

The Epistle to the Hebrews

I. Introduction

The epistle to the Hebrews is beyond question one of the most magnificent documents in the scriptural canon. It presents a singularly high and thorough vision of Jesus, the Messiah, and it does so in a way that no other New Testament writing does. The four gospels contribute much to our knowledge of Jesus, and Paul's insight was unparalleled. But for all that, the scriptural witness – and so our understanding of Jesus – would be greatly impoverished without the contribution of the Hebrews epistle. For it presents the most complete portrait of the Messiah, because it traces it out against the background of Israel, the Abrahamic covenant nation, and its life with God. If one comes to this epistle not recognizing that Jesus the Messiah is the goal, climax and fulfillment of Israel and its history, he will certainly come away with that understanding. Hebrews, then, is a critical key to approaching and rightly interpreting the Bible, particularly as it illumines the relationship between the two testaments and the overall Christ-centeredness of the entire scriptural canon.

The epistle to the Hebrews reveals Jesus the Messiah through the lens of the nation of Israel and its covenant life with God, and so is immense in both its scope and content. At the same time, it is remarkably concise. When one considers all that the writer conveyed in the space of thirteen chapters – what the author himself called a “brief word” (13:22) – his accomplishment is nothing short of astonishing. These features and qualities make Hebrews a uniquely significant writing, but also a uniquely *challenging* one. For it demands that the reader be familiar with the Old Testament record, particularly as it traces out Israel's history. The writer penned it to a first-century Jewish audience – it is a letter to *Hebrews*, and he assumed that his readers were familiar with their own national story as the Abrahamic people. But more than general familiarity with Israel's history, the reader must understand the particulars of Israel's covenant life and how the nation's relationship with God was structured and administered. The reason is that all of those particulars, playing out according to divine design and oversight, anticipated, prepared for, and together portrayed the coming Messiah and the work He'd accomplish.

The Hebrews writer understood this truth, and demonstrating it was a primary goal of his epistle. For he wrote to Jewish Christians to encourage and strengthen them in their faith in Jesus – faith that was being assaulted on all sides, most especially by their Jewish countrymen who sought to convince them that they had departed from Israel's God by embracing this Nazarene as Israel's Messiah. The writer feared that these Jewish brethren were faltering, and so he labored to bolster their faith and confidence by reinforcing to them how this man Jesus – crucified, resurrected and enthroned – was indeed the Messiah Yahweh had promised; the deliverer and king for whom the children of Israel had waited for many centuries.

Thus the Hebrews writer penned a narrative that draws together the key components of the Israelite history, showing in intricate detail how all of them have found their destiny and fulfillment in Jesus in the “fullness of the time” (cf. Galatians 3:15-4:5). This is the perspective from which the epistle must be read; without it, the reader will find himself confused and misguided, possibly even taking from it ideas and conclusions foreign to it.

A. Authorship

The structure and orientation of the Hebrews epistle make it unique in the New Testament writings, but there are other features that distinguish it, not least its literary style and anonymity. Hebrews isn't the only anonymous book in the New Testament; the same is true of the four gospel and accounts and several of the epistles. But, for various reasons, not least the document's Jewish subject matter, the authorship of Hebrews has been a point of controversy from very early in Church history. Even while the Church was becoming more of a Gentile community and moving further from its Jewish roots, it was becoming increasingly suspicious of Jewish influences. This was part of the reason many objected to Jerome's use of the Hebrew Scriptures in producing the Latin Vulgate (completed in 405 A.D.), arguing that he should work only from the Greek Septuagint, which was the Old Testament version in common use in the churches. Some, Augustine among them, even believed the Septuagint to be inspired.

Over time, this anti-Jewish bias in the Church led to the questioning of writings that seem to have a strong Jewish flavor, among them the epistles of James and Hebrews. Almost certainly this resistance to Hebrews being part of the New Testament canon was an important reason so many tried to demonstrate that the epistle was penned by an apostle or apostolic delegate. Among those proposed authors are Paul, Barnabas, Apollos, Luke, and Silas.

