

CHAPTER 5

INTRODUCTION TO HEBREWS

Canonicity

Unquestioned place in the canon throughout early church period.

- Quoted by Clement of Rome (A.D. 96) in *1 Clem.* 36 (*ANF* 1:15)

“This is the way, beloved, in which we find our Savior, even Jesus Christ, the High Priest of all our offerings, the defender and helper of our infirmity. By him we look up to the heights of heaven. By him we behold, as in a glass, his immaculate and most excellent visage. By him are the eyes of our hearts opened. By him our foolish and darkened understanding blossoms up anew towards his marvelous light. By him the Lord has willed that we should taste of immortal knowledge, ‘who, being the brightness of his majesty, is by so much greater than the angels, as he hath by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they’ [Heb 1:3-4]. For it is thus written, ‘Who maketh his angels spirits, and his ministers a flame of fire’ [Ps 104:4; Heb 1:7]. But concerning his Son the Lord spoke thus: ‘Thou art my Son, today have I begotten thee. Ask of me, and I will give thee the heathen for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession’ [Ps 2:7-8; Heb 1:5]. And again he saith to him, ‘Sit thou at my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool’ [Ps 110:1; Heb 1:13].”

- Included in Paul’s epistles in the Chester Beatty Papyrus, p⁴⁶ (ca. A.D. 200)
- Approved by the whole church, Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 3:3 (*NPF*:2, 1:134)
- Evaluated approvingly by Origen (ca. A.D. 200), as quoted by Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 6:25 (*NPF*:2, 1:273)

“In addition he [Origen] makes the following statements in regard to the epistle to the Hebrews in his Homilies upon it:

““That the verbal style of the epistle entitled “To the Hebrews,” is not rude like the language of the apostle [Paul], who acknowledged himself “rude in speech” [2 Cor 11:6], that is, in expression; but that its diction is purer Greek, any one who has the power to discern differences of phraseology will acknowledge. Moreover, that

the thoughts of the epistle are admirable, and not inferior to the acknowledged apostolic writings, any one who carefully examines the apostolic text will admit.’ Farther on he adds:

“If I gave my opinion, I should say that the thoughts are those of the apostle, but the diction and phraseology are those of some one who remembered the apostolic teachings, and wrote down at his leisure what had been said by his teacher. Therefore if any church holds that this epistle is by Paul, let it be commended for this. For not without reason have the ancients handed it down as Paul’s. But who wrote the epistle, in truth, God knows. The statement of some who have gone before us is that Clement, bishop of the Romans, wrote the epistle, and of others that Luke, the author of the Gospel and the Acts, wrote it.’ But let this suffice on these matters.”

- Included in early canons:

Not in Muratorian Canon of A.D. 170 (fragmentary canon)

Athanasius, A.D. 397 Easter proclamation

3rd Council of Carthage (A.D. 397), “13 epistles of Paul and one epistle of the same writer to the Hebrews”

6th Council of Carthage (Council of Hippo; A.D. 419), “14 epistles of Paul”

Authorship

— Note Origen’s evaluation (above)

[For thorough external evidence, see Alford, Prolegomena to his commentary on Hebrews (pp. 1-40)]

Paul

In favor of Pauline authorship.—this is the “traditional” view. More recent defenders include Moses Stuart, Arthur W. Pink, Homer Kent.

- 1) Fairly strong tradition (not earliest), includes p⁴⁶, which places it between Romans and 1 Corinthians; generally accepted as Pauline by 4th century
- 2) Similar doctrine, e.g., attitude toward Christology, the place of the Jewish law

3) Many similarities in expression to Paul's epistles; some examples:

- “Milk” in disparaging sense, Heb 5:12-14 = 1 Cor 3:2; cf. good in 1 Pet 2:2

Heb 5:12-14, 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! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.

1 Cor 3:2, I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready.

1 Pet 2:2, Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation,

- “Running a race,” Heb 12:1 = 1 Cor 9:24
- Deut 32:35 quoted identically in Heb 10:30 and Rom 12:19, yet different from Hebrew and LXX (Bleek says Hebrews author probably quoted Paul here)

Heb 10:30, For we know him who said, “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” and again, “The Lord will judge his people.”

