

NAME

Laney:

The title of the epistle, Pros Hebraious (To The Hebrews - Προς Εβραίους), goes back to the last quarter of the second century, and from that time on it has been the regular designation for the epistle in New Testament manuscripts and among Christian writers.

AUTHOR

The author of the epistle is not identified. The search for the author of Hebrews has been going on for centuries, and is no nearer a solution than when it began. There is no scarcity of candidates. The book has been attributed to almost every New Testament character. Conclusive evidence for any one candidate is lacking. Problems exist no matter who is suggested. Although the author of the epistle is unknown, the canonicity of Hebrews has never been questioned. Origen (185-253 A.D.) probably had the most insight into authorship when he wrote, *"Who wrote the epistle only God knows certainly."* The most plausible suggestions are listed below:

1. Paul: Probably the "front runner" of all the candidates. In Alexandria the epistle was ascribed to Paul from the second half of the second century onward. The almost universal opinion of the early church was of Pauline authorship. The reference to Timothy (13:23) and the situation of the author (13:19) have been suggested as evidence for Pauline authorship. The letter closes with characteristic Pauline style (13:25, cf. 2 Thessalonians 3:17). The content and logic is typically Pauline. This epistle is a commentary of Habakkuk 2:4, like two other known Pauline epistles: Romans and Galatians. However - There are problems with this position. In 2:3 the author ranks himself with those who received the gospel from *"those who heard"* while in Galatians 1:1 Paul states that he received direct revelation. The absence of the title "Christ Jesus" and the phrase "in Christ" would be unlikely in a Pauline epistle. The language and style does not seem to be Pauline. Also, the author's preference for the LXX and his method of quoting Old Testament sources differs from Pauline practice.
2. Barnabas: Probably the "runner up" of the candidates. Tertullian ascribed the book to Barnabas, a Levite who would have been interested in Jewish ritual and acquainted with its procedures. However, Barnabas probably heard and saw Jesus, whereas the author of Hebrews includes himself among those who had to depend on others for eyewitnesses testimony (2:3).
3. Apollos: "Third runner up" on the list. Martin Luther suggested that the epistle was written by Apollos who was a learned Alexandrian Jew who had thorough knowledge of the Old Testament Scriptures and was acquainted with Paul (Acts 18:24-28; Titus 3:13). He would have had a preference for the LXX as the writer of Hebrews obviously does. The weakness of the hypothesis is the lack of early historical testimony - i.e. a significant lack of early tradition favoring Apollos.
4. Luke: Considered a "front runner" as a companion of Paul. There are similarities in the polished Greek style of Hebrews and that of Luke and Acts. But Luke and Acts are Gentile in their outlook. Hebrews is highly Jewish.
5. Clement of Rome: The likeness between Hebrews and 1 Clement make Clement of Rome a possibility. But there are many differences in outlook, and Clement probably borrowed from Hebrews.
6. Silas (Silvanus): As Paul's companion this would explain the similarities to Pauline theology. Not much can be said for or against the authorship by Silas.
7. Philip
8. Priscilla (with or without Aquila): Has been suggested because of her close association with Paul. It has been ingeniously argued that she left the book anonymous because female authorship was unacceptable to the public.
9. John Mark

Canonicity:

Given the uncertainty of authorship the question of inclusion in the Canon must be addressed. With regard to the validity of including Hebrews in the Canon of Scripture the following argument is put forth:

Hebrews 13:18ff strongly suggest that the readers of the epistle knew who the author was. While early church tradition is uncertain about the authorship Paul was usually regarded as the author - especially in the eastern part of the Roman Empire. The Eastern church accepted Hebrews as an original, Pauline, canonical book. Whereas the Western church denied its Pauline authorship and excluded it from the Canon, mainly because of the uncertain authorship. It was for the reason of unclear authorship that the book was not accepted as canonical until the late fourth century.

It is important to remember that the church did accept Hebrews as canonical. The book of Hebrews is included in the earliest and best complete manuscript of the Bible, codex Sinaiticus (ca. 3-4 cent. A.D.). Sinaiticus contains a complete copy of the book of Hebrews - positioned in the middle of the Pauline letters, in between 2 Thessalonians and the pastoral epistles (a clear indication that the producers of this wonderful manuscript assumed that Paul was the author).

