

The Epistle to the Hebrews: The ABCs

Authorship, Background, and Contents

Authorship

The Epistle to the Hebrews begins with a formal opening like that of a speaker who has already been introduced and therefore does not identify himself. Even after hundreds of years of scholarly inquiry, the authorship of Hebrews remains unknown.

Some have asserted Hebrews shares similarities with the thinking of the apostle Paul, but it is not his usual style or subject matter. Many have suggested that it was written by someone within Paul's circle, and a comment near the end supports this idea:

I want you to know that our brother Timothy has been released. If he arrives soon, I will come with him to see you. (13:23)

Tertullian, who lived around A.D. 160-220, claimed that in his time it was called "the Epistle of Barnabas to the Hebrews." This could account for the Pauline similarities, since Barnabas and Paul worked together for several years. Also, according to Acts 4:36, Barnabas was a Levite, which could have well-prepared him to write this epistle. The Levitical system is explained in detail in the letter and compared to Christ's surpassing fulfillment of it. But the historical case for his authorship is very flimsy.

Clement of Alexandria (about A.D. 150-215) says that Paul did write the letter, and accounts for the differences in style by suggesting that he wrote it in the Hebrew language, which was then translated into Greek by Luke.

Two centuries later, Augustine of Hippo (A.D. 354-430) claimed that most in his time believed that Paul wrote Hebrews, but also admitted that many denied it.

Probably the best-balanced view was offered by the ancient commentator Origen (about A.D. 185-254), who wrote that while some believed that Paul wrote it, the style of the letter did not support the idea:

The thoughts are the apostle's, but the diction and phraseology belong to someone who has recorded what the apostle said, and as one who noted down at his leisure what his master dictated.

Origen then concludes with the comment that should guide all of us who follow:

But who it was that really wrote the epistle, God only knows.

However, even though we don't know *who* wrote the letter, we can make an educated guess about *what kind of person* wrote Hebrews. Based on internal evidence, the **letter was written by a Hellenistic Jew** (a Jew living outside the Holy Land whose language and culture were Greek), **who was highly educated and trained in the Greek rhetorical style.**

While there is no evidence that Paul's associate Apollos wrote this letter, the description of him given in probably also applies to the unknown writer of Hebrews:

a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. (Acts 19:24)

Following the “golden age” of philosophy in Athens (about 500 B.C.-300 B.C.), Alexandria in northern Egypt became the greatest intellectual center of the Mediterranean world, famous for its schools and library. For example, at the time of Cleopatra’s death (30 B.C.), it was noted that the library possessed *over half a million scrolls* (books). There were numerous philosophical and rhetorical schools at Alexandria, and also a very large Jewish community that had a long and strong intellectual tradition. Calling Apollos “a learned man” meant he had a formal education in rhetoric, as well as training in the Old Testament in its Greek translation, the Septuagint. The impact he made on the synagogues and churches bears this out:

he was a great help to those who by grace had believed. For he vigorously refuted the Jews in public debate, proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ. (Acts 19:27-28).

In fact, Apollos’s eloquence was so admired that he (inadvertently) became Paul’s popular rival in Corinth (see 1 Corinthians 1:11-12). That Paul and Apollos had no personal rivalry is proven by Paul’s attitude toward him in 1 Cor. 16:12.

Whoever wrote this letter was a Hellenistic Jewish-Christian who had an education as high as was available in the Greco-Roman world, and a thorough education in the Old Testament and traditions.

As far as this letter’s date, it can be approximately located. Even though an “argument from silence” is normally a weak form of evidence, this is a case where it is extremely powerful because it touches on a critical fact. One of the writer’s most important assertions is that the Old Covenant had ended in Christ, and that the sacrifices commanded under the Law were therefore obsolete. The ultimate *historical* proof of his argument would be the destruction of the Temple, which happened in A.D. 70. That the author did not exploit the Roman destruction can be taken as strong proof that this letter was written before then. The Romans conducted a fierce persecution of Christians in Rome from A.D. 64 to the death of Nero in 68, which provides a probable window.

In the opinion of the vast majority of scholars, therefore, this letter can be dated in the A.D. 60s, certainly before A.D. 70.

Background

I. Style: A Synagogue Sermon Put to Writing

Hebrews presents a polished and sophisticated example of a Hellenistic Jewish-Christian sermon. Internally, especially evident to those who can read the original Greek, **the letter reads like a spoken sermon put to writing**. It is full of rhetorical techniques a polished orator of the time would use, and numerous signs that the writer intended it to be publicly read and heard by listeners.