- From the end of the second century, the tradition in the Eastern Church has maintained that *Paul* authored the Hebrews epistle. That view was popularized by Clement of Alexandria, though his successor, Origen, was not so certain, believing the style of the epistle to be inconsistent with Paul's writing. Nonetheless, he occasionally cited Paul as the author and made no formal disagreement with those who held that position.
- In the Western Church, the earliest reference to the epistle's authorship comes from Tertullian (c. A. D. 200) who held that *Barnabas* (Paul's associate) penned it. Later, the church historian Eusebius (circa A. D. 300) noted that the Roman church of his time disputed Paul's authorship of Hebrews, and, for that reason, some were rejecting its canonicity. Possibly for the same reason, Hebrews was never accepted into the African Canon, nor was it ever mentioned by Cyprian, the third century bishop of Carthage in North Africa.
- As early as the time of Origen (late second century A.D.), there were some who ascribed the book of Hebrews to *Luke*. Clement of Alexandria (c. A.D. 150-215) believed that Luke translated the work from Paul's original Hebrew manuscript into Greek. The view that Luke penned the epistle continues to be promoted by some modern scholars, who often point to supposed stylistic parallels between Hebrews and Luke-Acts. Luke's writing does parallel Hebrews, in that both display a style that is very Greek and shows strong competence with the language, as opposed to other New Testament writings that suggest that Greek wasn't the writer's first language. But in itself, this is hardly compelling. Others have pointed to certain topical similarities between Hebrews and Acts, particularly with respect to Old Testament history. But these similarities reflect the nature and purpose of the writings, not authorial tendencies.

1. Among all of the proposed writers, Paul has garnered the most support through the centuries. Again, this was the traditional view of the Eastern churches, and it was also the position of several of the church fathers and many of the English Puritans. It's easy to see why, given Paul's Pharisaic background and status as a Jewish scholar, not to mention the fact that he authored the majority of the New Testament epistles. Who was better equipped and suited to pen such an epistle that displays remarkable insight into Israel's history, structures and religious practice? On the surface, Pauline authorship seems quite likely, and yet the overall body of evidence points in a different direction.
 - a. One of the most obvious arguments against Paul's authorship is the absence of his usual greeting. Each of his thirteen epistles begins with the single word "Paul," and if Hebrews was indeed written by him, it's significant that he departed from that pattern in this one instance. Scholars have proposed various explanations, including that Paul wanted to remain anonymous for fear of Jewish retribution, either against himself or his readers. This is possible, but very much out of character for Paul. He was completely open and unafraid in his witness to Jesus, and willingly paid the price, including suffering greatly at the hands of his Jewish countrymen. Paul was hardly a man who'd be concerned about protecting himself (cf. Acts 14:19-20, 20:17-24, 21:7-14, 21:27-22:24; also Galatians 1:10).

Another explanation is that Paul omitted his name from the epistle because Jewish readers could hardly be expected to receive a letter from the apostle to the Gentiles. But Paul was a Jew, and his ministry to Jews continued to be a primary focus, even while he fulfilled his calling to the Gentiles (ref. Acts 9:1-16, esp. v. 15; cf. also Acts 9:20, 13:14ff, 14:1, 17:1-2, 10-11, 18:1-4, 18-19). Paul remained devoted to his countrymen and labored to see them come to faith in their Messiah (Romans 9:1-5). At the same time, he understood and preached that Israel's God was restoring Israel as His covenant house built on Jesus the Messiah – a house consisting of Jews and Gentiles as one new human community in which there is "neither Jew nor Greek" (cf. Romans 9-11; Galatians 2:11-14, 3:15-29; Ephesians 2:11-22). This was Paul's message to everyone everywhere, and so it makes no sense that Jewish Christians would be reluctant to receive a letter from him, believing him to be an apostle entirely dedicated to the Gentiles.

