34; [quoted in Hebrews 8:8-12](#)).

The Jewish Scriptures show that God promised a [new sacrifice](#):

‘Sacrifice and offering you do not desire, but you have given me an open ear. Burnt offering and sin offering you have not required. Then I said, ‘Here I am; in the scroll of the book it is written of me. I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart’ (Psalm 40:6-8; [see Hebrews 10:7](#)).

The author stresses the fact that the ancient covenants as well as the Jewish law, cult and institutions have found their perfect expression in Christianity, which, while bringing Judaism to its fulfilment, has gone beyond the limits of Judaism in opening eternal redemption to everyone who shares Jesus’ faith, to everyone who believes in the God revealed by Jesus.

The author is encouraging his Jewish readers to cling to Jesus, to be faithful to the revelation of God that they have received in their conversion, and to resist going back, whatever hardships they are facing. He calls them to remain faithful to the tradition: to **‘what we have heard’** (2:1); to **‘our confession’** (4:14; 10:23); to **‘the confidence and the pride that belong to hope’** (3:6; 6:11; 10:19, 35). He calls them to endure (10:36; 12:2, 7; 10:32-34).

This fidelity calls them to continue on a journey of faith. They are to ‘**approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may find mercy and grace to help in time of need**’ (4:16; 10:22). They are to ‘**make every effort to enter God’s rest**’ (4:11). They are to ‘**run with perseverance the race that is set before us**’ (12:1). They are to go forth even to suffering (13:13), being faithful to Jesus who is the source of the saving grace which they have received and the one who leads them to its perfection.

The Rhetorical Style of the 'Oration to the Hebrews.'

Our author is a highly skilled orator. He presents whoever is to proclaim his 'letter' to the assembly with a ready-made and polished piece of oratory, using all the conventional techniques aimed at assisting the listeners not only to follow the argument and come to insight, but also to be moved to recommit their lives to Christ.

Some of these techniques can be reproduced in translation:

1. the repetition of words to link what is being said to a point that was introduced by the same word earlier.

‘Christ was appointed high priest by the One who said:
You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek’ (5:6).

‘Jesus became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him,
having been designated by God a high priest
according to the order of Melchizedek’ (5:10).

‘Jesus has entered the shrine on our behalf, having become a high priest
for the eternal age according to the order of Melchizedek’ (6:20).

‘It is attested of him, “You are a priest forever,
according to the order of Melchizedek’ (7:18).

2. the repetition of a phrase to link a point with the preceding or following one.

‘Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him’ (9:28).

‘It is by God’s will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ, once for all’ (10:10).

3. repeating key words throughout the development of a theme to which it is central.

See the repetition of the word 'perfect' in Part Three

'Solid food is for the **perfect**' (5:14).

'Let us go on toward **perfection**' (6:1).

'If **perfection** had been attainable through the levitical priesthood' (7:1)

The law made nothing **perfect**' (7:19).

'A Son who has been made **perfect** forever' (7:28).

'Gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot **perfect**' (9:9).

'Through the greater and **perfect** tent, (9:11-12).

'The law can never make **perfect** those who approach' (10:1).

'By a single offering Christ has **perfected** for all time those who are sanctified' (10:14).

Our author manages beautifully to signpost his meaning in many intricate, aesthetically pleasing, and intellectually satisfying ways – and all in the service of accurate communication. The most important way in which he indicates his intention is by

- announcing the theme of the section which is to follow.

1) The final words of the Introduction (1:1-4) are:

having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

This is the theme of Part One (1:5 -2:18)

2) The final words of Part One are:

He had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect so that he might become a merciful and trustworthy high priest.

This is the theme of Part Two (3:1 - 5:10)

See also 5:9-10; 10:36-39 and 12:13.

Other more subtle techniques in the orator's art defy translation:

- alliteration and other forms of repeating sounds,
- the many ways in which a skilled orator assists the listeners with modulation of sound, tone, and pace.

A comparison can be made with a musical composition, which is much more than a series of sounds. The orchestration is all important.

So it is with the orator's structuring of his work. It is his way of indicating points that are to be played softly, and others with full force. By the way in which he structures his work he lets us know when to slow down, and when to build to a climax. Relative importance is a critical issue.

All this is true for any piece of good writing. It is especially true of The Oration to the Hebrews, which is the most highly structured and polished piece of writing in the New Testament. Since most of us are reading the text rather than hearing it proclaimed, and since most of us are reading it in translation, it becomes especially important that we try to understand how the piece has been orchestrated. This will help us appreciate what is important to the author, achieve insight into his meaning, and be moved to the faith that he wishes to inspire in his audience.

What emerges most clearly from a close examination of the way in which our author orchestrates his work is that he wants its recipients to listen attentively to God who is speaking to them: ‘**See that you do not refuse the one who is speaking**’ (12:25).

They are to listen carefully to the word of God mediated through their sacred writings, to which the author regularly refers. His aim is to demonstrate that when they do this they will hear God making promises that have been fulfilled in Jesus, God's perfect word.

They are to listen carefully to the words now being addressed to them by the risen Christ, especially when they come together in worship. Their former religious worship, expressed in the traditional cult, has also found its fulfilment in Jesus who lives forever in the eternal sanctuary of God's presence, whence he continues to mediate God's word to us and to join our response to his, bringing us into the perfect communion of love for which we are created and for which we long.

All our hopes for the present and for the future lie in Jesus. We must cling to him in faith, hope and love, and when this brings suffering, we are to cling all the more closely, knowing that we will share his glory.

An analysis of the structure demonstrates that it is the **priesthood of Christ** which is the central theme of the oration.

Part One (1:5 - 2:18) lists divine and human titles of Jesus, reaching its climax in the title '**high priest**' which links the divine and the human.

Part Two (3:1 - 5:10) looks at Jesus' divine and human nature.

Section A looks at his connection with God which makes his mediation **trustworthy**

Section B looks at his connection with mankind which makes his mediation **compassionate**.

Part Three (5:11 - 10:39) looks at the three essential characteristics of priesthood and shows how in each of these the priesthood of Christ surpasses that of the Levitical priesthood.

Section A shows that Jesus' mediation from God to mankind is more secure, and is eternal.

Section B shows that Jesus has reached fulfilment in the sanctuary of heaven. This is the centrepiece of the Oration, and at the centre of this section is the phrase 'Christ the high priest' (9:11).

Section C shows that his mediation from mankind to God is complete as he draws us into the eternal salvation of complete communion with God.

Part Four (11:1 - 12:13) is an exhortation to endurance

Part Five (12:14 - 13:19) is an exhortation to live a Christian life

This is a passionate appeal from a pastor to a Christian community. It is not a piece of abstract, academic, Christology. He highlights the priesthood of Christ, but only so that they will recognise in Christ the mediator of the eternal redemption and salvation for which they hope. His aim is to encourage them to cling to Christ in hard times and to continue their Christian mission in the world.