

Introduction to the Epistle to the Hebrews

Authorship

“Who wrote the Epistle God only knows certainly.” These are the words of Origen (ca A.D. 185 - 254) as quoted by Eusebius (ca A.D. 260 - 339) in reference to the authorship of the epistle to the Hebrews. Since the authorship of this grand book seems to be the area of greatest interest, it is here we shall begin our introduction and examination.

By declaration of the pope, the epistle was declared non-Pauline (i.e., not written by Paul), yet later declared by a different pope to be written by Paul. (So much for ruling as Christ on earth, reserving all rights of biblical interpretation, and papal infallibility!). In addition to Paul, the epistle has been attributed to Barnabas, Silas, Luke, Clement of Rome, Apollos, Mark, and others (Coffman, 1). Though we cannot know with any degree of certainty who wrote Hebrews, we can examine the evidence that points away from Paul, both externally (historically and from secular writings) and internally (within the text itself).

External Evidence Against Pauline Authorship

Generally speaking, the idea of Pauline authorship was resisted until the late fourth century (Coffman, 1), even among the church at Rome (Bruce, xxxiv). Additionally, most of today's scholars do not believe Paul to be the author of Hebrews. Such has been the case for the last 2000 years (except for those under Catholic influence). Clement of Rome was familiar with the epistle, quoting from it in his letter (ca A.D. 96) from the church at Rome to the church in Corinth (Bruce, xxiii, xxxiv). However, he makes no reference or inference to the author's identity (Bruce, xxxv).

Internal Evidence Against Pauline Authorship

Internally, the arguments are numerous and convincing. First, there is no reference made anywhere in the text to identify Paul as the author. In the thirteen previous epistles, Paul identified himself as the author with the very first word. Additionally, though Paul did not physically pen each word of his epistles, at times he went to some length to identify himself as the source of the message. What statement is made to this effect in:

1. 1 Corinthians 16:21? _____
2. Colossians 4:8? _____
3. 2 Thessalonians 3:17? _____
4. Galatians 6:11? _____

In connection with this, the author seldom refers to himself in the singular first person. In fact, the first singular reference to self (“me”) does not appear until 10:34, with two more in 11:32 (“I” and “me”), then with a few references in the closure (13:18-25). This is quite unlike the apostle Paul’s normal writing style.

Also, the statement made by the author in 2:3-4 does not conform to Paul’s experience. God’s Word was not confirmed to Paul by the words and signs of the apostles (“confirmed to us by those who heard Him”). In contrast to the experience of the Hebrew writer, Paul said the gospel he preached was not given to him by man, nor was he taught it, but it was given by the revelation of Jesus Christ (Gal 1:11-12). Additionally in Galatians 1, Paul notes how it was several years before he ever met any of the apostles. Specifically, he said that after his conversion he did not confer with “those who were apostles before me, but I went into Arabia and returned again to Damascus. Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter . . . But other apostles saw I none, save James the Lord’s brother” (Gal 1:17-19).

When was Hebrews Written?

There are a few statements within the pages of this grand book that may shed some light on the approximate time of writing. In 5:12-6:3, we see how enough time has passed that the recipients of the epistle should have been mature in the faith and teaching others. In 6:10 we read how they had “ministered to the saints,” possibly a reference of relief sent to the needy saints in Jerusalem (cf. Rom 15:25-26; 2 Cor 8:21; 9:11-15).

Also, 10:32 admonishes the recipients to “call to remembrance the former days, in which after ye were illuminated, ye endured a great fight of afflictions.” In Acts 8:1, a great persecution arose against the church at Jerusalem. The early church was made up entirely of people with ties to Judaism, as the gospel was not preached in Samaria until that persecution drove Philip to Samaria in Acts 8:5. As the entire epistle is written for a Jewish audience, it seems only likely this refers to the early persecution of the church by unconverted Jews, but not to the Roman persecution culminating in the destruction of Jerusalem, as we shall soon see.

In 10:25, the Christians are warned not to forsake the assembly. “Forsake” is from a double compound Greek word meaning to “leave in the lurch, abandon in time of trouble.” The admonition to pay particular attention to the assemblies is due to seeing “the day approaching.” To what day does “the day” refer? It was terrible, thus the need to be close to God and His people. It was “seeable” yet in the future. In all likelihood, “the day” refers to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

Finally, in 12:4, the writer indicates the Christians' struggle had not yet been "unto blood." That is, they had not been vigorously opposed and persecuted to the point of giving their blood in defense of the truth. Nero's cruel and intense persecution began in A.D. 64. Thus, we might assume the letter shortly preceded it or took place in the infancy of the persecution.

These references, along with Hebrews 2:3-4, indicate the epistle was written within a generation (40 years) of the establishment of the church. In light of the internal evidence, I believe the epistle was written between the years A.D. 60 - 65.

Why Was Hebrews Written?

Scholars are in virtual agreement as to the purpose of this epistle. The epistle was written to Jewish Christians who were in danger of returning to Judaism. Because of the very nature of Judaism and its connection to Jewish history and daily life, this was a continuous problem for Jewish Christians (cf Acts 15:1-2; Galatians 2:1 - 3:3).

1. How was the Law of Moses described in Galatians 3:24-25? _____ In this same text, what was the purpose of the Law? _____
2. How is the Law of Moses described in Colossians 3:16-17? _____
3. Read 2 Corinthians 3:3-11.
 - a. The law of Moses is called the ministration of _____ (v 7), of _____ (v 9), written and engraven on _____ (v 7).
 - b. The law of Christ (New Testament - v 6) is called the ministration of the _____ (v 8), the ministration of _____ (v 9), written in the _____ (v 3).

The Mount of Transfiguration (Matt 17:1-8; Luke 9:28-36) also illustrates the superiority of Christ and His law over that of Moses. In this scene, Jesus appears with Moses, the great lawgiver, and with Elijah, the greatest prophet (in the estimation of the Jews). God uses this event to exalt Christ over these, the two greatest men in Jewish history. When Peter called for three tabernacles (places of worship) to be built for each one, God immediately took away Moses and Elijah, and declared "This is My beloved Son; hear ye Him."