4) Author's circumstances might fit Paul:

- Associated with Timothy, Heb 13:23

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

- Perhaps had been in prison, Heb 10:34 (some MSS read δεσμοῖς μου *desmois mou*, “with my bonds”; probably should read δεσμίους *desmiois* “with those in prison,” UBS {B})

Heb 10:34, You had compassion with those in prison and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and a lasting one. (ESV)

Cf. KJV, For ye had compassion of me in my bonds, and took joyfully the spoiling of your goods, knowing in yourselves that ye have in heaven a better and an enduring substance.

- 5) Some writers believe 2 Pet 3:15-16 refers to Hebrews, as addressed to the Diaspora (cf. Heb 5:11); this argument countered by Friedrich Bleek and Henry Alford

2 Pet 3:15-16, Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction.

Heb 5:11, We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn.

- 6) General pattern similar to Paul's epistles:

- Doctrine section, ch. 1 - 10:18; practical section, 10:19 – ch. 13
- Closing characteristic of Paul, 13:25; cf. 2 Thess 3:17-18

Heb 13:25, Grace be with you all.

2 Thess 3:17-18, I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand, which is the distinguishing mark in all my letters. This is how I write. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

- But beginning different

Against Pauline authorship:

- 1) Anonymous letter
- 2) Tradition weak in earliest church; easy to explain attribution to Paul as time went on (see Origen quoted above)
- 3) Writer seems to be second generation, Heb 2:3-4

Heb 2:3-4, how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.

4) Style is different from Paul's epistles:

- General style (cf. Romans); e.g., no ultimately suspended clauses in Hebrews; uses rhetorical devices
- Citation formulas
- Dependence on LXX
- Fewer Hebraisms
- Names of Christ

5) Situation with Timothy does not fit with what we know of Paul's life, Heb 13:23; cf. 2 Tim 4:9, 21

Alternatives

While there are weighty arguments against Pauline authorship, there is no clear alternative. Other suggested authors have been selected by comparing the features of Hebrews with known characteristics of the individual. It is generally agreed that the author, while probably not Paul himself, was closely associated with Paul. While the style is not Pauline, the theological ideas and even many expressions, are.

Apollos

Apollos seems to fit in many ways, and has been favored as the author of Hebrews by the following: Luther, Bleek, Tholuck, Alford, Zahn, A. T. Robertson, Lenski, C. Spicq. He is described in Acts 18:24-28 and 1 Cor 3:5-6, 22.

Acts 18:24-28, Meanwhile a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervor and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately. When Apollos wanted to go to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples there to welcome him. On arriving, 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.

1 Cor 3:5-6, 22, What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. . . . whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours.

- 1) Disciple of Paul through Priscilla and Aquila
- 2) Use of LXX agrees with Alexandria origin
- 3) Eloquence evident in Hebrews
- 4) Knowledge of OT evident in Hebrews
- 5) Persuasion a strong factor in Hebrews
- 6) Fits with second generation, Heb 2:3-4

Against Apollos as the author there are two very strong arguments from silence. First, there is no record that Apollos wrote anything. Second, we have no evidence from anyone before Luther's time saying Apollos wrote Hebrews.

Barnabas

Barnabas is the only other major NT figure to be suggested by a substantial part of the early church. He is favored as the author of Hebrews by Tertullian, and more recently by B. Weiss, Godet, and P. E. Hughes.

- 1) Statement of Tertullian (ca. A.D. 200; *Pud. [On Modesty]* 20 [ANF 4:97b]))

“For there is extant withal an Epistle to the Hebrews under the name of Barnabas – a man sufficiently accredited by God, as being one whom Paul has stationed next to himself in the uninterrupted observance of abstinence: ‘Or else, I alone and Barnabas, have not we the power of working?’ And, of course, the Epistle of Barnabas is more generally received among the Churches than that apocryphal ‘Shepherd’ of adulterers. Warning, accordingly, the disciples to omit all first principles, and strive rather after perfection, and not lay again the foundations of repentance from the works of the dead, he says: [here follows lengthy quotes from Hebrews].”

- 2) Companion of Paul
- 3) Levite (Acts 4:36), familiar with temple service
- 4) From Cyprus, contact with Hellenists

5) Mediator between Paul and Jewish Christians, Acts 9:27

Against Barnabas as the author are two arguments. First, the above arguments are very general, and would apply to many besides him. Second, it is unlikely that the name of the prominent Barnabas would be thoroughly lost from his epistle, especially since his name is attached to a pseudepigraphical one.

