

Study 11: Hebrews & James

Hebrews has most questioned authorship of all of the books of the New Testament, whilst the place of James in the New Testament canon has been greatly questioned.

The Hebrew letter gives a strong and coherent treatise on Jesus as the Messiah, whilst James gives as a very practical approach to putting our faith into practice.

Introduction

Hebrews - Authorship

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James - Authorship

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James – Date and Occasion

James – Brief Outline

Homework and preparation for next week:

- Read the notes as a review of the study
- How does James' view of "faith and works" reconcile to Paul's view? (Rom 4; 9; 11:6)
- Skim read 1&2 Peter & Jude
 - What are the clues about the writers?
 - Why is Jude so similar to 2nd Peter?
 - Which Jude do you think wrote "Jude"? (and why?)
 - How many "Jude's" can you find in the New Testament?

Notes for study 11: Hebrews & James

Introduction

Hebrews has most questioned authorship of all of the books of the New Testament, whilst the place of James in the New Testament canon has been greatly questioned.

The Hebrew letter gives a strong and coherent treatise on Jesus as the Messiah who fulfilled prophecy and is placed far above all other beings including the angels. He came as a servant, and received the inheritance as a Son. As a mediator He makes intercession for us, and is well qualified to do just that because He has been where we are.

Hebrews - Authorship

The author of Hebrews does not identify himself anywhere in the letter, unlike most of the letters in the New Testament. It was a widely questioned and debated subject in the third century and remains so today. However, there are a few clues in the letter that tell us a little about who he might have been – or at least to narrow the possibilities.

It is clear that the author knew and was known to his readers. At the close of the letter, he sends quite specific greetings (13: 18-25), and speaks of his personal hardships and struggles. He also makes quite specific reference to Timothy, and some of the brethren who send greetings. We also know that he was a man, as he uses a masculine term “to tell” in Heb 11:32. The term literally in English would go something like “...time would forbid for *a man like me to tell you...*”

Paul stands out as the most likely of all of the contenders as the writer (that is to say that the evidence for Paul is stronger than the evidence for anyone else). From around 400 AD until around 1600 AD, the book was widely known as “*Paul’s letter to the Hebrews*” He was a “Jew’s Jew” (Phip 3:5) and was extremely well educated in the Jewish religion “brought up at the feet of Gamaliel” (Acts 22:3). His understanding of the Jewish religion, his perfect understanding of Christianity allowed Paul to be *the* most effective teacher of the gospel as it reached out into the world – at least as far as is recorded for us. Timothy is specifically mentioned in Heb 13:23, and the author of the book had quite recent knowledge of his state. As a frequent associate of Paul, it adds some weight to Paul’s authorship of the letter. The end greetings come via the author from the Italian brethren, and given Paul’s two imprisonment in Rome would add some further weight to Paul’s authorship.

Having said that, in chapter 2:3 he speaks in the third person of Jesus and the Apostles “...by *them* who heard Him...” and “...God also bearing *them* witness with signs and wonders ...” So that excludes the writer from being any of the apostles (including Paul). That is to say, that the evidence *against Paul* is stronger than the evidence in favour of him.

In most of Paul’s letters (except Php, Phm and Thess) he writes “...*Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ...*”, even to Timothy (both letters) and Titus – both of whom he regards as “...*my true son in the faith...*”. Paul’s apostleship was challenged (by the Judaisers) everywhere he went, so he goes to great lengths in his letters to point out that he is an apostle, but by special appointment, and is just as authoritative as the others. In the letters to Timothy and Titus, he is writing *with an apostolic hat on*, not just a letter to his close friends.

Yet the Hebrew writer points out by speaking in the third person, that he was *not* one of the twelve, and does *nothing* to point out that he was an apostle by special appointment.

External evidence:

Tertullian (c 200 AD) spoke about “an epistle to the Hebrews under the name Barnabas”. Barnabas was well placed to have been the author: He was a Jew of the priestly tribe of Levi, and was well regarded by the church in Jerusalem. As a close friend and travelling companion of

Paul, he was commissioned with Paul by the church at Antioch to reach out with the gospel into the world (on the first missionary journey). He was also well versed in the Old Testament, and played the prominent role at the beginning of the first journey. Consequently Luke referred to them as “Barnabas and Paul” when later it became “Paul and Barnabas” or “those of Paul’s company”.

Another leading candidate is Apollos, and he is favoured by many scholars today. He was a Jewish Christian, who was “...*mighty in the (Old Testament) scriptures...*” and an eloquent man. He would have had a close association with Paul whilst in Corinth, and probably also at Ephesus.

Luke has been suggested by some, as the purity of the Greek language in the epistle only occurs elsewhere in the New Testament in the parts of Luke’s gospel where he writes independently of the other gospel writers. However, Luke was a Gentile, and the Hebrew writer is clearly Jewish. Although, such could be explained if Luke were writing under instruction from Paul.

Clement of Rome is also considered to be a possible author by some.

