

THE AUTHORSHIP OF HEBREWS

OR

DID PAUL WRITE HEBREWS?

A Seminary Thesis
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The Epistle to the Hebrews presents many moot problems. Some of them are in conjunction with the question of authorship, which we shall consider under the following divisions:

1. Internal evidence on authorship (is Hebrews an epistle or treatise?)
2. Date and destination
3. Arguments available on authorship
4. A defense of the Pauline authorship

We are contending for the Pauline authorship of Hebrews. First, we shall present all arguments against it; then we shall present the evidence that establishes the Pauline authorship in our own thinking.

INTERNAL EVIDENCE ON AUTHORSHIP

According to one writer, tradition and history shed no light upon the question of the authorship of Hebrews. We do not agree with the writer on this statement. Rather, we believe that both history and tradition lend a deciding voice to determining the authorship.

We are therefore thrown back, in our search for the author, on such evidence as the epistle itself affords, and that is wholly inferential. It seems probable that the author was a Hellenist, a Greek-speaking Jew. He was familiar with the Scriptures of the Old Testament and with the religious ideas and worship of the Jews. He claims the inheritance of their sacred history, traditions and institutions (1:1), and dwells on them with an intimate knowledge and enthusiasm that would be improbable, though not impossible, in a proselyte, and still more in a Christian convert from heathenism. But he knew the Old Testament only in the LXX [Septuagint] translation, which he follows even where it deviates from the Hebrew. He writes Greek with a purity of style and vocabulary to which the writings of Luke alone in the New Testament can be compared. His mind is imbued with that combination of Hebrew and Greek thought which is best known in the writings of Philo. His general typological mode of thinking, his use of the allegorical method, as well as the adoption of many terms that are most familiar in Alexandrian thought, all reveal the Hellenistic mind. Yet his fundamental conceptions are in full accord with the teaching of Paul and of the Johannine writings.

The central position assigned to Christ, the high estimate of His person, the saving significance of His death, the general trend of the ethical teaching, the writer's opposition to asceticism and his esteem for the rulers and teachers of the church, all bear out the inference that he belonged to a Christian circle dominated by Pauline ideas. The author and his readers alike were not personal

disciples of Jesus but had received the gospel from those who had heard the Lord (2:3) and who were no longer living (13:7) [Paul] quotes the Old Testament from the Hebrew and LXX, but [the author of] Hebrews only from LXX For Paul the Old Testament is law, and stands in antithesis to the New Testament, but in Hebrews the Old Testament is covenant, and is the “shadow” of the New Covenant. (*The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. II, p. 1357.)

The main thesis of this writer is that Paul could not have been the author. His sole proof is based on the internal evidence from the epistle.

In considering the internal nature of the epistle, a word must be said relative to the question: Is it really an epistle? There is no word of salutation or greeting in this Epistle to the Hebrews, such as marks the other New Testament books, with the possible exception of 1 John. It is in the form of a treatise rather than a letter. In it are long, philosophical sentences written in the purest idiomatic Greek. It bears no mark of a translation from the Hebrew, as Clement of Alexandria suggests. This is an inference on his part because it was written to Hebrew-speaking Jews. The length of the epistle is another thing that might suggest a treatise, yet not the author’s own words in this respect, “... for I have written a letter unto you in few words” (Hebrews 13:22). Delitzsch has this enlightening comment to make:

We seem at first to have a treatise before us, but the special hortatory reference interwoven with the most discursive and dogmatic portions of the work soon show us that it is really a kind of sermon addressed to some particular and well known auditory; while at the close of the homiletic form changes into that of an epistle.

According to Deissmann’s definition of an epistle as distinct from a letter, we feel sure that this would allow it to fall under the category of an epistle. Its conclusion is that of an epistle. (Later in our discussion we shall present a reason for the omission of a greeting. These problems are intimately tied up with the question of authorship, especially when one attempts to maintain the Pauline authorship.) We agree with Plumer that this is an epistle.

As we conclude this section on the internal nature of the Epistle to the Hebrews, we should note that this epistle is in composition and lofty concept the masterpiece of the New Testament, although there is no conclusive evidence for the authorship. Only suggestions and intimations shed light on this problem. In our defense for the Pauline authorship, we shall undertake to show that the suggestions and intimations point to Paul as the author, yet we are not dogmatic in stating that the proof is positive.

