

Study 1: Introduction to the book of Hebrews

Authorship of the book

- Who are the possible authors?
- What are the probabilities?
- How do we know?
- Who was it written to?

When was the letter written?

- How do we know?

Content of the book

- What are the major themes?
- What are some reference sources we might use in the study?

Homework and preparation for next week:

Read the whole book in a single sitting, and a few days later read again chapter 1

Notes for study 1: Introduction to the book of Hebrews

Authorship of the book

The authorship of Hebrews stands alone. Not in that it is clear who he is, but rather that it is unclear and widely questioned and debated.

The author does not identify himself anywhere in the letter, unlike most of the letters in the New Testament. 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.

Firstly, we know that he was a man. In Heb 11:32 he uses a masculine term “to tell”. In English, we do not have the gender forms of most of our words (unlike the Greek language the New Testament was written in). The term would go something like “time would forbid for *a man like me to tell you ...*”

It is also clear that the author knew and was known to those to whom he wrote. By contrast, Paul went to great pains in Galatians and Corinthians to point out who he was, and why they should listen to what he had to say. At the close of the Hebrew letter, the writer 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.

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 ...”

Who are the possible authors?

From around 400 AD until around 1600 AD, the book was widely known as “*Paul’s letter to the Hebrews*”

Paul remains perhaps the strongest contender as the author, although there are serious reasons to question it. 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 imprisonments in Rome would add some further weight to Paul’s authorship.

However, Paul said that he was the Apostle to the *Gentiles*. (Acts 9:15, 13:46, 18:6, Rom 11:13, 15:18, Gal 2:2, 2:7-9, 1 Tim 2:7, 4:17).

Further, on the “Italian brethren” greetings, the author did not say that he was in Italy. He merely said that the brethren from there sent their greetings. This could mean that the author had recently been there, or it could mean that some brethren from there had been with the author. For example, I was in Townsville about 3 months ago, and I could justly write to brethren in Brisbane and say that “the Townsville brethren send their greetings”. That is not to say that I am in Townsville. Equally, if I had some brethren visit from Tasmania, they could ask me to pass on their greetings to the brethren in Brisbane even though I have not been to Tasmania for some time.

The *style of the letter* is not consistent with Paul’s usual writing. Paul usually followed “structure” in his letters (see my notes on the Ephesian study for a discussion on this). Such structure is absent in the Hebrew letter (but it is also absent in the two letters to Timothy!!).

Everywhere Paul went, he had to defend his apostleship – even to many brethren who knew him “first hand” (such as the Corinthians) – Paul, you’re not a *real* apostle – you were not one of the twelve! And so Paul 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. Yet the Hebrew writer points out by speaking in the third person, that he was *not* one of the twelve, but does not do *anything* to point out that he was an apostle by special appointment.

Who are the other possibilities?

Tertullian (c 200 AD) spoke about “an epistle to the Hebrews under the name Barnabas”.

Barnabas could be well placed to have been the author: He was a Jew of the priestly tribe of Levi. He was well regarded by the church in Jerusalem, as it was through him that Paul was accepted as a brother after his conversion. He became a close friend and travelling companion of Paul, and 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 further, an intellectual Hebrew christian who was well versed in the Old Testament. At the beginning of the first journey, Barnabas plays the prominent role, and consequently Luke refers to them as “Barnabas and Paul”. 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” Acts 18:24 and an eloquent man.

Further, he would have had a close association with the apostle Paul whilst in Corinth, and probably also at Ephesus.

What are the probabilities?

The balance of probabilities probably point towards Paul, with stronger evidence for his authorship than for anyone else in particular. Although the evidence against Paul is stronger than the evidence for him!

Whilst this is “an interesting debate” it does not really matter who penned the letter. Its inspiration is without question.

Who was it written to?

The recipients were familiar with the Old Testament, as the author over and over addresses the Jewish heritage of Christianity: Christ – the fulfilment of the Law and the Prophets.

The recipients are not explicitly stated, although a specific group was no doubt in the mind of the author rather than a general letter. The close of the letter makes specific reference to Timothy, to the impending visit of the author with them in a short time, and of specific greetings from the Italian brethren.

So a specific group of Jewish (Hebrew) Christians are the intended recipients. Some have suggested that the group were in danger of falling into Judaizing apostasy, although this is not specifically spelled out in the letter.

When was the letter written?

The date must have been before the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 68-70, as the author would no doubt have made considerable argument from the cessation of the sacrifice and temple worship.

In fact throughout the letter, 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).

But how soon before AD 68 we are not sure, although the reference in 10:25 to “see the day approaching” would suggest that it might not be too far away.

Content of the book

What are the major themes?

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

What are some reference sources we might use in the study?

- The Old Testament
- Josephus
- The Mishnah