

Introduction to the Book of Hebrews

A. Interpretation

- A. The What:
 - A. The author.
 - B. The approximate date.
 - C. The place of origin.
 - D. The addressees, their background and current situation.
 - E. The intended purpose.
- B. The Why:
 - A. To find the meaning intended by the original author.
 - B. To not twist the meaning into something unintended.
 - A. For example, imagine if people read a letter I wrote to Tokito telling him not to smoke the juice. If they don't know that Tokito was a bible college student who taught and translated for youth group, and the 'smoking the juice' was a term Pastor Tommy used for airy fairy messages preached without studying first, they may think that Tokito could be a drug addict and I'm simply rebuking him.
 - B. Do you start to see the importance of understanding the situation when interpreting something?
- C. The Bad News:
 - A. When we look at Hebrews we are in a remarkably poor position to answer these kinds of questions. And this has an effect on the interpretation of the book.
- D. The Good News:
 - A. It seems that our best information we can find out about the author/readers/situation is what we find in the book itself. Which is still a lot.

B. Authorship

- A. The Propositions:
 - A. Paul.
 - A. Traditionally received as his letter.
 - B. Luke.
 - A. Suggested by Origin
 - C. Barnabas.
 - A. Suggested by Tertullian.
 - D. Silas.
 - E. Clement of Rome.
 - A. Quotes Hebrews in his letters.
 - F. Apollos.
 - A. Suggested by Luther on the basis of Acts 18:24-19:1.
 - G. Priscilla... etc.
 - A. Each one has reasons why it could be that person.
 - B. It is almost unanimously agreed that Paul did not write Hebrews.
 - A. Pauline authorship wasn't accepted in the western church until late in the 4th century, although it was attributed to Paul in the eastern church much earlier. Simply not everyone could agree.
 - A. **In the East:** "At the end of the second century **Pantaenus** (c. A. D. 180), the founder of the great catechetical school in Alexandria, Egypt, claimed that Hebrews was both Pauline and canonical... Pantaenus's successor, **Clement of Alexandria** (c. A. D. 200), continued to affirm the tradition of Pauline authorship and canonical status... He attributed the omission of Paul's name to Paul's desire not to offend the Jews to whom he had addressed this epistle. Moreover, he said that Paul wrote in Hebrew and that Luke translated Hebrews into Greek." - **Gareth Cockerill**.

B. Origin in the 3rd Century (Quoted by Eusebius).

A. 11. In addition he makes the following statements in regard to the Epistle to the Hebrews in his (Origin's) 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' but that its diction is purer Greek, any one who has the power to discern differences of phraseology will acknowledge. 12. 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." 13. 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. 14. *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.* (Schaff, Eus VI 25.11-14)

C. If that was the conclusion all the way back then, we're probably not going to find our selves in a better position today.

B. The Facts:

A. We only know what we can draw from the book.

B. **Gareth Lee Cockerill** identifies 3 things:

A. He was a master of elegant Greek who understood the principles of rhetoric and oral persuasion as taught in the ancient world.

B. He had a thorough knowledge of the OT and a clear understanding of how it should be interpreted in light of it's fulfillment in Christ.

C. He was well acquainted with the past history of the people to whom he was writing and was deeply concerned lest they fail to persevere in their devotion to and public confession of Christ.

C. Mainly because of the 1st reason Apollos has been an attractive candidate, but this is only a good guess.

C. **Readers and location.**

A. **Where were the Hearers located?**

A. **Hebrews 13:24**, "*those from Italy send you their greetings*".

A. This could mean that the author is writing from Italy;

A. There were early copies of the letter which had an inscription saying "to the Hebrews written from Rome (Italy)", "To the Hebrews written from Rome by Paul to those in Jerusalem"... etc.

B. Some early commentators argued that Hebrews was written to Jerusalem because of it's interest in the Jewish sacrificial system - **Cockerill**.