DATE AND DESTINATION

The latest date for the composition of Hebrews is A.D. 96. The earliest date cannot be determined so easily. It must have been written after A.D. 50 if it is made dependent on Paul’s epistles. All critics fix the dating between these two terminal points. Moffatt shows that Clement, Justin Martyr, Hermas, and Tertullian knew of it and quoted from it. Clement quoted from it at length. By the second century it was widely circulated and read. Rees places the date around A.D. 80, Moffatt around A.D. 85. Here is a list of the probable datings: Basnage— A.D. 61;

L'Enfant and Beausobre— A.D. 62; Horne and Bagster— A.D. 62 or 63; Pearson, Lardner, Tomlin, Mill, Wetstein, and Tillemont— A.D. 63; Authorized Version and Lloyd— A.D. 64; Michaelis— A.D. 64-65; Scott— A.D. 65; Ebrard before A.D. 58. The number of dates given suggests that the means used to arrive at a date was by way of the lottery, not by process of scholarship. However, Hebrews must have been written before the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Because there is constant reference to the Old Testament ritual being in progress at that time, certainly there would have been reference to the destruction of the temple. Having examined the arguments carefully, we are fully persuaded that those who place the dating of it after the destruction of Jerusalem do not sufficiently answer the question of why the writer omitted reference to this catastrophe.

E. Schuyler English gives us this word:

It is also obvious that the epistle was written before the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. For at the time of its composition Mosaic institutions were still being observed—priests were offering gifts according to the Law (8:3-5) and the temple was still standing (13:11, 12). The temple was in Jerusalem.

Godet has a fitting comment:

This epistle, without introduction or subscription, is like the great High Priest of whom it treats, who was without beginning of days or end of years, abiding an High Priest continually. It is entirely fitting that it should remain anonymous.

The epistle was first accepted by the Eastern church. Athanasius accepted it, and the council of Carthage confirmed it in A.D. 397. Paul's name was on the epistle about the time it began to circulate.

The consensus is that Hebrews was written to Jewish Christians. But where were the Jewish Christians located? It was not written for the whole body of Jewish believers everywhere. It was written to a particular church located in a particular place. The epistle bears testimony to this: The church had for some time obeyed the gospel (Hebrews 5:12); past conduct inspired confidence in their sincerity (Hebrews 6:9); they had been kind to God's people (Hebrews 6:10); note other personal references in Hebrews 10:32-34; 13:19, 23. Was this church in Palestine or out of Palestine? It is around this question that the argument on destination is based.

First of all, there is evidence that the first readers were Jews. The epistle assumes an intimate knowledge with the Old Testament. The readers were of the same lineage as Jews in the Old Testament (Hebrews 1:1; 3:9). Zahn has this comment to make:

Hebrews does not contain a single sentence in which it is so much as intimated that the readers became members of God's people who descended from Abraham, and heirs of the promise given to them and their forefathers, and how they became such. Hebrews 13:13 shows that both the readers and author were members of the Jewish race.

Now we shall try to determine to whom or rather what particular church the author was addressing. This epistle is addressed to the Hebrews, a word which in the New Testament does not apply to all Jews. It was used for those who were more thoroughly of Jewish origins and habits and who spoke the vernacular of Palestine. The other Jews outside of Palestine were

designated Hellenists. Lindsay says that Acts 6:1 makes this distinction clear. DeWette says that Eusebius, speaking of the Jews of Asia Minor, styles them not Hebrews but *ex Hebraion ontes*. Chrysostom says that this epistle was sent to Jerusalem. The fact that the epistle was written in Greek does not negate the evidence that it was sent to Palestine, for it is natural for a writer out of Palestine to write in the universal language of his day. The Palestinian Jews were well acquainted with Greek, as Deissmann has clearly demonstrated. In fact, it was the language of communication. DeWette held to the opinion that this epistle was destined to parts other than Palestine; yet he acknowledges that the Jewish character of the epistle—the persecutions which they were enduring, the consequent risk of apostasy, and the ancient opinion—reveal Palestine as the more probable destination. Ebrard wrote, “We are at liberty to seek these Jewish Christians only in Jerusalem.”

ARGUMENTS AVAILABLE ON AUTHORSHIP

We can say with Shakespeare that we have now come to the very heart of the matter. There is less evidence for the authorship of this epistle than of any other book of the New Testament. Others have problems of authorship, but there is some definite evidence available and some general agreement, at least, regarding the author. For example, nearly all critics say that some John wrote the fourth Gospel. But there is no such agreement regarding Hebrews. Moffatt rightly says that few characters in the New Testament have escaped the attention of those in late days who have sought to identify them as the author of Hebrews. Apollos, Peter, Philip, Silvanus, Prisca, Barnabas, and Paul have all been suggested as the possible author. To Moffatt’s list we might add the names of Luke, Silas, Clement of Rome, Ariston, and Titus, all of whom have been suggested as the possible author. Out of this dozen, one is privileged to take his choice—or refrain from doing so, as Moffatt does. Moffatt concludes that the author was one of those unknown personalities in whom the early church was more rich than we realize. There is absolutely no basis, other than conjecture, for asserting that most of these were the author, although several have a plausible claim.