- b. The literary style of Hebrews is an even stronger argument against Paul's authorship. The epistle shows a mature competence with Greek and the style is quite refined, perhaps more than any other New Testament book. It also lacks Paul's characteristic conversational, stream-of-consciousness manner. So Guthrie:

"The language, as Origen noted, is more Greek, with its more polished periods, its more designed argumentation and its absence of the usual Pauline abruptness, digressions and even disorderliness. Where breaks in the argument occur, the writer always picks up the threads in a deliberate, almost leisurely, manner, in strong contrast to Paul's habit of losing his line of argument altogether. This clear difference cannot be mitigated by the difference of form, assuming this epistle to be more an oration than an epistle in the sense of Paul's letters."

- c. One other important consideration is the writer's statement in 2:1-4, in which he seems to place himself outside of the apostolic circle. The apostles heard Christ's words firsthand and attested them with signs and wonders, while the Hebrews writer referred to himself as one who was instructed in the faith by those witnesses. Paul, on the other hand, repeatedly affirmed his apostolic calling (2 Corinthians 11:5, 12:11-12), even introducing most of his epistles with that affirmation. So also, Paul nowhere attributed his gospel message to the instruction of others, but insisted that he was taught by the Lord Himself (Galatians 1:11-12).
2. Another common view – and perhaps the oldest one – is that Barnabas penned the epistle. As noted before, Tertullian (c. 155-240 A.D.) believed Barnabas was the author, and he gave no indication that he was merely speculating about this. It would seem, then, that others shared his conviction. At the same time, it's important to note that this view was limited to the African church, which suggests that it was a local tradition rather than a shared conviction of the wider Christian community. Perhaps the best argument for Barnabas' authorship is the fact that he was a Levite (Acts 4:36), and so would have been intimately familiar with the temple rituals detailed in the epistle. But this is hardly conclusive. It also doesn't answer the question of anonymity, and if Barnabas was indeed the author, why was that knowledge restricted to such a narrow portion of the Church?

Though several others, including Silas (Paul's associate), Philip the deacon, Apollos, Clement of Rome, and even Priscilla (Acts 18:2-26), have been suggested as the author of Hebrews, the arguments for each are highly speculative and without any substantial support. In the end, it appears that the best conclusion regarding the authorship of this great epistle is that God was pleased to give it to the Church in anonymity, and therefore all attempts to determine its authorship can only distract from what really matters, which is the letter's content and magnificent contribution to the New Testament witness to Jesus the Messiah.

B. Date, Recipients and Occasion

As with many of the biblical writings, the epistle to the Hebrews is difficult to date precisely. The fact that the author is unknown only adds to the difficulty. However, there are internal and external considerations that situate the epistle within a general time period.

1. The first reference to the Hebrews epistle is in a letter by the early church father, Clement of Rome. He penned this letter not later than A. D. 95, which proves that Hebrews was written within the apostolic era. Others, including the biblical scholar and historian A. T. Robertson, date Clement's letter to early in the year A. D. 70, just before the fall of Jerusalem at the hands of Rome. This earlier dating is at least partly due to the fact that Clement spoke of the Levitical priestly ministry in the present tense, which suggests that it was still ongoing at that time. If so, the temple in Jerusalem had not been destroyed.

Internal evidence also possibly suggests a date between A. D. 60-70. For the writer spoke of heightening persecution, and some associate this with Nero's treatment of Christians following the great Roman fire in 64 A.D. But the writer seemed to be focusing on *Jewish* opposition of Jewish Christians, which leaves the dating question open-ended.