The discussion shows that the early church did not gullibly accept books into the Canon without first examining their credentials as to authorship, trustworthiness, and doctrinal purity.

DATE

Laney:

Since Hebrews was used by Clement of Rome in his Epistle to the Corinthians it must have been written prior to 96 A.D. Hebrews would have been written at a time when Timothy was still alive (13:23), but some of the original leaders of the Hebrew Christian assembly had died (13:7). The readers were apparently second generation Christians (2:3) (see below: Recipients). The indications are that the Jewish sacrificial system was still in operation (7:8; 8:4; 10:1,2,8,11). This would demand a date prior to 70 A.D. when the Jerusalem temple was destroyed. (However, note that the description is actually of the pre-Solomonic "Tabernacle.")

If the epistle was written from Rome and Timothy was able to come to Rome as Paul requested (2 Timothy 4:11-13) and was also imprisoned at that time (13:23), then the date of writing would have followed his release, about 68 A.D. Another reverence, however, would indicated that the date of writing was earlier: 12:4 "*You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin,*" if interpreted literally, would indicate that the epistle was written before the Neronian persecution which began in July 64 A.D.

Hebrews was probably written between 64 and 67 A.D. - probably before the summer of 64.

THEME

Halley (page 44): "*Christ the Mediator of a New Covenant*"

Laney: "*Christ's Person and work - the believer's incentive to maturity and service.*"

The purpose of Hebrews is: 1) To teach concerning the superiority of Christ's person and work to the Old Testament system; 2) To warn concerning the danger of drifting from orthodoxy to apostasy, sin, and disobedience; and 3) to exhort the Hebrew Christians to move on to maturity in Christ.

Mitchell:

Three purposes:

1. To establish the superiority and finality of Christianity. The author does this by contrasting Judaism and Christianity. The latter is seen to be the fulfillment of the former, as shadow to substance. The epistle is heavy with doctrine, presenting with laborious logic the superiority of Christ and His priesthood to the Old Testament economy. Hebrews is a Christ-centered epistle, presenting both His person and work effectively. Yet the chief contribution to the doctrine of Christ is His present ministry. We are taken within the veil into the Holy of Holies. We see a majestic High Priest doing wonderful things for the believer today! All too often believers are instructed concerning the cross and the second coming of Christ but are never fully aware of His present ministry.
2. To strengthen genuine Christians and lead them to maturity. This comes through knowing Christ as our High Priest. These people had been saved for years and needed to go on to maturity.
3. To prevent apostatizing to Judaism. Under intense social and economic pressures from the Jewish community, some of these professed Christians were tempted to revert back to Judaism.

Parenthetical Warning Passages:

Mitchell:

The argument of Hebrews is interspersed with six parenthetical warning passages (below). These warnings do not advance the argument of the book. They are all warnings against reverting to Judaism. These six warnings constitute the problem passages for which the book of Hebrews is famous.

1. The Danger of Drifting 2:1-4
2. The Danger of a Hardening Heart 3:7-4:2
3. The Danger of Continued Unbelief 4:11-13
4. The Danger of Degeneration (is it possible to "lose" one's salvation?) 5:11-6:20
5. The Danger of Despite (a willful renunciation of God's gracious mercy) 10:26-31
6. The Danger of Despising Spiritual Things and Refusing Christ 12:18-24

Key Word (Nelson's): The Superiority of Christ - The basic theme of Hebrews is found in the word *better*, describing the superiority of Christ in His person and work (1:4; 6:9; 7:7,19,22; 8:6; 9:23; 10:34; 11:16,35,40; 12:24). The words *perfect* and *heavenly* are also prominent. He offers a better revelation, position, priesthood, covenant, sacrifice, and power.

Key Verses (Nelson's):

"Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." (Hebrews 4:14-16)

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,

looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him, endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.” (Hebrews 12:1,2)

Key Chapter (Nelson's): 11 - The hall of fame of the Scriptures is located in Hebrews 11 and records those who willingly took God at His word even when there was nothing to cling to but His promise.