At the close of the letter, the writer refers to it as “my word of exhortation” (13:22). This same expression is used in Acts 13:15, where a local synagogue official invites Paul to speak:

Brothers, if you have a message of encouragement for the people, please speak.

The Greek phrase is virtually identical: in the Greek, “message” = “word” and “exhortation” = “encouragement.” This has led some scholars to the conclusion that “word of exhortation” or “encouragement” was a common expression for a biblical sermon in Hellenistic synagogues of the time.

Hebrews was written to some Jewish-Christian congregations outside the Holy Land. That they were *Jewish* congregations is easily seen by a casual reading: It is permeated by the Old Testament Scriptures, and Israel’s history and practice of the Law of Moses is referred to in every chapter. Experts in ancient Greek are unanimous in testifying that the Greek of this letter is of the highest quality and fluency. As a comparison, it shows the kind of sophisticated vocabulary and grammar that an English speaker who has received a doctorate degree at Oxford or Harvard would use.

Many students have concluded that Hebrews was written to Jewish Christians in Rome. This may be indicated by the letter’s final greeting:

Greet all your leaders and all God’s people. Those from Italy send you their greetings. (13:24)

“Those from Italy” sound like people sending greetings to those back home, Jewish-Christian congregations in or near Rome. This may also be supported by the fact that the earliest known citing of Hebrews is in the letter known as *I Clement*, an epistle from the church at Rome to the church at Corinth about A.D. 95.

II. Occasion: Believers Fearful and Wavering.

Through the writer’s counter-teaching, we can discern that these Jewish-Christian believers were facing ostracism, threats, and a possible onslaught of persecution. These fears had not yet progressed to the point of martyrdom:

In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. (12:4)

However, some of them had actually withdrawn from fellowship due to fear, or were considering doing so. Therefore the writer uses strong language in warning them of the seriousness of these decisions, like “falling away” (6:6), “trampling the Son of God under foot” (12:29), or “selling one’s birthright” as Esau did (12:16).

From other things the writer says, it is clear that most of these Jewish-Christians were not new believers. They had been believers for some time, and in fact had successfully dealt in the past with various sufferings for Christ’s sake. This is indicated in several passages. Two examples:

We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God’s word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! (5:11-12)

Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you stood your ground in a great contest in the face of suffering. Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You sympathized with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions. (10:32-34)

What was happening now? If this was indeed the period A.D. 64-68, then the first official governmental persecution was either immanent or had begun under the insane Emperor Nero. The first victims of this persecution were the Gentile Christians because of an important fact: **Judaism was a legal religion in the Roman Empire**. As long as Christianity was seen as a subset of Judaism, believers enjoyed general tolerance from the authorities (for an example, see Acts 18:12-17). But more and more, as the church became predominantly Gentile, that interpretation became harder to maintain.

Non-Christian Jews began to complain to Roman authorities that the Christian movement was something entirely different, which in the 60s in Rome put them in real jeopardy. **The temptation faced by the Jewish-Christians was that of playing down or abandoning their allegiance to Christ in order to return to the safe umbrella of officially-sanctioned Judaism.**

The Epistle to the Hebrews was written to discourage such actions and to encourage them to stay true to Christ.

Contents

The goal of the writer is to encourage these Jewish Christians to remain faithful to Christ in the face of fear. He does so by demonstrating that the Old Covenant system is obsolete, and that all has been brought to completion in Christ.

I. A Commentary on Psalm 110 in Light of Jesus Christ.

There is no Old Testament verse quoted and alluded to in the New Testament more than Psalm 110:1:

The LORD says to my Lord: “Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.”

During the last week of Jesus’ ministry, he engaged in several disputes with the scribes and Pharisees. Psalm 110 was already recognized by Jewish scholars as a prophecy of the Messiah. The first “LORD” in the verse is the sacred name of God, Yahweh. The second “Lord” refers to God’s human representative, the Messiah. Citing this verse, Jesus confronted the Pharisees with something they apparently had missed — that the Messiah was not only a human being, but a *divine* being. First he asked who the Messiah is, and received the answer, “the son of David.” Jesus then asked,

“How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him ‘Lord’? ... If then David calls him ‘Lord,’ how can he be his son?” (*Matthew 22:41-45*)

The answer is that the Messiah would be both David’s descendant according to the flesh, and his divine Lord, because the Messiah will be God incarnate.

Psalm 110:1 is a prophetic view of God giving all authority to the Messiah in view of his completed work. But what completed work? Verse 4 adds this pronouncement:

The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind: “You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.”