Others

Other names have been suggested:

1) Luke. Favored by Clement of Alexandria (Luke translated Paul's letter from Hebrew into Greek); perhaps by Origen, by Calvin, F. Delitzsch. Style of Hebrews is similar to that of the second half of Acts.

2) Silas. Favored by E. G. Selwyn. Similar style to 1 Peter; assumes Silas was Peter's amanuensis.

3) Aquila (and/or Priscilla). Variations of this view favored by Peake, Harnack. Woman's name would explain why anonymous. Discussed by B. Weiss and by Kümmel. A difficulty for Priscilla is Heb 11:32, where the author refers to himself with a masculine ending on a participle ("for time will fail for me telling concerning Debra, Barak, . . ." διηγούμενον *diegoumenon*, "telling," from διηγέομαι *diegeomai*, "tell, relate").

4) Clement of Rome. Mentioned as a possibility by Origen and Eusebius; favored by Erasmus.

5) None of the above. Possible that author is otherwise unknown to us.

Conclusion

The author of the epistle did not think it sufficiently important to identify himself; therefore, the authorship of the book is not vital to know. It expounds the same doctrine as the rest of the NT, including Paul's epistles, and has an unquestioned place in the NT canon.

Recipients

Title of the book, "To the Hebrews," goes back to at least the 2nd century A.D. E.g., found on p⁴⁶.

Letter itself does not mention recipients by place or by nationality. Controverted verse—Heb. 13:24, “the ones from Italy greet you” (οἱ ἀπὸ τῆς Ἰταλίας *hoi apo tes Italias*). Are they in Italy now? Or are they from Italy, visiting somewhere else?

Kümmel says “to Christians as Christians.”

But tradition is strong for recipients as Jewish Christians, and the epistle is against a Jewish backdrop.

City?

[See F. F. Bruce *Hebrews* (1st ed., pp. xxxi-xxxv) for summary of arguments]

Jerusalem—problems with 2:3; 6:10; 10:34

Rome—fits 10:32-34 (Claudius in A.D. 49 [Acts 18:2], or Nero in A.D. 64 [cf. 12:4])

Heb 10:32-34, 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.

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

Date

- *Terminus ad quem* of A.D. 96 (Clement of Rome’s Epistle to Corinthians quotes it).
- Timothy still alive (13:23; was born maybe ca. A.D. 20).
- Second generation since apostles (2:3-4).
- Some leaders had died (13:7).
- Probably sacrificial system still operating (8:4; 10:1, 2-3, 11; 13:10-11)

Heb 10:2-3, 11, If it could, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt

guilty for their sins. But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins. . . . 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.

Note that Kümmel maintains that these references are in the general present, since the tabernacle specifically is referred to, not the temple.

- If written after AD 70, why not mention Jerusalem's destruction? (cf. 8:13)

Probably written in the 60s. If non-Pauline, as late as 68-69, after Paul's death. The period prior to and during the Jewish revolt would be a time when there was increased pressure on Jewish Christians to support the Jewish religion and state. It seems the destruction of the temple and its services is near; if it had been destroyed already, this fact probably would have been mentioned (Heb 8:13). On the other hand, if it was written to Christians in Rome, it may precede A.D. 64, since some of the Christians there had not yet "suffered unto blood" (Heb 12:4). On the other hand, that expression may be true only for those Christians who were then living.

Occasion

Plight of Jewish Christians:

- a. Torn: want stately, magnificent worship
- b. Growing lethargy and discouragement
- c. Persecutions developing
- d. Tendency to return to Judaism, all the more with the Jewish rebellion brewing in Jerusalem and persecutions in Rome

Thus many encouragements, plus these stern warnings:

- #1 Heb 2:1-4
- #2 Heb 3:7 - 4:13
- #3 Heb 5:11 - 6:20
- #4 Heb 10:26-31
- #5 Heb 12:18-29

The warnings in 6:4-6 and 10:26-29, 38-39 are especially harsh and strong.

