

STUDIES IN HEBREWS

PART 1: WHO WROTE THE BOOK OF HEBREWS?

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“There is no portion of Scripture whose authorship is more disputed, nor any of which the inspiration is more indisputable” (Conybeare and Howson).

INTRODUCTION

“Secret things belong to the Lord our God, but those that are revealed belong to us and our descendants forever, so that we might obey all the words of this law” (Deut.29:29). This is the verse that comes to my mind whenever I ponder over the question of the authorship of Hebrews, a monumental document in the New Testament canon that has made immensely valuable contributions to the theology of the Christian Church. Even when God is telling us that He has concealed the name of the author of Hebrews, instead of leaving that question alone, some of us still work hard to identify the author, just because of our ardent admiration for the one who penned this majestic work on the superior excellences of our blessed Savior - His greatness, preeminence and superiority. No doubt, the author was highly educated, literate, eloquent, theologically mature, and pastorally hearted. It makes little difference who wrote the book of Hebrews. In the final analysis, it is the doctrine and the message that matters.

My own interest in the book of Hebrews germinated as a result of my father’s deep appreciation for it which finally culminated in his commentary on Hebrews. My most memorable sermons of my father are from the book of Hebrews. I also had the opportunity for erudite discussions with him on the authorship and theology of the book of Hebrews. Somehow I assumed that he had a leaning towards the Pauline authorship of Hebrews. But to my surprise, I discovered that he believed that someone other than Paul wrote it, though he did not speculate on the identity of the author. His leaning toward non-Pauline authorship is also reflected in His commentary on Hebrews written in the Malayalam language (K. G. Kurian, *Commentary on The Epistle To The Hebrews*, 1970). He aroused my curiosity on this great Christological document in the New Testament and exposed me to the various scholarly opinions on its authorship.

The author of Hebrews may have a theological reason in his mind to have concealed his own identity. Whenever he cites the Old Testament (he does it more than any other New Testament author), he does not name the human authors of the Old Testament books (one exception in Heb.4:7). He looks at Scripture as having come from God as the revealed and inspired Word of God. That settles everything for him. We would do well to heed it. It seems that it is his

practice not to name human authors of the Scriptures, and he has followed that rule even in the document which he wrote. He is consistent with his policy.

J.M. Flanigan's comments on the divine authorship merit our attention. He writes; "The human author, be he apostle or not, has indeed been overshadowed by a greater. There is another Apostle in this letter. He is supreme. Let the occupation of the earliest readers, and of those of us who follow, be with the Apostle and High Priest of our confession. Let us consider Him....that we should see Him who has become to us the revelation of the heart of God and the fulfillment of every Messianic prediction" (*What the Bible Teaches, Hebrews*, p.8).

AUTHORSHIP DEBATE

The authorship of Hebrews is still much debated. Over the centuries, there have been many proposed authors. Paul Ellingworth, in his commentary, deals with 13 proposed authors to the book (*The Epistle to the Hebrews*, pp.3-21). The most feasible ones that have been backed with some data include Apostle Paul, Barnabas, Luke, and Apollos. Earliest suggestion also included Clement of Rome. Other proposals set forth Priscilla, Jude, Philip, and Silvanus (Silas). At best, the author's identity has been a matter of significant conjecture throughout church history.

We must humbly agree that we have no certain evidence about the authorship of Hebrews. It still remains a 'mystery' (not in the New Testament sense of the term). We can scarcely improve on the words of Origen's conclusion, that "who wrote the Epistle, God only knows the truth."

"If I gave my opinion, I should say that the thoughts are those of the apostle, but the diction and phraseology are those of someone 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" (Origen, cited by Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 6.25).

Probably most of the candidates mentioned above are all possible authors. There are arguments for and against their authorship. There is no need of dogmatism here. In the light of the available evidence mixed with some educated guesses, you may draw a reasonable and well-informed conclusion, and form your opinion on this matter. But this uncertainty should not trouble us in anyway as this letter is the inspired and authoritative Scripture. It has unquestioned value for the doctrine of Christ (Christology) and the Christian life (Zoeology). But I don't blame

anyone for being curious about the authorship of the most sophisticated writing in the New Testament.