As we examine their claim to authorship, Luke and Clement are easily eliminated because a comparison of their writings to the Epistle to the Hebrews reveals a difference in style, composition, and influence. Clement quotes from Hebrews, and his own writings show marked differences. (See introduction of Moffatt’s commentary on Hebrews.) So little is known of the others, with the exception of Barnabas, that it is impossible to establish a case for or against them. Barnabas will be considered in the three theories that are presented.

In the early church were three traditions regarding the authorship of Hebrews: The Alexandrian tradition supported the Pauline authorship; the African tradition supported the authorship of Barnabas; Rome and the West supported the idea that it was anonymous.

- 1. Alexandrian tradition:** Clement says that his teacher, probably Pantaenus, explained why Paul did not address his readers under his name. He further states that Paul wrote it in Hebrew and Luke translated it into Greek. Origen follows Clement, but knowing that the view of Alexandria was criticized, he concludes that the author is “known only to God.”

By the fourth century the tradition of the Pauline authorship was well established in Alexandria, Syria, and Greece. This tradition prevailed until the revival of learning. Eusebius favored the Pauline tradition, as did Dionysius of Alexandria, Alexander of Alexandria, Athanasius, Cyril of Jerusalem, Epiphanius, the Council of Laodicea of A.D. 363, and Erasmus. Among those who denied the Pauline tradition were Irenaeus, Cyprian of Carthage, Tertullian, Caius and Novatus, presbyters of the church at Rome. Calvin did not accept the tradition, for he says, "I, indeed, can adduce no reason to show that Paul was its author." Luther and Moll defend the authorship of Apollos against the Pauline tradition. Thus, we see that tradition was probably equally divided.

- 2. African tradition:** This view supported Barnabas as the author of Hebrews. Tertullian was the leading exponent, for he attributed the epistle, without question, to Barnabas. This is the most tempting suggestion, as Wickham remarks. It suits the character of Barnabas. Barnabas was a "Levite of the country of Cyprus," a Hellenist by birthplace, but a Hebrew by race, interested in the sacrificial system, companion of Paul (yet one who entertained views of his own), the "son of consolation," the mediator and peacemaker between old and new. Zahn infers that this tradition arose in Montanist churches and originated in Asia. However, this tradition was superseded by the Alexandrian tradition, for in A.D. 393 the council of Hippo reckoned thirteen epistles to Paul, but in A.D. 419 the council of Carthage reckoned fourteen to Paul, which would include Hebrews.
- 3. Roman tradition:** This view said the author was anonymous. No tradition of authorship appears before A.D. 400, according to Rees. Stephen Gobarus, writing in A.D. 600 says that both Irenaeus and Hippolytus denied the Pauline authorship. The epistle was known to Clement of Rome, and he mentions no one as author. Another suggestion as to the authorship of Hebrews is mentioned by Plumer. It is that of Zenas, the lawyer. This makes thirteen guesses as to the author of Hebrews.

A DEFENSE OF THE PAULINE AUTHORSHIP

We are not holding dogmatically or tenaciously to an obsolete view. Rather, we have examined the evidence and find no reason to reject the Pauline authorship. It is not our purpose in this section to affirm that Paul wrote Hebrews, but to set forth our reasons for tentatively accepting the Pauline authorship, or the authority, that this epistle rests upon, for the canonicity of this epistle depends largely upon the view of authorship. It was accepted into the canon on Pauline authority; and with that removed, it is possible to reject this great epistle.

Under the first heading (Internal Evidence on Authorship) we attempted to show that all the light from the epistle itself reveals only the fact that the author is anonymous. His name is nowhere mentioned in the epistle. Now, using the internal evidence, we want to show how Paul could be the author.

So far we have tried to show two things: (1) there is no evidence, external or internal, to support any claim as to the authorship, except it be Paul; (2) there is nothing incompatible with thinking that Paul wrote it.

Now we shall take our third burden of proof and attempt to show that internal and external evidence support the Pauline authorship.

1. Internal evidence: Origen remarked that the thoughts (*noemata*) of this epistle all bore the stamp of Paul's mind, but the language was *Hellenikotera*, purer Greek than his. Following is Lindsay's list of representations and images found in Hebrews and in Paul's other epistles, which are not found in the works of other New Testament writers.

