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HEBREWS

by George H. Guthrie

Who Wrote Hebrews?

Unlike most other New Testament works, the book of Hebrews does not reveal the identity of its author. Since the second century, people have loved to speculate concerning that identity. The early church fathers were mixed in their opinion on the matter. Scholars of the east-

ern part of the Mediterranean world often suggested that the apostle Paul wrote the book. Scholars in the West, focused in Rome, argued against that opinion. Even those who held to Pauline authorship, such as Clement of Alexandria and Origen, recognized that the style of the book differs sharply from Paul's writings.

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Hebrews

ROME

The Tiber River.



► Hebrews IMPORTANT FACTS:

- **AUTHOR:** Unknown, but someone like Apollos.
- **DATE:** Approximately A.D. 64–66.
- **OCCASION:**
 - To address the problem of apostasy among the recipients.
 - To bolster the resolve of Christians facing persecution.
 - To challenge the believers to move on to maturity, in terms of theological understanding and practical obedience.
 - To address friction between the members of the church and their leaders.
- **THEMES:**
 1. God has spoken and we should obey him.
 2. God has spoken ultimately in the person and work of his Son.
 3. The Son is incarnate and exalted.
 4. The high-priestly ministry of the Son is manifested through his death and exaltation.
 5. The Son's person and work form a superior basis for perseverance in the face of trial.
 6. There are terrible consequences for those who reject the salvation provided by the Son's person and work.

Today few scholars of any theological tradition hold to Pauline authorship for the following reasons. (1) Many of the book's images, theological motifs, and terms are not found in the Pauline literature. For instance, the image of Christ as high priest is unique to Hebrews, and 169 words used in Hebrews are not used anywhere else in the New Testament. (2) The author introduces his quotations of the Old Testament in a different manner from what Paul normally does. Paul usually uses the phrase, "It is written"; Hebrews, following the style of sermons in the Greek-speaking, Jewish synagogues of the Mediterranean world, introduces scriptural quotations with some form of God speaking (e.g., "he says"). (3) Finally, the author of Hebrews depicts himself as having received the gospel from the original witnesses commissioned by the Lord (2:3), and, in light of his often-made assertions to the contrary, it is difficult to imagine Paul making such a statement!¹

Through the centuries other names have been put forward, such as Luke, Clement of Rome, Barnabas, Jude, Apollos, Philip, Silvanus, and Priscilla. What do we know about the author who wrote this intriguing book?

First, the author is a dynamic preacher who really knows his Old Testament and has been trained in the forms of interpretation common in Jewish synagogues. The synagogue was the center of social and religious life for the Jews, and the worship service was at the center of the synagogue service. Focal to the worship service was an exposition of what we now call the Old Testament Scriptures. Hebrews exhibits a number of characteristics of a first-century sermon. The author uses techniques and patterns in his expositions of the Old Testament that were common sermonic features, and he uses these techniques and patterns with great skill and eloquence. Moreover, the book is packed with references to the Old Testament. There are some thirty-

five quotations, thirty-four allusions, and numerous summaries of material and references to names and topics given. What is clear is that the author has a broad grasp of Scripture and a heart committed to its authority.

Second, the person who wrote Hebrews is obviously highly educated, which means that he has advanced training in rhetoric. At the heart of ancient rhetorical training was education in the art of expression and argumentation, and numerous stylistic forms were learned as tools to these ends. Such forms are found throughout Hebrews, so the author brings a wealth of education to bear on his task of communicating his message.

Third, the author serves as a Christian leader of the church and exhibits a deep concern for the spiritual state of the book's recipients. All of his background in the synagogue forms of preaching, his copious understanding of the Old Testament, and his training in the art of rhetoric are brought to bear on the task of challenging this group of Christians to stay the course of commitment to Christ. He shows a detailed understanding of the congregation's past and present situations and demonstrates great urgency about their condition.

Although any suggestion as to the authorship of Hebrews must remain in the category of a "best guess," a number of scholars since the time of Martin Luther have followed the Reformer in putting forth Apollos as the best guess on who penned the work. In Acts 18:24–26 Luke describes Apollos as follows:

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.