Bob Utley's excellent summary of the theories of authorship is really helpful (*Introduction to Hebrews*, Bible.org):

1. Clement of Alexandria in his book *Hypotyposes* (quoted by Eusebius) believed Luke translated into Greek Paul's original writing in Hebrew (Luke used excellent Koine Greek).
2. Origen said either Luke or Clement of Rome wrote it but followed Paul's teaching.
3. Jerome and Augustine accepted Paul's authorship only to facilitate the book's acceptance into the Canon by the Western Church.
4. Tertullian (*De Pudic.*20) believed Barnabas (a Levite associated with Paul) wrote it.
5. Martin Luther said Apollos, an Alexandrian-trained intellectual associated with Paul (cf. Acts 18:24), wrote it.
6. Calvin said Clement of Rome (the first to quote it in A.D. 96) or Luke was the author.
7. Adolph Von Harnack said Aquila and Priscilla (they taught Apollos the full gospel and were associated with Paul and Timothy, cf. Acts 18:26) wrote it.
8. Sir William Ramsey said Philip (the evangelist) wrote it for Paul while Paul was in prison at Caesarea.
9. Others have asserted Philip or Silas (Silvanus).

PAULINE AUTHORSHIP

It is possible Paul wrote the Book of Hebrews. The King James Version assumes Pauline authorship. But none of the early writers who cite Hebrews mentions its author. In the Eastern Church by the time of Clement of Alexandria (A.D.150-215) and Origen (A.D.185 -253), the epistle was attributed to Paul, although both of these theologians recognized the stylistic differences between Hebrews and the Pauline epistles. According to Eusebius, they only claimed a Pauline association for the book but recognized that Paul himself did not put pen to paper for this book, even though they did not know the author's name. Clement of Alexandria suggests that Paul wrote the book originally in Hebrew and that Luke translated it into Greek (Luke is the New Testament's second most eloquent writer, the first being the author of Hebrews). The reason for Clement's observation is probably because the style of Hebrews is not Pauline "and the naming of Luke as the translator having no basis except that Acts is in better Greek than Paul wrote" (Alexander C. Purdy, *Hebrews, The Interpreter's Bible*, Vol.11, p.581). "Origen's problem.....is to reconcile un-Pauline style with what he regards as apostolic (Pauline) thought....he is more concerned to validate Hebrews as apostolic than to establish Paul's role on it" (ibid. pp.581-582).

As Karen Jobes rightly observes, "The nuanced position on the authorship question by the Alexandrian fathers was obscured by later church tradition that mistook Pauline association for

Pauline authorship. The enormously influential King James Bible took its cue from this tradition as reflected in the title translated from that found in some manuscripts, "The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews." In spite of this, the careful reader of the epistle will note that the book of Hebrews is in fact anonymous" (*Letters to the Church, A Survey of Hebrews and the General Epistles*, p. 37).

Arguments in favor of Pauline authorship can be summarized as follows:

1. Since Apostle Paul was the most widely known and influential apostle and theologian of the early church, the most assumed author is Paul.
2. The centrality and the preeminence of the person of Christ is Paul's favorite theme and that is the theme of the epistle to the Hebrews. Like Paul's epistles, great emphasis is placed on the death of Christ as a propitiatory sacrifice. Many of the thoughts of Hebrews are similar to those found in Paul's writings.
3. The tradition of Pauline authorship is very old. Early Church fathers like Clement of Alexandria and Origen held that the epistle was in some sense Pauline. Jerome and Augustine popularized the Pauline authorship in the west. But as Bruce notes, ".....not that they were convinced that it was so on grounds of literary criticism but because as a practical issue its canonicity was bound up with the belief in its apostolic authorship" (F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, xxxviii).
4. Paul was a "Hebrew of the Hebrews" (Phil.3:5), and as a religious and zealous Pharisee, he was well-versed in the OT and he could easily write a document like Hebrews. Moreover, he cared for the Jews and he could have written a letter out of his great love for them.
5. Peter mentions an epistle that is difficult to understand (2 Peter 3:15-16). Since Peter knew Paul, he may be alluding to the letter to the Hebrews written by Paul.
6. The author of Hebrews knew Timothy (Heb.13:23). Timothy and Paul were companions and they travelled together.
7. There is a strong similarity between the writer of Hebrews and Paul in the use of Scripture. Like Paul, the author heavily depends on the Old Testament Scripture to support his argument.
8. The oldest manuscript containing Hebrews (the Chester Beatty Papyrus, P 46, dated prior to A.D.200) is placed along with Paul's letters.
9. Habakkuk 2:4 is quoted three times in the NT. The first two quotations are found in Paul's letters (Rom.1:17; Gal.3:11). The third quotation in Heb.10:38 also should be from Paul.
10. The focus of Hebrews is to portray Jesus Christ as the Apostle and High Priest (3:1). Hence the human apostle's name is not disclosed contrary to what Paul does in his other letters.

The evidence for Pauline authorship is not very extensive or conclusive. But it stems from a very old tradition in the early church. Some similarities in theology, phraseology, and the use of OT Scriptures also argue in favor of Paul's authorship (see J. Dwight Pentecost, *A Faith That Endures, The Book of Hebrews Applied to the Real Issues of Life*, pp.3-10). The stylistic differences are attributed to Paul writing Hebrews in Hebrew, and then Luke translating it into Greek. It is also argued that Paul omitted his name in the letter because he the "apostle to the Gentiles" was writing to the Jews who would have likely dismissed the letter if they had known the source.

Though the authorship of Hebrews is widely debated, the most common conjecture through the centuries has been that the apostle Paul is the author. The Eastern Church (Alexandria, Egypt) leaned towards Pauline authorship of Hebrews, while the West (Rome) was hesitant to accept it as Pauline. But by the end of the fourth century, Augustine and Jerome had argued for it. But from their own writings, it seems that they were motivated by a hope for church unity than any real conviction about the authorship of the epistle.

Moses Stuart's *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (1833) is one of the notable older commentaries that defend Paul's authorship. The last major defense of Paul's authorship of Hebrews was written more than half a century ago - William Leonard's notable work, *The Authorship of the Epistle to the Hebrews: Critical Problem and Use of the Old Testament* (1939). Among the famous commentators, J.N. Darby, William Kelly, F.B. Meyer, Samuel Ridout, Adolph Saphir, F.W. Grant, Sir Robert Anderson, Franz Delitzsch, W.R. Newell, Arno C. Gaebelein, H.A. Ironside, and others, supported the long accepted tradition of Pauline authorship of Hebrews.

REJECTION OF PAULINE AUTHORSHIP

In 1516, Erasmus, the great Renaissance scholar and theologian began pressing serious objections to Paul's authorship sparking a long history of investigation and debate. By the middle of the 20th century, there was a nearly universal scholarly consensus that "Paul is neither directly nor indirectly the author" (*Jerome Bible Commentary*, XXXX). "The question of Pauline authorship has been answered with a resounding "no" from virtually all modern scholars, regardless of theological orientation" (George H. Guthrie, *Hebrews, The NIV Application Commentary*, p. 23, f. n. 12). This seems to be a fair assessment with which the vast majority of conservative scholars today are in agreement. The only thing some commentators are certain of is that the author is not Paul (William Lane, *Hebrews*, xlix). "What Paul and the author of Hebrews have in common is the basic apostolic teaching; but when we come to distinctive features we may say with certainty that the thought of the epistle is not Paul's, the language is not Paul's, and the technique of Old Testament quotation is not Paul's (F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, xli). Calvin was quite certain that Paul was not the author of Hebrews. "I can adduce no reason to show that Paul was its author" (quoted by Bruce, *Hebrews*, xli).