Here is revealed a mystery that the Old Testament never answers: How can the Messiah be from the lineage of David and also a priest? And what does the “order of

Melchizedek” mean, when the only reference to that character was a brief story in Genesis 14. But David, speaking by divine inspiration, is hinting of a truth that will not be understood until the coming of Jesus. Priests under the Law of Moses had to be from the tribe of Levi, while David and the royal line were of the tribe of Judah. Therefore, Jesus could not serve as a priest under the Law. However, *if his priesthood is of a different kind*, then he could. The writer goes on to explore every implication of this verse, including what kind of priest he will be, what kind of sacrifice he will make, and what it means that he is shown “sitting down.”

Like a great oak grows from a single small acorn, the Epistle to the Hebrews grows from these two verses, Ps. 110:1 and 4. The writer of Hebrews builds a complete argument proving the supremacy of the person and work of Jesus Christ.

II. The Supremacy of the Person and Work of Jesus Christ.

The first four verses of the letter are like a formal opening of a speech, and by v. 3 the author has cited Psalm 110:1 and set the stage for his argument:

After he [Christ] had provided purification of sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.

Being seated at the right hand of God proves Christ’s complete superiority. The writer goes on to assert that he is better (or superior) in every way.

- He is better than the angels (chapters 1-2)
- He is better than Moses (ch. 3)
- He is better as high priest than Aaron (ch. 5)
- His priesthood is better than the Levites (ch. 7)
- His New Covenant is better than the Old (the Law of Moses) (ch. 8)
- His sacrifice is better than anything available in the Old (chs. 9-10)

To crown his argument, the writer again uses the image of Psalm 110:1 to prove the complete and final accomplishment of Jesus’ death on the cross (allusions italicized):

And by that [God’s] will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices which can never take away sins. But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, *he sat down at the right hand of God. Since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool, because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.* (10:10-14)

Since Christ has died for sins “once and for all,” he is *sitting down* — his work is *finished!* That means the Old Covenant system is obsolete:

And where these have been forgiven, there is no longer any offering for sin. (10:18)

This conclusion creates the foundation for all the “warning passages” in Hebrews: Since Christ’s accomplishment has made the old system obsolete, their choices are to trust in Christ or abandon all hope. There is nowhere else to go.

III. Warning Passages in Hebrews.

The facts outlined in the last two sections provide the building blocks for the writer's main purpose: To exhort these anxious Jewish-Christians to continue in their faith in Christ, rather than drawing back due to fear. Throughout the letter are exhortation sections where he pauses from teaching and calls for faithful action.

The most prominent warning passages are 5:11-6:8; 10:26-39; and chapters 11 through 12. These sections have often been pulled out of context, and, as a result, have frightened many sincere believers into doubting their salvation. That was hardly the writer's intent! Also, many have used them to teach that it's possible for a Christian to lose his salvation. That is not what they are saying.

One of the most important metaphors used by the writer can be found in 3:7-4:10. There he compares his listeners to the generation of Israelites who had been led out of Egypt by Moses. The passage refers to the story found in Numbers 13-14, where the people defiantly rejected Moses's leadership. Refusing to go ahead to the Promised Land, they vowed to return to Egypt. God pronounced his judgment on that generation, saying they would not enter his rest (the Promised Land), but that he would bring their children in when they had all died in the desert.

An important point about that Israelite generation is that *God forgave them* (see Numbers 14:20). If they represented "loss of salvation," this would not be true. However, they never saw God's Promised Land. You could say they were forgiven, but disqualified from their inheritance.

The "Promise Land" symbolically represents "rest" in the Christian life through faith in the completed work and sufficiency of Christ:

There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his work, just as God did from his. (4:9-10)

The thrust of the warning passages, therefore, is to urge believers to press on in faith, and not to lose the rewards promised to those who persevere. The Israelites of the Exodus generation could not return to Egypt even if they had wished. Their choices were only to press on to the Promised Land or die in the desert. The Jewish-Christians who were the original recipients of this letter also had only two choices: To hold true to Christ and receive all the benefits of assurance, comfort, and help he gives; or to draw back, with nowhere else to go. The old system, being obsolete, offers no third option.

Conclusion

This brief paper cannot do justice to this amazingly profound and spiritually nutritious book. Scholar E. Schuyler English has written:

The Epistle to the Hebrews, one of the most important books of the New Testament in that it contains some of the chief doctrines of the Christian faith, is, as well, a book of infinite logic and great beauty. To read it is to breathe the atmosphere of heaven itself. To study it is to partake of strong spiritual meat. To abide in its teachings is to be led from immaturity to maturity in the knowledge of Christian truth and of Christ Himself. It is to "go on unto perfection."

Hebrews is a lifetime study, and will prove, reading after reading, to challenge, teach, and encourage.

T.L.S.