

The Book Of Hebrews

Lesson 1 - Introduction

Background Information

A. Authorship

Early tradition

"When the book emerges into the clear light of history toward the end of the 2nd century, the tradition as to its authorship is seen to divide into three different streams" (ISBE). In Alexandria it was ascribed to Paul, a view which did not assert itself in the west until the fourth and only became generally accepted in the fifth. Even the Eastern Church did not accept Paul's authorship without some qualification: "In Alexandria, it was regarded as in some sense the work of Paul. Clement tells how his teacher, apparently Pantaenus, explained why Paul does not in this letter, as in others, address his readers under his name. Out of reverence for the Lord and to avoid suspicion and prejudice, he as apostle of the Gentiles refrains from addressing himself to the Hebrews as their apostle. Clement accepts this explanation, and adds to it that the original Hebrew of Paul's epistle had been translated into Greek by Luke" (ISBE). Clement died about A.D. 215. Origen also of Alexandria and living at about the same time knew "that other churches did not accept the Alexandrian view..." (ISBE). The writer was considered in Rome during this early period to be anonymous. Lastly, among the African churches Barnabas was championed as its author.

In the early King James and English Revised Versions the work is described as "the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews". However, these words are not found in the earliest manuscripts and are thought to have been added by copyists. The only statements concerning the writer's identity that can be made with any certainty are that we do not know and that it was not Paul. Origen (A.D. 184-253) declared concerning this question, "God alone knows".

Suggestions include Paul, Barnabas, Apollos, Luke and Clement of Rome with other candidates such as Barnabas and Apollos etc. The main objection to these is the lack of supportive evidence. It therefore remains to set out some of the things that would exclude Paul and Timothy.

Some reasons why a Pauline or Timothian authorship cannot be accepted.

1. The author clearly distinguishes himself from Timothy who at the time of writing had recently been set at liberty (13:23).
2. The writer did not put himself in the group which directly heard the word from the Lord but among those to whom it was "confirmed" by those who did hear Him (2:3; cf. Gal 1:11-12); in other words he heard the gospel through a third person and not directly from Jesus, something not true of the apostle.
3. Arguments which revolve around style must always be subjective and are rarely decisive. Certainly I am not equipped to be confident in such judgements but will quote from the ISBE as a counterbalance to those who claim to see the finger of Paul all over it:

"Although the Pauline tradition itself proves nothing, the internal evidence is conclusive against it. We know enough about Paul to be certain that he could not have written Hebrews, and that is all that can be said with confidence on the question of authorship... Paul's characteristic terms, 'Christ Jesus,' and 'Our Lord Jesus Christ,' are never found in Hebrews; and 'Jesus Christ' only 3 times (10:10; 13:8), and 'the Lord' (for Christ) only twice (2:3; 7:14) — phrases used by Paul over 600 times (Zahn)."

B. Date and audience

Character and location of readers

As did the writer, the readers first heard the gospel from the Lord's personal disciples (2:3-4).

Jewish or Gentile Christians?

"It is the whole argument of the epistle, rather than any special references, that produced the tradition and support the view that the readers were Jews. The entire message of the epistle, the dominant claims of Christ and of the Christian faith, rests upon the supposition that the readers held Moses, Aaron, the Jewish priesthood, the old Covenant and the Levitical ritual, in the highest esteem. The author's argument is: you will grant the Divine authority and greatness of Moses, Aaron and the Jewish institutions: Christ is greater than they; therefore you ought to be faithful to Him. He assumes an exclusively Jewish point of view in the minds of his readers as his major premise" (ISBE).

However, this does not answer the question, "Where did these Jews live"? Tradition fixed on the idea that it was Jerusalem but this position is not uncontested. Other suggestions include Rome and Alexandria.

Date and place of writing

As with the location of the readers, similarly the time of composition cannot be determined with certainty though it is likely that this fell in the second half of the first century and probably before the fall of Jerusalem (8:4-5). The work refers to two persecutions (10:32 f; 12:4 and 10:35-37) and some conjecture that these correspond to the persecutions of Nero (A.D. 64) and Domitian (after A.D. 81). Nevertheless, when it is remembered that there was normally active persecution somewhere in the empire and the destination of this letter is uncertain this consideration should not weigh over heavily in dating the book.

In the midst of these ambiguities it seems fairly clear that the author composed the work whilst in Italy (13:24).

C. The author's message

Fortunately the doubts concerning these background questions do not obscure his purpose in writing. In fact, we can determine something of the general setting by the content of the book.

1. It consists of strong warnings against falling away (3:1-4:13; 5:12-6:20) intermingled with doctrinal passages – the doctrinal development ending in ch. 10.
2. Persecution threatened to lead them into apostasy. These Christians had suffered in the past, had endured and now it appeared that they were to be tried again (10:32-34). With the prospect of more to come some were considering casting aside the faith in order to avoid further suffering (10:35-37; 12:4-13).
3. The primary purpose of the writer is to bolster the resolve of these Christians to be faithful by showing the perfection and finality of Christianity as compared to the Mosaic system. He quotes various OT passages, the main usage being to show that the OT itself attested to its own incompleteness and temporary character. In these instances a vacuum was left in the Old Testament system, and that vacuum is filled by Jesus Christ. Notice the following -
 - It's incompleteness in itself to accomplish the thing desired (8:6-9; Jer 31:31-34).
 - The insufficiency of animal sacrifices (10:1-4; Lev 16:29, 34 and 10:5-6; Ps 40:6-7).
 - The incompleteness of the priesthood (argued through ch. 7 which explains the implications of Psa 110:4 but note esp. 7:11-12).

Piecing these things together, the likelihood is that for the second time these Jews faced persecution because they were Christians and thought that they could escape a repeat experience by renouncing Christ and returning to Judaism. The writer insists that to go back to the Mosaic economy was not to go back to God; rather it was a desertion of God and not a going to Him. The gospel message is God's final revelation and the fulfilment of the Old Testament. Failure to hold fast to God's word is to fall away from the faith.

The book can be divided into three parts: Jesus, The Incarnate Son of God (1:1-4:13); Jesus, Our Great High Priest (4:14-10:18) and Practical Application Of Doctrine To Life (10:19-13:25).