Compare Hebrews 1:1, 3 with 2 Corinthians 4:4 and Colossians 1:15, 16

Compare Hebrews 1:4 and 2:9 with Philippians 2:8, 9

Compare Hebrews 2:14 with 1 Corinthians 15:54, 57

Compare Hebrews 7:16, 18, 19 with Romans 2:29 and Galatians 3:3, 24

Compare Hebrews 7:26 with Ephesians 4:10

Compare Hebrews 8:5 and 10:1 with Colossians 2:17

Compare Hebrews 10:12, 13 with 1 Corinthians 15:25

DeWette and Bleek have concluded that since Hebrews reads more like Paul's writing than any other New Testament writings, it was written by a disciple of Paul. The opponents of the Pauline authorship are quoted to show that this book is not unlike Paul's writings and could have been written by Paul. Paul obviously meets this requirement.

Some have claimed that Hebrews 2:3 excludes Paul as the author because he says in Galatians 1:11, 12 that he received his gospel not from men but from God. However, this is not incongruous with Paul's statement in Galatians. Paul is evidently using the editorial "we" that is used so effectually in the New Testament. If Paul places himself in the same category with the other Christians at Jerusalem, he could not say that we received it from God on the road to Damascus about midday on a mule. Paul's conversion was peculiar to himself. Then the Galatians passage does not exclude the fact that Paul did not have it confirmed unto him by the ones who heard the Lord. In Galatians he is defending his apostleship and is therefore showing from whence he received his authority.

As to the statement that Hebrews 13:7 reveals that the apostles were no longer living at the time Hebrews was written, we can hardly see where this verse establishes any such view.

Regarding the fact that the Epistle to the Hebrews quotes the Old Testament from the Septuagint Version, it is possible for Paul to have quoted only from the Septuagint in Hebrews and from both the Septuagint and the Hebrew in his other epistles. The fact that there are more quotations in this book than in any other New Testament book shows that the author is placing a great deal of stress on these quotations. Instead of quoting from memory, he would have a copy of the Old Testament at hand. Paul did quote from the Septuagint frequently, and he could easily have used it exclusively in the Epistle to the Hebrews.

Rees says that Paul's Christology turns about the death, resurrection, and living presence of Christ in the church. In contrast, the Epistle to the Hebrews centers about the high priestly nature of Christ's work. He evidently is thinking of Ephesians, Colossians, 1 Corinthians, and

Romans, for the rest of Paul's epistles deal no more with these subjects than does Hebrews. This method of trying to distinguish different authors by difference of style is not conclusive, to say the least. Certainly it is not a valid argument in this epistle.

We come now to the problem of the absence of the author's name in the Epistle to the Hebrews. Why did the author conceal his name? The theory has been advanced that had Paul been the author he would have subscribed his name, and the fact that his name does not appear shows he did not write it. We submit Plumer's answer to this sort of reasoning.

Moreover, if Paul is proven not to be its author because it lacks his name, the same reasoning would prove it had no author at all, for it bears no name whatever.

Now let us examine the reasons why Paul might have concealed his name. Dr. Biesenthal, writing on Hebrews, advances a new and interesting theory for the reason the writer concealed his name. He shows that Christianity's teaching that animal sacrifices were no longer needed was being felt in heathendom. Consequently, sacrifices at births, marriages, and other occasions were being neglected. The priestly class, which lived by these sacrifices, and the large cattle industry, were being threatened by utter ruin. This created a great antagonism against Christianity. Dr. Biesenthal, a Hebrew by race, concludes that for this reason the writer withheld his name from this epistle which so bitterly denounces animal sacrifices.

Also, Paul himself was a man who was hated by the Jewish nation. To them he was no less than a traitor. This brilliant young Pharisee, who was well versed in the ritual of Moses, as he himself claims, was anathema to his brethren in the flesh. In writing to them this learned work, composed in the best Greek, he withheld the name that would prevent its circulation among those to whom it was originally destined.

There is another reason we think to be more valid, which was presented even by the Alexandrian tradition. It is that Paul left off his salutation, "Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ," because he was not the apostle to the Jews but to the Gentiles. Another more recent suggestion on this line comes from a consideration of Hebrews 3:1: "...Consider the Apostle and High Priest of our profession, Christ Jesus." Christ is the great Apostle in this epistle and the writer would not subscribe his name beside the one of Christ. Certainly, the fact that the writer did not mention his name does not eliminate Paul from the list of possible authors.