B. On the other hand, they could indicate that the letter was addressed to a community or communities in Rome and that those from Italy who were with the author wished to be remembered to their compatriots.

A. In other words, friends saying g'day to their school mates.

B. This seems like the more natural conclusion, and when combined with other arguments has led the majority of scholars to locate the readers in Rome.

B. Two items in Hebrews fit well with a Roman destination;

A. The generosity of the readers (6:10; 10:32-34) known to be true of the Roman church, and practically impossible for the impoverished Jerusalem church;

B. The persecution of former days (10:32), which may refer to Claudius's expulsion of the Jews from Rome in 49AD, or Nero's persecution in the 60s.

B. **Were the Hearers Jewish or Gentile?**

A. The Situation:

A. That the letter was written to Jewish Christians was universally assumed by scholars on the basis of Church tradition until the end of the 19th century. Hence the name "To the Hebrews".

B. Since the 19th century some scholars have been arguing that it was written to Gentiles rather than Jews.

B. Why does it matter?

A. It matters because whether the hearers were ethnically Jewish or Gentile changes the way we

understand the book. Is Hebrews talking to Jewish believers who are tempted to go back into Judaism and forsake Jesus, or to Gentiles who are beginning to lose their confidence in Christ and go back into the world?

C. **The Facts:**

- A. "The hearers must have been followers of Christ who could both appreciate the elegance of the pastor's Greek and thus were at home both linguistically and culturally within the Hellenistic world... [they] were obviously well versed in the OT and had been followers of Jesus for some time." - **Gareth Cockerill**.
- B. Gareth Cockerill also points out that there is no distinction between Jewish and Gentile Christians in Hebrews. There is only the people of God.
 - A. This is the best place to leave it. The author is writing to Christians.

D. **Date**

A. **When Was Hebrews written?**

A. **Gareth Cockerill** identifies 3 proposals.

- A. The first of which is that Hebrews was written to a Gentile audience late in the 1st century.
- B. The second is that Hebrews was written shortly after Jerusalem's fall in 70AD.
- C. The third is that it was written to a largely Jewish audience before the fall of Jerusalem (Traditional).

B. **Some markers:**

- A. 1st Clement's dependence on Hebrews confirms the first century composition of this sermon (Cockerill).
- B. The mention of Timothy in Heb 13:23 is the most concrete evidence for the date of Hebrews, suggesting a time within the lifetime of Paul's younger associate (Cockerill).
- C. Establishing the date of Hebrews depends in part upon the identification of the persecution mentioned in 10:32-34.
 - A. We do know that it involved abuse, public insult, and the loss of personal property, but apparently not the loss of life (see 12:4).
 - B. The prospect of continued or renewed persecution, on the other hand, also seems clear from the tone of chapter 12.
 - C. All this seems to point to Claudius's persecution of the Jews in 49, rather than Nero's persecution in 64, in which many people were martyred for their faith.
- D. The author does not seem to know of the destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD.
 - A. This is evident from the fact that he doesn't mention it.
 - B. If he did it could have been the cherry on top of his argument, (in 8:13, where our author writes, "what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away").

C. **Putting it together:**

- A. A date in the 60s seems relatively certain, and one just prior to the beginning of Nero's persecution probable.
- B. The evidence is insufficient, however, to narrow the time of Hebrew's composition with certainty beyond a range of A.D 50 to 90 (Cockerill).

E. **The situation of the listeners**

A. **Past Situation**

A. **Conversion:**

- A. He recalls the "earlier days" (10:32) when their original leaders had taught them the word of God (13:7, 2:3). The readers were then "enlightened" (6:4, 10:32), became "partakers of the Holy Spirit" (6:4), and experienced the powers of the coming age (6:5).

B. **Persecution:**

- A. Shortly after their conversion they experienced the trauma of persecution that resulted in

imprisonment, public abuse, confiscation of property, and other forms of suffering (10:32-34, 12:4-11).

