

ONE BIBLE, ONE STORY: THE EPISTLE to the HEBREWS

Introduction to Hebrews

I. Introduction

A. An Often-Neglected Epistle

- Most believers' understanding of Hebrews is limited to Heb 4:12, Heb 13:8, or the so-called "hall of faith" in Hebrews 11.
- The difficult content and the prevalence of the Old Testament in Hebrews also make it hard to understand.
- Hebrews is also difficult due to the literary and complex Greek of the original, which is felt even in English translations.

B. Unique Contributions

- Hebrews has much to say about the exalted Christ (a "high Christology"), yet it also focuses quite a bit on the humanity and incarnation of Jesus.
- Hebrews is unlike any other New Testament book—OT institutions point beyond themselves to Christ, who perfects or fulfills them.

II. Authorship

A. Paul

1. Early Thoughts

- Early on, Hebrews was often believed to be Pauline, but there were also doubts from the beginning by Church fathers.
- The ascription in the King James, "The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews," is not original and is not found in any of earliest Greek manuscripts.

2. Compelling Reasons to Reject Pauline Authorship

a. Evidence from Hebrews

- The author considers himself as a second-generation believer (Heb 2:3-4).

b. Differences in Style and Vocabulary

- The Greek in Hebrews is very different from the style of Greek found in Paul's letters.
- There is no opening salutation.
- Hebrews uses distinctive imagery, such as an anchor or a ship slipping away, which are not found in Paul's letters.

- The expression “Christ Jesus” occurs over 90 times in Paul’s letters, but not in Hebrews.
- Hebrews is one extended argument that mixes exposition and exhortation, whereas these two are often separated in Paul’s letters (a so-called “indicative/imperative” structure).

c. Differences in Theology

- Paul’s discusses Jesus’ death on the cross in legal (forensic) terms—Jesus accepted the sentence of death that was ours and paid that price on our behalf. Hebrews discusses Jesus’ death on the cross in sacrificial (cultic) terms—Jesus offered himself as the perfect sacrifice that made any further sacrifice unnecessary (actually impossible); moreover, Jesus is the perfect high priest who makes another priesthood obsolete.
- Paul generally focuses on Jesus’ resurrection, whereas Hebrews focuses on Jesus’ exaltation in Hebrews.
- In Paul’s letter, citations from the OT are usually introduced by “it is written,” whereas in Hebrews the emphasis is on God’s word speaking (and still speaking!).

d. Conclusion

- It virtually impossible that Paul wrote Hebrews.
- So what?! This matters because we want to hear Hebrews on its own terms so that we can hear its own unique contribution to our understanding of the Son and the tremendous work that God has accomplished through the Son. We miss this if we try to fit Hebrews into a Pauline framework. Instead we want to see the unique, but complementary, focus of Hebrews.

B. Other Candidates

- Just about anyone who was a part of the first-century church seems to have been considered as the author of Hebrews at some point!
- Luke, Clement of Rome, Barnabas, Apollos, Priscilla, Jude, Philip, Silas, Timothy, Epaphras, Mary, Peter, Stephen!
- A better approach is what we can infer about the author from the text; this includes the following:
 - ❖ a Hellenistic Jew who used LXX
 - ❖ a well-educated individual; a well-trained rhetorician
 - ❖ a creative theologian; apparently familiar with Pauline teaching
 - ❖ a superb exegete of Jewish Scriptures; steeped in OT cultic images
 - ❖ a devoted pastor; a gifted preacher
 - ❖ someone who has some level of authority among recipients

D. A Quick Note about the Difference between Anonymity and Pseudonymity

- anonymous – we do not know who wrote Hebrews, but the original recipients did!
- pseudonymous – Someone claims that an epistle is written by someone, when in fact it is not written by that person (e.g., 3 Corinthians).

IV. Audience, Audience Profile, and Destination

A. Specific, Yet Unknown Congregation

- Despite the lack of opening salutation, the final greeting suggests a specific group.
- These appear to be second-generation believers (Heb 2:3), who have endured hardships for gospel (Heb 10:32-35).

B. Hellenized Jewish Believers

- The traditional view is that this is a group of Jewish believers who are tempted to abandon their faith in Jesus (because of persecution) and return to Judaism (apostasy).
- Clearly the problem is apostasy, but it is likely that this was a mixed congregation with Gentiles who may have been converts to Judaism and who became followers of Jesus.
- This was likely some type of house church in Rome (based on Heb 10:25; 13:17; 13:24).

V. Occasion and Purpose of Hebrews

A. “A Word of Exhortation” (Heb 13:22)

- 5 warning passages: 2:3-4, 3:12-4:11; 6:4-6, 10:26-32, 12:25

B. Perseverance in the Faith

VI. Date - Probably before AD 70

VII. Type of Writing - a sermon-letter

Closing benediction from Hebrews 1:1-2