- Other internal evidence (evidence within the epistle itself) for an early date includes the writer's mention of Timothy, Paul's disciple, who was still alive and known to these Hebrew believers (13:23).
- As well, the epistle follows Clement's practice in using the present tense to speak of the Levitical priesthood and its ministry (ref. 5:1-4, 8:1-5, 9:6-7, 10:1, etc.), which, again, gives the impression that the temple was still standing at the time it was written. However, this conclusion doesn't necessarily follow, for the present tense doesn't, in itself, indicate present *time*. In Greek, verb tenses (present, future, aorist, perfect, etc.) distinguish the *kind* of action or state, not the time that it occurs. In the case of the Hebrews epistle, the writer used the present tense in these priestly passages to highlight the *ongoing* nature of the Levitical ministration. And he did so to prove his point that the priestly system couldn't deal in a final way with the problem of sin and covenant violation; the ministration continued because the problem continued. The writer was emphasizing that Levitical system was preparatory and prophetic, not effectual; it looked to another ministration that would accomplish what it only prefigured (ref. 7:11-28, 9:6-10, 10:1-18).
- Perhaps more compelling for an early date is the conspicuous absence of any mention of the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple. Given the epistle's orientation, content and concern, it seems almost unimaginable that the writer wouldn't point out that event had it already occurred at the time of his writing. For what would better substantiate his claim of the transient nature of the temple and its ministration than the temple's final destruction? If anything argues for a date before 70 A.D., this would appear to be the most convincing.

When everything is taken into consideration, it seems reasonable to conclude that Hebrews was penned sometime in the decade preceding the destruction of Jerusalem. But regardless of the exact date, the epistle is set in a very trying time marked by increasing tensions between Roman paganism and Christianity on the one hand, and Judaism and Christianity on the other. And overarching those conflicts was Jewish zeal for throwing off the Roman yoke, which climaxed with Rome marching into Judea and leaving in its wake wholesale slaughter, Jerusalem's desolation, and the destruction of its temple. The judgment Jesus had pronounced on Israel for its rejection of its Messiah had now been realized; Mosaic Judaism, centered in the Levitical ministration, was no more.

2. This timeframe provides important insight into the occasion for the letter. This is especially so if the recipients were Jewish Christians, as many scholars believe. There are those who contend that the epistle was penned to *Gentile* believers, and they point to statements and ideas that supposedly don't apply to Jews, such "falling away from the living God" (3:12) and "repentance from dead works" (6:1, cf. 9:13-14). They argue that a Jewish Christian wasn't guilty of "dead works" in his former life as a Jew under Torah; he had served God according to God's own revelation and structure. So also, a Jewish Christian returning to Judaism doesn't amount to falling away from God; it is returning to the God of Israel according to the way He'd always been known and worshipped.

But this perspective reflects a critical error – indeed an error that lies at the heart of the epistle’s message and exhortation.

- It is *precisely* true that Jews repent of “dead works” when they embrace Jesus as Israel’s Messiah, for the forgiveness, cleansing and renewal God promised Israel under His covenant with them have now been realized in the “new covenant” in Jesus (8:1-13, 9:11-15; cf. Ezekiel 37:1-14).
- The whole of Israel’s covenant history and life reached its climax and goal in Jesus the Messiah, and now He is bearing its fruit in the world. God’s purposes for Israel – and for the world through Israel – are “yes and amen” in Jesus (2 Corinthians 1:20), and this means that Old Covenant Judaism has yielded to that which it prefigured and served as a pedagogue. Moses, the Law and the priestly ministration haven’t been abrogated, but *fulfilled*; the kingdom of Israel has realized its destiny in the kingdom of God (Matthew 5:17-20). This being the case, abandoning Jesus to return to Judaism is absolutely “falling away from the living God” – it is denying Him by denying what He has done; it is seeking to return to that which has passed away (10:1-31; cf. Galatians 3:15-4:11).

3. And so, while the Hebrews epistle certainly had something to say to Gentile Christians (especially as they were coming to understand the Old Testament salvation history that was their shared heritage), it was specifically directed to Jewish disciples of Jesus and the particular challenges and obstacles they faced. These “Hebrews” were suffering at the hands of the Roman power just as Gentile Christians were, but they were also experiencing a second, especially fierce, element of persecution: They were enduring the wrath of their Jewish countrymen as apostates from Yahweh and His Torah – apostates who, in the eyes of committed Israelites, needed to be destroyed.