Schaff notes¹:

The following points may be regarded as made certain, or at least in the highest degree probable: the author of Hebrews was a Jew by birth; a Hellenist, not a Palestinian; thoroughly at home in the Greek Scriptures (less so, if at all, in the Hebrew original); familiar with the Alexandrian Jewish theology (less so, if at all, with the rabbinical learning of Palestine); a pupil of the apostles (not himself an apostle); an independent disciple and co-worker of Paul; a friend of Timothy; in close relation with the Hebrew Christians of Palestine, and, when he wrote, on the point of visiting them; an inspired man of apostolic insight, power, and authority, and hence worthy of a position in the canon as "the great unknown."

Eusebius wrote a church history in the fourth century, and quotes many of the earlier writers. He mentions²:

Clement in his epistle which is accepted by all, and which he wrote in the name of the church of Rome to the church of Corinth ... he gives many thoughts drawn from the Epistle to the Hebrews ... Wherefore it has seemed reasonable to reckon it with the other writings of the apostle. For as Paul had written to the Hebrews in his native tongue, some say that the evangelist Luke, others that this Clement himself, translated the epistle. The latter seems more probable, because the epistle of Clement and that to the Hebrews have a similar character in regard to style, and still further because the thoughts contained in the two works are not very different.

In discussing the canon of the New Testament books, Eusebius discusses Clement’s view of authorship³:

He says that the Epistle to the Hebrews is the work of Paul, and that it was written to the Hebrews in the Hebrew language; but that Luke translated it carefully and published it for the Greeks, and hence the same style of expression is found in this epistle and in the Acts. But he says that the words, Paul the Apostle, were probably not prefixed, because, in sending it to the Hebrews, who were prejudiced and suspicious of him, he wisely did not wish to repel them at the very beginning by giving his name.

Origen compiled a list of canonical books in the second century, and Eusebius quotes him concerning the Hebrew letter:⁴

¹ Schaff, Vol 1: “Apostolic Christianity” p. 822

² Eusebius: “Ecclesiastical History” Baker Book House, ISBN 0-8010-3306-3: Book 3, chapter 38

³ Eusebius: Book 6, chapter 14

In addition he 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, who acknowledged himself 'rude in speech,' 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.

Whilst this is "an interesting debate" it does not really matter who penned the letter. Its inspiration is without question. Origen's statement shows that even in the second century its authorship was unknown.

Hebrews – Recipients of the Letter

The recipients are not explicitly stated, although rather than a general letter, the author had a specific group in mind who were very familiar with the Old Testament. He addresses the Jewish heritage of Christianity over and over: Christ – the fulfilment of the Law and the Prophets. The close of the letter makes specific references to Timothy, to the impending visit of the author with them in a short time, and of specific greetings from the Italian brethren.

Hebrews – Date and Occasion

Whilst the *power and effect* of Judaism was abolished at the cross (Eph 2:15-16; Col 2:13-15), its *practice* continued until the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, when the Temple and all its records were destroyed by the Romans. During this *period of transition*, The Jewish Christians must have been thinking that perhaps they should go back to the Jewish religion and avoid the persecution and tribulation being suffered by the Christians, both at the hands of the Romans, and also from the Jews.

The letter was written before the outbreak of the Jewish War (AD 66) which culminated in the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, as the Greek present tense is used when speaking of the temple. (5:1-3; 7:23,27; 8:3-5; 9:6-9,13,25; 10:1,3-4,8,11; 13:10-11). Also the author would no doubt have made considerable argument from the cessation of the sacrifice and temple worship. But how soon before AD 70 we are not sure. The writer clearly has a view that the period of transition would soon come to an end, and says "...By calling this covenant "new," he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging ***will soon disappear***..." (8:13 NIV). The Jewish historian Josephus gives us the precise date of August 5th AD 70 for the cessation of the daily sacrifice⁵.

⁴ Eusebius: Book 6, chapter 25

⁵ Josephus: "Wars of the Jews" 6:94

The Jewish Christians had become discouraged because of suffering (10:32-39), and were trying to reconcile their Jewish heritage with Christ and Christianity. He encourages and instructs them to “...not drift away...” (2:1); “...hold fast to our faith...” (4:14); and “...do not cast away our confidence, which has great reward...” (10:35).

In view of the suffering and confusion with Judaism, Christ is held up as the pre-eminent manifestation of God and the Messiah who fulfilled the Messianic prophecies of the Old Covenant.

Hebrews – Brief Outline

THE major theme of the book is the fulfilment of the Old Testament in Christ, and the supremacy of Him in every way over the Jewish system.

Jesus Greater than the Angels
Jesus Greater than Moses
Jesus Greater than Abraham
Jesus Greater than the OT Priests
A better covenant
A better sanctuary
A better sacrifice
Past heroes were blessed because of faith and obedience
We can be blessed by our faith and obedience
Keep your focus on Jesus
Practical basis for living a worthy life in Christ

James - Authorship

James is one of the “general epistles” in the New Testament, not written to a specific person or church. The writer makes a very brief introduction “...James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad: Greetings...” (1:1 NKJV). He gives us no clues as to which James he is. Three James’ were recorded in the New Testament:

- **James the son of Zebedee**, and brother of John. Whilst prominent among the apostles, he was the first of the apostles to die, being killed by Herod around AD 44 (Acts 12:2). He is excluded as the author because of his early death
- **James the son of Alphaeus**. Very little is known about this James. He is often confused with James the Lord’s brother (“James the Less”). He is often dismissed as the author because we know little about him.
- **James the Lord’s brother**. This James was also known as “James the Less”. Authorship of the letter is most often ascribed to this James. Whilst he was not one of the twelve, he was prominent in the church in Jerusalem, and chaired the Jerusalem conference (Acts 15).