The major arguments against Paul's authorship are summarized in the following observations.

1. As it has already been shown, though some of the early church fathers associated Hebrews with Paul (without giving any strong evidence to support their view), none of them were quite sure of its authorship. Though Clement, Bishop of Rome, around AD 100, quoted material from the opening chapter of Hebrews (without referring to the book by name), he made no reference to its author. It seems that later church tradition mistook Pauline association with Pauline authorship.

2. As it is evident from the writings of Clement of Rome, Hebrews was known very early in Rome. But the church in the West (Rome) was very reluctant to accept the canonicity of Hebrews. As Eusebius also testifies, the Roman reluctance to accept Hebrews as canonical possibly may have been because of a latent memory of having received the letter from an author other than the apostle Paul (Karen H. Jobes, *Letters to the Church*, 31). The book is omitted in the list of Paul's letters adopted by the Western Church called the Muratorian Fragment (a list of New Testament canonical books from Rome about A.D. 180-200). John Calvin and Martin Luther as far back as the 16th century also rejected the Pauline authorship of Hebrews. And so the rejection of Pauline authorship of Hebrews is not a new phenomenon. It is a long standing position in the church.

3. In the earliest extant manuscript of Hebrews (P 46) Hebrews is located in the middle of Paul's letters, right after Romans. As Jobes has argued, "While this is unusually construed as suggesting those who so ordered the books so believed the apostle Paul wrote Hebrews, it may instead reflect a Roman destination for both letters" (*Letters To The Church*, pp.31-32). The time when P 46 was written, Hebrews was generally rejected in the West. One reason to include it along with Paul's letters in P 46 was probably to place an emphasis on the importance of its enduring message.

4. It is an over-generalization to see similarities with Paul's vocabulary and style. The style is so different (except chapter.13) and also the vocabulary. There are subtle differences in word and phrase usage and emphasis. Some scholars find the suggestion of Clement of Alexandria attractive that Paul had written it in Hebrew and that Luke had translated it into Greek. This is an utterly insupportable hypothesis as the Greek of Hebrews bore no sign of translation. The highly literary and ornate Greek of Hebrews, its sophisticated vocabulary (includes 150 words that are not found elsewhere in the New Testament), and the superior rhetorical achievement argue against a translation. It is not written in translation-Greek. Jobes comments: "However, scholarly examination shows that the Greek text of Hebrews could not be a translation of a Semitic text....because the rhetorical features would be possible only when composed in Greek. And so if either Clement or Luke were involved in the production of the extant book of Hebrews, he would have had a very free hand in working with Paul's material, to the point that he would be

an author, not a translator, by any modern definition" (*Letters to the Church*, 41; See also F. F. Bruce, *Hebrews*, xxxvi-xxxvii).

5. While Timothy was a close associate of Paul, and is mentioned by name in Hebrews (13:23), he is called "our brother Timothy." Paul usually calls Timothy "my son" (1 Tim.1:2, 18; 2 Tim.2:2). As Uteley adds, "When Paul calls his friends and co-workers 'brother' the person's name always comes first (cf. Rom.16:23; 1 Cor.1:1; 16:12; II Cor.1:1; 2:13; Phil.2:25) but 13:23 has "our brother Timothy" (*Introduction to Hebrews*, Bible.org). Though Paul and Timothy were close associates in ministry, we do not know of any confinement Timothy had experienced. The author of Hebrews appears to not be in prison since he says he will come with Timothy to visit them. But there is no record of Timothy being in Prison while Paul was not. The mention of Timothy's name cannot be seen as an argument for Pauline authorship. Timothy is a companion of the author and is known to the recipients of Hebrews.

6. The absence of self-identifying salutation and personal introduction that Paul gives at the beginning of his epistles (Paul's normal practice) is missing from Hebrews. In all of the known letters of Paul, he signs his name.