Outline

- I. Christ's superiority over the prophets, the angels, and Moses (ch 1 – 4:13)
 - A. Superiority over the OT prophets (1:1-4)
 - B. Superiority over the angels (1:5 - ch 2)
 - 1. Superiority over the angels shown by the OT (1:5-14)
 - 2. Superiority over the angels resulting in more severe warnings (2:1-4) (Warning #1)
 - 3. Superiority over the angels in spite of his humiliation (2:5-18)
 - a. Humiliation of humanity (2:5-9)
 - b. Humiliation of suffering (2:10-18)
 - C. Superiority over Moses (ch 3 – 4:13)
 - 1. Comparison with Moses (3:1-6)
 - 2. Greater warning than that of Moses (3:7 - 4:13) (Warning #2)
- II. Christ's superiority over Aaron (4:14 – 10:18)
 - A. Christ the superior mediator, beginning *inclusio* (4:14-16)
 - B. Aaron's and Christ's priesthoods compared (5:1-10)
 - 1. Aaron's priesthood (5:1-4)
 - 2. Christ's priesthood (5:5-10)
 - C. Danger of rejecting Christ's priesthood (5:11 - ch 6) (Warning #3)
 - 1. Rebuke for spiritual immaturity (5:11-14)
 - 2. Encouragement for spiritual maturity (6:1-3)
 - 3. Folly of apostasy (6:4-8)
 - 4. Encouragement to faithfulness (6:9-20)
 - D. Christ of the order of Melchizedek (ch 7)
 - E. Superiority of the ministry of Christ (ch 8 - 10:18)

1. Summary of Christ's better ministry (8:1-6)
2. A ministry with a better covenant (8:7-13)
3. A ministry with a better tabernacle (9:1-10)
 - a. Tabernacle construction (9:1-5)
 - b. Tabernacle worship (9:6-10)
4. A ministry with a better priesthood (9:11-28)
5. A ministry with a better sacrifice (10:1-18)
 - a. Animal sacrifices inadequate (10:1-10)
 - b. Christ's sacrifice effective (10:11-18)
 - (1) As shown by Christ's actions (10:11-14)
 - (2) As shown by the Holy Spirit's testimony (10:15-18)

III. The life of faith (10:19 - 13:19)

A. Encouragement to faithfulness (10:19-39)

1. Faith, hope, and love (10:19-25)
2. Warning against apostasy (10:26-31) (Warning #4)
3. Encouragement from former experience (10:32-39)

B. OT illustrations of faithfulness (ch 11)

1. The essence of faith (11:1-3)
2. The faith of the antediluvian patriarchs (11:4-7)
3. The faith of the Hebrew patriarchs (11:8-22)
 - a. Abraham (11:8-19)
 - b. Isaac (11:20)
 - c. Jacob (11:21)
 - d. Joseph (11:22)
4. The faith of the Exodus saints (11:23-31)
 - a. Moses' parents (11:23)
 - b. Moses (11:24-29)
 - c. Joshua (11:30)
 - d. Rahab (11:31)

5. The faith of others in Israel's history (11:32-38)

- a. Saints named in the OT (11:32)
- b. Saints unnamed (11:33-38)

- (1) Accomplishments (11:33-35a)
- (2) Sufferings (11:35b-38)

6. The rewards of faith (11:39-40)

C. Faithfulness in suffering (12:1-13)

- 1. Examples in suffering (12:1-3)
- 2. Purpose in suffering (12:4-11)
- 3. The present sufferings (12:12-13)

D. Warning against leaving the life of faith (12:14-29) (Warning #5)

- 1. The danger of falling short (12:14-17)
- 2. The fearfulness of falling short (12:18-29)
 - a. The majesty of Mt. Sinai (12:18-21)
 - b. The greater majesty of Mt. Zion (12:22-24)
 - c. Our greater responsibility (12:25-29)

E. Miscellaneous Christian duties (13:1-19)

- 1. Social duties (13:1-6)
- 2. Ecclesiastical duties (13:7-19)

IV. Conclusion (13:20-25)

- A. Benediction (13:20-21)
- B. Final message (13:22-25)

Commentaries

John Calvin (ca. 1550)

John Owen (7 volumes, 1666)

Henry Alford (1844)

Franz Delitzsch (2 vol., 1871)

Brooke Foss Westcott (2nd ed., 1892)

George Milligan (1899)

F. F. Bruce (*NIC*, 1964)

Homer A. Kent, Jr. (1972)

P. E. Hughes (1977)

Donald Guthrie (*TNTC*, 1983)

Simon J. Kistemaker (*NTC*, 1984)

R. McL. Wilson (*NCBC*, 1987)

F. F. Bruce (*NIC*, rev. ed., 1990)