The author's purpose is to establish the finality of the gospel in contrast with all that went before it as the way to God. He establishes the finality of Christianity by establishing the supremacy of Christ in His person and in His work.

With regard to His person, Christ is greater than all the servants and spokesmen of God who have gone before (1:1-3) - not only greater than other human servants and spokesmen (including Moses) but greater than angels (1:4-14). He is the Son of God, His agent in creating and maintain the universe, Who became the Son of man and submitted to humiliation and death. He is now exalted above the heavens, enthroned at God's right hand, and He lives forever there as His people's representative.

The special aspect of the person and ministry of Christ which is emphasized in this epistle is His High Priesthood. The author repeatedly stresses Jesus' qualifications to be His people's effective High Priest - not only was He personally holy, guileless, undefiled (7:26), but having been in all points tempted as His people are, He can sympathized with them and supply the help they need in the hour of trial (2:18; 4:15).

Outline:

- I. The Superior Person of Christ 1:1-7:28
 - A. Superior to the Prophets 1:1-3
 - B. Superior to the Angels 1:4-2:18
 - C. Superior to Moses 3:1-4:13
 - D. Superior to Aaron 4:14-7:28
- II. The Superior Work of Christ 8:1-10:18
 - A. The Minister in a Better Sanctuary 8:1-5
 - B. The Mediator of a Better Covenant 8:6-13
 - C. The Priest of a Better Tabernacle 9:1-12
 - D. The Offerer of a Better Sacrifice 9:13-10:18
- III. The Superior Life of Faith 10:19-13:24
 - A. The Confidence of Faith 10:19-39
 - B. The Examples of Faith 11:1-40
 - C. The Endurance of Faith 12:1-29
 - D. The Workings of Faith 13:1-17

RECIPIENTS

No recipients are greeted at the outset. Neither their nationality nor their geographic location is agreed upon by scholars. The title "To The Hebrews" (see NAME above) goes back to the second century, but the letter itself does not mention the readers as being either Jews or Gentiles. Consequently there are some scholars who deny any particular Jewishness to the first readers.

The significance of the ancient title, however, and the prevailing view of the church for centuries are factors not easily set aside. Furthermore, the contents are far more Jewish than the objectors suggest. Everything in the letter is explained in the context of Jewish history and religion. Most conservative scholars agree on the basis of internal evidence that the readers were Hebrew Christians. Among the suggestions made regarding the location of the readers are the following: Jerusalem, Caesarea, Samaria, Antioch, Palestine generally, Ephesus, Corinth, Alexandria, Rome.

The Jerusalem or Palestinian destination for the epistle and the Roman destination are most liked by the scholars.

Jerusalem has been suggested because of the references to the temple and temple institutions. Closer observation, however, reveals that the author writes of the Tabernacle (9:1), not the temple. Further more, the Jerusalem Christians were known for receiving charity, not giving it (6:10; 10:34).

Alexandria has been suggested due to the fact that a temple was located nearby at Leontopolis. The epistle also reflects an Alexandrian influence as seen in the quotations of the LXX.

Based on 13:24 Rome has been suggested. The salutation could be that of Christians originally from Italy sending back greetings to their friends. The phrase could, on the other hand, merely refer to the present location of the writer and greeters. Due to the fact that the epistle was first known in Rome where there appears to have been an influential group of Christians (Romans 9-11, cf. Acts 28:17-31), the majority of scholars tend to favor Hebrew Christians residing in Rome as the addressees. But possibly other Hebrew Christians residing elsewhere in the Roman world.

Situation of The Readers:

Laney:

Though the geographical setting of the readers of the epistle is uncertain, their spiritual condition is very clear. The believers had demonstrated Christian love (6:10) and had endured persecution (10:32-43). In spite of these favorable traits there were some areas of weakness.

Though they had been Christians for some time, the addressees were making no spiritual progress (5:11,12). The believers had failed to grow in the Lord and this was reflected in their Christian conduct (10:25; 13:2-17). The Hebrew Christians were looking backward to their Jewish ways instead of forward to Christ, the Author and Perfecter of faith (12:2).