7. The theology of Hebrews, though compatible with that of the Pauline letters, is very distinctive. Hebrews majors on Christ's high priestly work in heaven. Apostle Paul never alludes to Jesus as a priest. "Hebrews provides us with the most extensive exposition on the high priestly ministry of our Lord Jesus....it is the Book of Hebrews that contains the fullest exposition of our Lord's ministry as our Great High Priest" (Bob Deffinbaugh, *Why Study Hebrews?*, Bible.org). Jesus Christ is the perfect priest and perfect sacrifice. The author "is controlled with a two-story view of reality; on the ground floor the shadowy, transient, fugitive events and institutions; in the upper story the permanent, perfect realm of reality. What men need for their salvation is access to the upper story..." (Alexander Purdy, *Hebrews, The Interpreter's Bible*, Vol.11, pp.583-584). The central Pauline doctrines such as justification, believers' mystical union with Christ, new life through the Spirit, and spiritual gifts are entirely absent in Hebrews. Greater warnings are given in Hebrews than Paul gave elsewhere. The common use of the name "Jesus" in Hebrews is not characteristic of Paul. "Faith" to him is more than trust, belief, or personal acceptance of Christ. It gives reality and proof of things unseen. It is the power of apprehension of that which lies beyond the senses. "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Heb.11:1).

8. Paul in his epistles quotes the Old Testament both from the Hebrew text and also the LXX (Septuagint, the Greek translation of the OT). But the author of Hebrews quotes the Old Testament only from the LXX (35 quotations from the LXX, 34 allusions, 19 summaries of OT material, 13 times he mentions an Old Testament name or topic) {George H. Guthrie, *Hebrews*, p.19}. His mastery of the LXX is amazing. He also employs the OT citations very differently than

Paul. Hebrews adopts a very sophisticated typological exegesis, characteristic of the Hellenistic Jewish school of Philo of Alexandria. “The author whoever he was, was a magnificent stylist with an immense vocabulary and a vast knowledge of the Greek Old Testament” (R. Kent Hughes, *Hebrews: An Anchor for The Soul*, 16).

9. The characteristic interweaving of doctrine and exhortation in Hebrews is not the usual Pauline style. Paul begins with exposition and then moves on to exhortation.

10. The most persuasive argument against Pauline authorship comes from **Heb.2:3** where the author states that the Gospel was confirmed “to us” by those who heard the Lord announce salvation. The author was a second generation Christian. This statement is at odds with Paul’s characteristic claim to have received his appointment and revelation of the Gospel directly from Christ (Gal.1:1, 11- 12).

From Paul’s writings, we get a fairly clear picture of how he views himself, his apostleship, his utter independence of any earthly authority for his knowledge of the gospel and his right and calling to preach it. It seems quite unlikely that Paul would ever refer to himself as to imply someone who received the Gospel from those who had heard the Lord. “The statement that *it was attested to us by those who heard Him* indicates that neither our author nor his readers had received the teaching of salvation directly from the Lord....This information plainly rules out the admissibility of any “first-hand” apostle or disciple as the writer of our epistle, and at the same time, as Luther, Calvin, and many others have pointed out, it excludes the possibility of Pauline authorship....” (Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to The Hebrews*, p.77). Bruce agrees. He writes: “Our author, unlike Paul, does not claim any direct revelation from Christ for himself or assert his independence of the apostles; in this respect he puts himself on the same level as his fellow-Christians who heard the gospel from those “who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word (Luke 1:2)” {F. F. Bruce, *Hebrews*, pp. 29-30}.

For the writer and for his readers, the message of the gospel was “confirmed” by the original disciples- “It was confirmed to us by those who heard” (Heb.2:3). The gospel Christ offered is guaranteed by its apostolic attestation. Neither the author nor the recipients are included in the attestation (confirmation) process. It seems very unlikely that Paul would refer to himself as simply someone who received the gospel from those who had heard the Lord. Christ revealed the gospel message directly to Paul (Gal. 1:11-12) and called him to be His apostle to the Gentiles (Acts 9:1-19; 26:12-23). The Apostle Paul always made the point that even though he wasn’t one of the original twelve associated with the Lord in His earthly ministry, he was nonetheless an apostle directly chosen, and commissioned by the risen Lord.