There are a few suggestions in the epistle that point to Paul as author. The writer was a Jew acquainted with the details of Mosaic ritualism (Hebrews 13:13). He was acquainted with Greek philosophy, or rather, Alexandrian thought. The author of this epistle had been in prison in the locality where the ones addressed resided (Hebrews 10:34). He was at that time in prison in Italy (Hebrews 13:19, 24). Timothy was his companion and messenger (Hebrews 13:23). When Paul was in Rome in prison, he used Timothy to carry messages, and he sent him on a trip from the west to the east (Philippians 2:19). The writer hoped to be liberated (Hebrews 13:19). This is the same thought that is expressed in Philippians 1:25 and Philemon 22. While these

suggestions are not conclusive, who better fits this description than Paul? An appropriate supposition from Lightfoot concludes this section on internal evidence: “The very style of it may argue the scholar of Gamaliel.”

The dating of the Epistle to the Hebrews does not conflict with the Pauline authorship. If it were written before the destruction of Jerusalem, which we believe to be correct, it coincides nicely with Paul’s imprisonment at Rome. Paul’s last visit to Jerusalem helps explain the epistle. The Book of Acts tells us that Paul went up to Jerusalem in spite of the warning of the Spirit. His arrest was the result of having gone into the temple to purify himself with the four men who had a vow. This he was asked to do and to make apparent that he walked orderly and kept the Law. Did he do wrong? This is not a question for us to answer. The point is that he—knowing that he was dead to the Law—acted through zeal and love for his brethren. The believers at Jerusalem still clung to the Law and to the temple. When Paul was in Rome, he wrote this epistle to show these Jews the better things of the New Covenant and to warn them not to be drawn back into Judaism. This throws a great deal of light on Hebrews 13:13: “Let us go forth therefore unto him without the camp [Judaism], bearing his reproach.”

The Spirit of God could have used this epistle for the comfort of Jewish Christians right before the destruction of the temple. We suggest this to show that the dating and destination are not incompatible with the Pauline authorship.

2. External evidence: Several of the early church fathers who favored the Pauline authorship have been mentioned, but we have reserved for this section other evidence that confirms us in our view that Paul wrote Hebrews. This is Origen’s statement in full regarding the author of Hebrews:

The thoughts are Paul’s, but the phraseology and composition are by someone else. *Not without reason have the ancient men handed down the Epistle as Paul’s*, but who wrote the Epistle is known only to God.

We especially note that clause which is italicized. Evidently there was already in Origen’s day a tradition that Paul wrote this epistle. Quite evidently it was the opinion of the earliest church in the East that Hebrews was Paul’s epistle. It was not until a later day, and by a church more remote from Palestine, that the tradition arose of there being another author. Jerome, the greatest of the Latin fathers, considered Paul the author. It was during the third and fourth centuries that the Pauline authorship was denied in Rome. It is also interesting to note that during this same period the epistle was held in disrepute. After it regained its place as canonical Scripture, it was also considered as Pauline. Lindsay makes this valuable comment on the Western tradition. Jerome suggests that at first it was received in Rome as Scripture and received also as Pauline. It is significant that both go together.

Others could be mentioned, but they would add nothing decisive either way.

We now turn to a bit of evidence that is enlightening. Peter wrote to those of the circumcision, to believing Jews everywhere. In 2 Peter 3:15 he mentions the fact that Paul had written to them. He separated this epistle from the others of Paul (v. 16). No epistle of Paul other than Hebrews answers to this statement. If Hebrews is not the epistle, then the epistle to which he refers has been lost.

To conclude our remarks, we quote a statement from Weymouth that illustrates how easy it is to defend a theory and support it with misinformation:

The only fact clear as to the author is that he was not the Apostle Paul. The early Fathers did not attribute the book to Paul, nor was it until the seventh century that the tendency to do this, derived from Jerome, swelled into an ecclesiastical practice. From the book itself we see that the author must have been a Jew and a Hellenist, familiar with Philo as well as with the Old Testament, a friend of Timothy and well known to many of those whom he addressed, and not an Apostle but decidedly acquainted with Apostolic thoughts; and that he not only wrote before the destruction of Jerusalem but apparently himself was never in Palestine. The name of Barnabas, and also that of Priscilla, has been suggested, but in reality all these distinctive marks appear to be found only in Apollos. So that with Luther, and not a few modern scholars, we must either attribute it to him or give up the quest.

This statement is very sweeping, incorrect, and superficial. He does not even present the facts.

While we do not dogmatically assert our thesis of the Pauline authorship with any such note of certainty, we do not see fit to change our view without sufficient evidence. We will believe it to be reasonable to accept the Pauline tradition.

We deplore the fact that the King James Version carries the heading, *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews*. It should read, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*. Such is the tenet that we affirm in this paper.

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