Several of the descriptors used by Luke of this early Christian leader seem to fit the author of Hebrews. (1) Apollos was from Alexandria, and numerous terms used in Hebrews are also found in the works of Philo of Alexandria and Wisdom of Solomon, a book also associated with that city. We should not overstate the significance of the verbal parallels here since these literary achievements enjoyed wide readership in the Mediterranean world, but the vocabulary shared by these works from Alexandria and Hebrews does provide a possible connection with Apollos. (2) Luke refers to Apollos as "a learned man." The Greek term can also be translated as "eloquent" and was used of those with rhetorical

THE SYNAGOGUE AT CAPERNAUM

(left) Aerial view of the remains.

(right) The lintel above the entrance.



training. Alexandria was a major center for such training. (3) Luke writes that Apollos had a thorough grasp of the Scriptures (i.e., the Old Testament) and spoke with great fervor in the synagogue. Hebrews demonstrates a broad understanding of the Old Testament and a great fervor, and it exhibits characteristics of a synagogue homily in Greek-speaking synagogues of that time. While with Origen we must confess that only God knows who wrote Hebrews, we can also reasonably say that “someone like Apollos” wrote the book.²



ROME

(right) The Arch of Constantine.

(bottom) The Via Sacra leading to the Colosseum.



To Whom Was Hebrews Written and Why?

The Recipients. As is the case with authorship, the first recipients of Hebrews are not explicitly identified in the book. What the interpreter is left to, therefore, is sorting through clues to their identity. Fortunately, a number of such clues exist.

First, the author seems to address a group of people who have some background in the Jewish synagogue. His use of the Old Testament seems to assume a fairly broad understanding of the Scriptures. Also, theological concepts popular in the Greek-speaking synagogues of the day are found in the book—such as a special veneration of Moses, the mediatorial role of angels in relation to the old covenant law, and interest in the role of the divine Wisdom in creation.

Second, some associated with this Christian community seem to have abandoned the Christian faith and, perhaps, returned to Judaism proper, and others are struggling with the temptation to do so.

Third, the church addressed is likely located in the city of Rome. Among the over one million inhabitants of Rome in the first Christian century, some forty to sixty thousand were Jews. Many of these were Roman citizens, had Greek or Latin names, and spoke Greek. Acts 2 tells us that there were Jews from Rome at the Pentecost event, and it may be that some of these converted to Christianity, returning to the capital to establish a church there. In Hebrews 13:24 the author writes, “Those from Italy send you their greetings.” Although the phrase “from Italy” is ambiguous, the same phrase is used of Aquila and Priscilla in Acts 18:2. In context it refers to those from Rome who then reside somewhere other than

Rome. Therefore, it seems that the author is writing back to Rome while associated with some who are from there.

A second point in favor of a Roman destination is that the earliest documented use of Hebrews in the early church is in a pastoral letter known as *First Clement*, a letter written by Clement of Rome to the church at Corinth. Hebrews’ influence is seen throughout the work.

Finally, only Hebrews among the New Testament documents refers to those who govern the church as “leaders” (*hegoumenoi*, a participle used as a noun), although Acts 15:22 (RSV) uses the same Greek term adjectively to describe the delegation, “leading men,” sent to Antioch with the decision of the Jerusalem council. This designation for church leadership is also found in the books of *First Clement* and *The Shepherd of Hermas*, both of which are associated with the church in Rome.

Therefore, in all likelihood the first recipients of Hebrews are a Jewish Christian community in the city of Rome that has members struggling with enduring in their Christian commitment.

What Was the Author Attempting to Accomplish?

Consequently, the author of the book has a specific goal in view—to encourage those who are faltering spiritually to endure in the faith. He attempts to accomplish this goal by an interworking of theology and exhortation. In fact, the book is structured around a movement back and forth between teachings about Jesus as Son of God and great high priest, and strong exhortations to be faithful to him.³ The main expositional sections about Christ deal with his superiority to the angels (1:5–14), the necessity of his

incarnation (2:10–18), his appointment as superior high priest (5:1–10; 7:1–28), and the superiority of his heavenly offering for sins (8:3–10:18). Woven throughout the rest of the book are exhortation sections made up of positive and negative examples, warnings and promises, general encouragement and expressions of deep concern. These two great streams of theology and exhortation are masterfully woven together to communicate a central message: *Jesus provides a superior basis for relating to God and enduring in that relationship, and those who reject him are in deep trouble!*

When Was Hebrews Written?