These arguments are not conclusive and the evidence for non-Pauline authorship is not extensive, but they are significant. There are obvious differences between Paul and the writer to

the Hebrews. Personally speaking, the arguments for non-Pauline authorship are quite persuasive.

THE LEADING CONTENDER FOR THE AUTHORSHIP OF HEBREWS

Martin Luther was apparently the first to make the educated guess that the author was Apollos of Alexandria. Many others have since supported this suggestion. The rhetorical style, the ornate vocabulary, the brilliant exegetical skill in the Septuagint, the analytical and conceptual constructs, have all contributed to an Alexandrian connection to the epistle of Hebrews. Apollos was from Alexandria, travelled in Pauline circles, and was taught by Paul's companions (Acts 18:24 -28). His association with Paul might have brought him in close contact with Timothy (Heb.13:23). Apollos was "eloquent and mighty in the Scriptures." He was a man of words and ideas (according to A.T. Robertson, this is the meaning of the word "eloquent"). Apollos combined his deep knowledge and eloquence with a passionate heart, presenting the Gospel. Eventually, he became an influential leader in the early church (1 Cor.3:4-6). He was a highly educated Alexandrian, probably schooled in literature, philosophy, and in rhetorical skills. As a Jewish believer, he had thorough knowledge of the Old Testament in the Greek version (LXX). For these reasons, Apollos of Alexandria has been a leading contender for the authorship of Hebrews.

The Alexandrian characteristics of thought, vocabulary and style of Hebrews strongly favor the theory of Apollos' authorship. This brilliant guess originally suggested by Luther has gained tremendous popularity among prominent New Testament scholars including T. W. Manson and A.T. Robertson. Lightfoot and D. Guthrie makes several observations in support of Apollos. In the introductory part of his famous commentary on Hebrews, H.W. Montefiore makes a strong defense of his position that Hebrews was written from Ephesus by Apollos to the Corinthian church (*A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 1-32). Lenski finds the arguments for Apollos' authorship too strong to deny. Edmond Hiebert finds no decisive evidence against Apollos. If one is to conjecture, it would be difficult to propose a better candidate than Apollos.

While there are some strong suggestions in favor of Apollos, no argument clearly demonstrates that he must have written it. The absence of any early tradition even in Alexandria in support of Apollos' authorship is a serious difficulty in this view. At least, we do not know of any such record in the Alexandrian church. Again, we are assuming that Apollos being an Alexandrian, the Alexandrian church would have kept a record of his authorship of one of the most prominent documents in the New Testament. Even the strong arguments in favor of Apollos also fall short of proof. None of the early writers who cites the epistle mentions its author. Nor does internal or external evidence help us much.

Daniel Wallace, New Testament scholar and textual critic at Dallas Theological Seminary, has made the novel suggestion of dual authorship of Hebrews based on the “we” used repeatedly throughout the epistle to signal the author (2:5; 5:11; 6:9,11; 8:1; 9:5; 13:18). According to Wallace, this work was co-authored, though one writer was more prominent than the other. “The credentials of Barnabas and Apollos have been the most impressive, though it is quite difficult to tell which one would be the leading spokesman” (*Hebrews, Introduction, Argument, and Outline*, Bible .Org). Even in this dual authorship view the name of Apollos stands prominent.

CONCLUSION

The best option for us is to agree with Origen’s statement; “But who it was that really wrote the epistle, God only knows.” God supernaturally wrote the book of Hebrews through a man of God whom He chose in His sovereignty, and inspired him even to leave the book anonymous. There is no need to unjustly dogmatize even the best possible option. Whoever was the author of Hebrews, we owe him great respect for this wonderful piece of literature magnifying the superiority of the person and priesthood of Christ. We will do well in our lives if we take heed to the “better things” in this epistle, this enduring “word of exhortation,” presented with great rhetorical craftsmanship and deep theological thinking.