Eusebius says⁶

“These accounts are written respecting James, who is said to have written the first of the epistles general, (catholic;) but it is to be observed that it is considered spurious. Not many indeed of the ancients have mentioned it, and not even that called the epistle of Jude, which is also one of the seven called catholic epistles. Nevertheless we know, that these, with the rest, are publicly used in most of the churches.”

⁶ Eusebius: Book 1, Chapter 23

James – Recipients of the Letter

The letter is general in its nature, and addressed to “...*the twelve tribes scattered abroad*...”. This has the hint of being written to Jewish Christians. If the letter was written at an early date, then the *scattering* could refer to the dispersion of Acts 8, and at that time they were all *Jewish* Christians (Acts 11:19). Quite clearly, the letter is addressed to Christians, and James uses *brethren* many times in the letter. Cogdill⁷ says “...James was not writing to Jews nor just to Jewish Christians, but that his letter was addressed to the Church of the Lord generally which had been “scattered abroad” from Jerusalem and throughout the nations of the earth under very severe persecution...”

Roper⁸ adds “...there is its distinctly Jewish flavour – as it refers to such things as the twelve tribes (James 1:1), the synagogue (James 2:2), the law (James 2:11), and Old Testament worthies (James 2:21, 25; 5:17) – while it remains Christian to the core...”

In conclusion, the recipients were “scattered abroad” Christians displaced after the dispersion (*diaspora*) some time after Paul’s persecution of the church (Acts 8:1), and as the church grew throughout the world.

James – Date and Occasion

Eusebius⁹ records that James the Lord’s brother was thrown from a wing of the Temple and then beaten to death with a club. This was shortly after Paul had left for Rome and also shortly after the death of Festus. Festus died in office in AD 62, so (if the letter was written by James the brother of the Lord), this places the time of writing before AD 62.

The date of the letter could be somewhat determined if we knew which James wrote it (or *vice versa* – if we knew the date, we might be able to eliminate some of the possible authors). The options are:

- James the brother of John Before AD 44
- James the brother of the Lord Before AD 62
- James the son of Alphaeus Unknown, but probably before AD 90

The content can also help us to understand the date. The epistle does not deal with the Jew-Gentile controversy (at least to any significant extent). This suggests that it might have been written *before* it became an issue (before the conversion of Cornelius in AD 37, or at least before Paul’s return from the first journey in AD 51). The dispersion occurred in AD 34, and a general epistle to those who were scattered could fit that timeframe and events.

Alternately, a later date for the epistle could suggest that the Jew-Gentile controversy had been settled and no further instruction was needed. In his final letter (2nd Timothy), written shortly before his death in AD 68, Paul makes allusions to the problem (1:11; 3:2-5; Timothy well understood where Paul stood, whilst the Judaisers were trying to discredit him). This suggests that the controversy was still around up to 68 AD, although it was not the major problem being faced by Timothy. James would then have to have been written after (say) AD 60.

The occasion of the letter is not so hard to identify. The Christians had been scattered, and were in need of both encouragement and instruction on dealing with their practical problems.

⁷ Cogdill, p.142

⁸ Roper, David L: “Practical Christianity – Studies in the Book of James” Gospel Advocate Co.
ISBN 0-89225-291-X p.9

⁹ Eusebius: Book 1, Chapter 23

James – Brief Outline

Acceptance of James as a part of the New Testament Canon has been challenged more than any other book. Some of this relates to the author, and much to the content. Martin Luther described James as “an epistle of straw” because it did not align with his idea that salvation comes by “faith alone”. However, some of the earliest writers regarded James as a part of the canon, the most notable being Origen (AD 185 – 254) and the fourth century church historian Eusebius.

The following outline is adapted from Adamson¹⁰

- 1:1 *Salutation,*
- 1:2-11 *The Christian Faith*
- 1:12-27 *The Gospel Promise*
- 2:1-26 *The Christian Life*
- 3:2-18 *Some Christian Advice*
- 4:1-10 *Love of the world and Love of God*
- 4:11-17 *Cautions*
- 5:1-18 *Conclusion*
- 5:1-6 The judgement of the faithless rich
- 5:7-11 Be patient, for the Lord’s return is coming
- 5:12 Do not swear oaths
- 5:13-18 Exercising our service within the congregation

James is a very practical book, which deals with the practical application of our faith in the challenges of the real world, although it is not an easy book to read. At first it appears to be a lot of thoughts or short essays that are not connected to one another, but they are linked together by thought-trains.

¹⁰ Adamson, James B: “The Epistle of James – New International Commentary on the New Testament”
William B Eermans Publishing Company, ISBN 0-8028-2515-X p. 44 – 45