In the face of the hardships of the Christian faith they were in danger of drifting away (2:1) from the substance - Christ - to the shadows of the Old Testament sacrificial system (8:5; 10:1).

A careful study of the five warning passages (see THEME: Mitchell - Three Purposes and Parenthetical Warning Passages above) shows their problem to have been the very serious one of wavering before temptation to leave the Christian movement and retire to the safer haven of Judaism. By such a move, they could avoid persecution from their Jewish kinsmen, and also enjoy the legal protection which Judaism had from the government (something which the Christians at this time did not possess).

Such passages as 6:4-6; 10:26-29; and 10:38,39 appear to be inadequately handled when one sees in them merely an encouragement to the readers to free themselves from peripheral Jewish customs. It was to deal with such spiritual stagnation and apostasy that the author wrote his epistle to the Hebrew Christians.

CONTRIBUTION TO CANON

1. See above THEME: Mitchell - Three Purposes #1: To establish the superiority and finality of Christianity - the contrast of Judaism and Christianity.
2. The superiority of Jesus
3. The priesthood of Christ - Who made the sacrifice of Himself: 1) His present priestly ministry of intercession; 2) Christ at the right hand of the God making intercession for the believers (Romans 8:34; Hebrews 7:24,25). We read our Lord's "high priestly prayer" in John 17, and we find brief references to His high priestly ministry for us elsewhere in the New Testament. But it is the Book of Hebrews that contains the fullest exposition of our Lord's ministry as our Great High Priest. It is this ministry which we most need in times of difficulty and adversity. Hebrews encourages us to draw ever closer to Jesus.
4. Exposition of divine chastisement (12:3-12).
5. The Faith Hall of Fame (11:1-40). Jesus Who is the fulfillment of our faith.
6. More than any other New Testament book, Hebrews connects the dots between the Old Testament and the New. George H. Guthrie points out how the Book of Hebrews refers to the Old Testament: *"Of all the writings of the New Testament, none is more saturated with overt references to the Old Testament. The author so filled his discourse with Old Testament thoughts and passages that they permeate every chapter. Thirty-five quotations from a Greek translation of the Old Testament and thirty-four allusions work to support the development of Hebrews' argument. In addition, the writer offers nineteen summaries of Old Testament material, and thirteen times he mentions an Old Testament name or topic, often without reference to a specific context."* (George H. Guthrie, *Hebrews – The NIV Application Commentary*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998, page 19.).
7. The Book of Hebrews helps us to understand the relationship between Jewish and Gentile believers, and between Israel and the church. In Acts 15, the Judaisers prompted the "Jerusalem Council" by insisting that Gentile believers be baptized and keep the law. In other words, they insisted that Gentiles become Jewish proselytes. This issue was taken up in great detail in the Book of Galatians. A huge underlying issue in the Book of Romans is the relationship between Israel and the church (and thus the relationship of Jewish and Gentile believers in the church). It is possible that this highly emotional and divisive issue was dealt with on two levels: The Epistle to the Romans was the "western" explanation; the Epistle to the Hebrews was the "eastern" resolution. And both come to the same conclusions.

RESOURCES

Gromacki, Robert C. *New Testament Survey*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Baker Book House, 1978

Robert H. Gundry, Ph.D., *A Survey Of The New Testament*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Zondervan Publishing House, 1970

Halley, Henry H. *Halley's Bible Handbook*, Grand Rapids, Michigan; Zondervan Publishing House

Horton, David, General Editor. *The Portable Seminary*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Bethany House Publishers, 2006

Nelson's Quick Reference - Bible Maps And Charts, Nashville, Tennessee; Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1994

As general resources I've relied on my class notes from various professors at Biola University (especially those of Dr. Curtis Mitchell), Western Conservative Baptist Seminary (WCBS - [especially those of Dr. J. Carl Laney]), and Talbot Seminary as well as notes shared with me by Annie Kartoizian.

Additional reference material has come from the study Bibles of the English Standard Version, New American Standard Version, and The New Living Translation.

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