If we have assessed rightly the destination of Hebrews as the city of Rome, several facts gleaned from the book help to narrow the date of writing. The recipients have been Christians for a while (5:11–6:3) and at some time in the past have faced rather severe persecution for the faith (10:32–34). Yet, it seems that although they are facing an increasing intensity of persecution at present, at the time of writing they have yet to face martyrdom (12:4). These facts point to sometime in the mid–60s A.D., just before an escalating and severe time of persecution instigated by Emperor Nero. In the mid–60s the church had existed for some three decades. In A.D. 49 the



NERO

A coin depicting the emperor (A.D. 54–68).

Christian community seems to have had harsh conflicts with the Jewish community, resulting in a general expulsion of all Jews by the emperor Claudius. This could be the persecution referred to in 10:32–34. Also, the rise of Nero’s terrible persecution of Christians in Rome in the mid–60s would account for the faltering of some in the church.

How Is Hebrews Relevant for Today?

The Gospels and Paul’s letters have overshadowed the study and teaching of Hebrews for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the complexity of the book. However, Hebrews is a rich mine of theological insight and pastoral encouragement, and it has much to say to the modern-day church. Foremost of all, Hebrews speaks to the challenge of perseverance in the Christian life over

against “falling away” from God. In a day in which thousands every year abandon the church, either in overt rejection or quiet separation, the church needs to address the problem and what to do about it. Thousands more worldwide are caught in the crucible of persecution and put under pressure to leave the faith. In relation to these matters, Hebrews demonstrates the foundational nature of theology for Christian life and practice.

The author uses his extensive exposition on the Son of God as the *basis* for his exhortation material in the book. Right thinking, Hebrews suggests, leads to right choices in life. Thus, this Jewish-Christian sermon champions a clear view of Christ and his superiority to other ways of approaching God as mandatory for perseverance in true Christianity. Further, the book challenges Christians to choose a path of drawing near to God and to the Christian community as the



ROMAN EMPERORS

(left) Nero
(A.D. 54–68).

(right) Claudius
(A.D. 41–54)



ROMAN COLOSSEUM

The photo shows the interior of the structure and the labyrinth beneath the stadium floor.

relational bases of endurance. Christianity at heart is a relational religion, and Hebrews presents a clear picture of community as vital for correct living. Therefore, once the modern reader begins to sort through the twists and turns of Hebrews’ argument and the background of its thought world, a rich depository of encouragement and spiritual nourishment is tapped. If, as a Christian community, we can see Jesus more clearly (3:1; 12:1–2), draw near to God more consistently (4:14–16; 10:19–23), and encourage one another more readily (3:13; 10:24–25), Hebrews will have served us well.

Introduction (1:1–4)

As noted above, it is a widely held opinion that Hebrews constitutes a first-century sermon rather than a letter. In both the contexts of the Jewish synagogue and the forums in which speeches were deliv-

ered in the broader Greco-Roman culture, much emphasis was placed on an address beginning with a powerful and appropriate introduction, also referred to as a *proem* or *exordium*. Jewish sermons often started with a reference to the text to be expounded. Greek rhetoricians saw the introduction as well-crafted if it accomplished two goals. (1) The introduction should sum up the primary topic or topics to be discussed in the speech. Aristotle, whose work on rhetoric was used in rhetorical training in the first century, likened the introduction to a prelude in a performance on the flute because it paves the way for what follows.⁴ (2) The word-crafters of the day suggested that an introduction should capture the attention of the audience rather than allow the hearers to drift into disinterest. Philo of Alexandria, a contemporary of the author of Hebrews, writes concerning Moses’ introduction to the book of Genesis: “His exordium . . . is