Many don’t realize that Jewish opposition was the main engine of persecution in the first decades of the Christian Church. Prior to Nero’s imperial campaign, local Roman authorities acted against Christians under their jurisdiction, but usually because of Jewish pressure. Jewish opposition drove the first Christians from Jerusalem, and it continued to dog them as they spread their gospel and influence across the empire (cf. Acts 8:1-2, 9:1-2, 10-29, 13:14-50, 14:1-19, 17:1-13, 18:1-17, 20:1-3, 21:17-23:22; etc.). “Faithful” Jews vehemently opposed the Christian faith and its false Messiah, but especially other Jews who’d been led astray. It was bad enough that such persons were abandoning their heritage and ancestral traditions; far worse was that they were forsaking Israel’s God.

It seems clear that the epistle was penned to Jewish Christians, but where this community resided is a complete mystery. Historically, two views have predominated. The first is that these believers lived in Palestine, which explains the intense persecution from their Jewish countrymen (ref. Acts 8:1). Others add that the writer’s emphasis on persecution and suffering anticipated the coming Roman invasion of Judea, which only affected people living in that area. The second view is that these Christians lived in or near Rome. Among other things, scholars point to the fact that this epistle was known in Rome by at least the end of the first century. In the end, there’s no way to be sure.

The destination of the epistle and the exact identity of its recipients are uncertain, but the historical setting and general circumstance are beyond question. The biblical record, together with outside sources, provides adequate insight into the development of the early Christian community as it existed within and pressed up against Jewish and Graeco-Roman cultures. Again, the writer focused particularly on Judaism's reaction to the fledgling Christian community, which was predominantly Jewish in the first few decades. These Christians weren't seen as fellow Hebrews who'd embraced Israel's Messiah (at least by the Jewish power structure), but as enemies of God and His truth who needed to be silenced or even destroyed.

This is the backdrop of the Hebrews epistle, and it is absolutely critical to its meaning and significance. This letter has always been recognized as setting out a lofty and profound doctrine of Jesus Christ, but it wasn't written as a treatise on Christology. The Hebrews epistle is eminently *pastoral* in both its heart and its intent: The writer's goal wasn't to supply his readers with a systematic Christology, but to rehearse with them what Jesus the Messiah had accomplished and enacted, in order to encourage and comfort them in their very real struggles of faith and spur them on to persevere in Him, whatever may come (10:19-12:13).

C. Canoncity

At least in part because of its anonymity, the Hebrews epistle is one of a handful of New Testament writings whose canonicity has been questioned and even disputed. From the time the Church began addressing the issue of a New Testament canon, *apostolic authority* was a recognized criterion of canonicity. A canonical document didn't need to be penned by an apostle, but it had to have been written under the authority of an apostle. So the Gospel of Mark, which was received as written by John Mark, a disciple of Peter and Paul (Acts 12:25-13:5; 1 Peter 5:13). The reason for this criterion was obvious; Jesus left no written record, but entrusted His witness and authority to His apostles (ref. John 15:26-16:15; Acts 1:1-8).

1. From the end of the second century, the Eastern churches largely accepted the epistle as canonical, but this was because they believed it was penned by Paul. Thus it rightly belonged in the canon of Scripture along with the rest of his epistles. It was perhaps this pressure that caused Origen to attempt to reconcile its non-Pauline style (which he recognized) with its wide acceptance as Pauline by postulating that the Hebrews epistle represented Paul's *thoughts* as captured in Greek by one of his associates.
2. On the other hand, the Western churches largely rejected Paul's authorship, and so Hebrew's canonical status was routinely contested until the middle of the fourth century. At that time, it's believed that the church father Athanasius persuaded the Church authorities in Rome, as the center of Western Christianity, to accept the Eastern Church's position and formally recognize Hebrews' canonicity, if not its Pauline authorship. A half century later, Jerome completed his Latin Vulgate in which he titled the letter, *The Epistle of Paul to the Hebrews*, which tended to settle the matter in the Western Church. For the next eleven centuries, Paul's authorship was largely unquestioned until the Reformers began to take a fresh look at the Scriptures. Some of them, notably Luther and Calvin, concluded that the Church's tradition was wrong; whoever wrote the epistle to the Hebrews, it wasn't Paul.