B. Their suffering was probably not officially sponsored by civic authorities, but was not unlike the experience of new converts elsewhere who had alienated themselves from their relationships and shamed their families by their conversion.

C. Response:

A. The readers responded with extraordinary community solidarity (6:10, 10:32-34) to this suffering. They were able to do this through faith in the Gospel promise.

B. The Current Situation.

A. Spiritual Tiredness:

A. They now have drooping hands and weak knees (12:12). The author speaks of their current situation when he says, "You have become dull of hearing" and "you ought to be teachers because of the time" (5:11-12).

B. Some are abandoning the assembly (10:25) and "need endurance" (10:36). Despite the history of alienation, he also indicates that no one has died (12:4).

C. Their situation seen through allusions.

A. **Hebrews 2:8** - Allow us to understand that the community is struggling with the dissonance between its confession and the realities they experience.

B. **Hebrews 2:10-18** - The description of Jesus's solidarity with humanity in suffering help us to understand that the author is talking to people in a painful situation.

C. **Hebrews 3:7-4:11** - The imagery of the people who are being tested on the way to the promised land also suggests that the readers are tempted to abandon their faith.

D. **Hebrews 11:13-16, 26, 38** - The emphasis in on the people of God as "sojourners" and "aliens" (11:13-16, 38) who are homeless in this world and subject to abuse (11:26) probably reflects the situation of the readers.

E. **Hebrews 12:2** - The reminder that Jesus experienced "shame" and endured the cross (12:2) suggests that the author is addressing a community that has a history of alienation and shame.

D. Future of the Readers.

A. Danger of Apostasy:

A. He is concerned lest they "drift away" (2:1), "fall away" (3:12), "fall short" (4:11), "fall" (6:6), "sin deliberately" (10:26), throwing away the confidence that they have gained in Christ (10:35).

B. The fact that the references to the threat facing the community are not specific suggests that the author is more concerned with the community's abandonment of the faith than with any alternative they take.

E. Putting it together:

A. The people He is writing to shortly after their conversion experienced persecution but were able to endure by sticking together.

B. The community is continuing to feel shame because of their confession of Christ. Some now are growing spiritually tired or negligent. Feelings of bitterness are beginning to arise. Some are no longer assembling with other believers.

C. The community is in danger of burning out, becoming ashamed of their confession, and even of falling away.

F. Purpose of Hebrews

A. As the alternation between exposition and exhortation indicates, the purpose of Hebrews is to reorient a community that has been disoriented by the chasm between the Christian confession of triumph and the reality of suffering that it has experienced.

A. The centrepiece of the author's persuasive effort is the claim that "God has spoken in these last days by a Son," which he announced in the opening lines (1:1-2a) and amplifies throughout the homily (2:1-4, 3:6, 7-14, 4:2, 12-13, 5:11-6:3, 13-20, 12:18-19). The Son's coming to earth, death, and exaltation are God's ultimate word (12:24-25) to the community.

- B. As the elaboration on this theme in 4:14-10:31 indicates, this event is God's word of promise, the basis for the hope that is the "firm and steadfast anchor of the soul" (6:19), the confidence to draw near to God (4:16, 10:19), and the guarantee (7:22) of God's covenant.
- C. God's speech is both a promise and a summons "not to refuse the one who is speaking" (12:25). Thus the community that is the beneficiary of the certainty of God's ultimate promise can now live with the apparent uncertainty of its own situation, knowing that God's ultimate word is the guarantee of the future.
- D. In the examples of the faithful people - including Jesus Himself - who endured shame and alienation because they could see what was invisible to the rest of the world (11:27), the author indicates that their suffering is not a misfortune but a sign that they have a place among the people of God.
- E. While the readers may be a small minority in this world, they have a new family in the community of faith that shares their confidence in the alternative reality, providing support to them in time of need. Believers can live as strangers without seeing the ultimate triumph of God if they are able to see beyond the realities of this world.