

INTERNAL EVIDENCE ON CRITICAL MATTERS: HEBREWS

Virgil Warren, PhD

I. Authorship

Hebrews makes no claim to authorship. Certain points about the book may have relevance to the authorship question.

A. *2:3-4: “How will we escape if we neglect such a great salvation, which having at the first been spoken through the Lord, was confirmed to us by them that heard, God also bearing witness with them both by signs and wonders and by many powers and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to his own will.”*

Since the text says that the word of the Lord was confirmed to “us” by those who heard the Lord himself, commentators have inferred that the author was not an eyewitness of the Lord’s (cp. Ephesians 2:1-10; 2 Peter 3:2). The inference would be that the book was not written by anyone among the original apostles.

The writer could be identifying himself with his readers here and not necessarily be implying anything about himself.

Scholars often use this reference as part of their denial of the Alexandrian tradition that Paul wrote Hebrews. But Paul may not have been an eyewitness of the Lord’s ministry anyway, even though he may have been among the “scouts” that Pharisees sent out to keep tabs on Jesus’ activities. The text does not indicate that the message was received second hand by the author but only that its confirmation was through signs by eyewitnesses. In Galatians 1:11-12, Paul is adamant that he did not get his message from other people.

B. *13:23: “Know that our brother Timothy has been set at liberty, with whom, if he come shortly, I will see you.”*

This verse could mean that the writer was somewhat secondary to Timothy and that his own movements would depend on Timothy’s. Such a reading is possible; if correct, it does not sound like Paul, who would have considered Timothy a beloved helper that he directed rather than one he followed around.

A different reconstruction could make it that the author intended to visit his readers anyway. If Timothy came soon enough, they would be coming together.

C. *13:22: “But I encourage you, brothers, listen to the exhortation; I have written to you in few words.”*

The writer states that his purpose is to “exhort” the readers. *Barnabas*, meaning “son of exhortation,” was a nickname/surname given to Joseph (Acts 4:36-37), who later became one of Paul’s missionary companions. If the name was given to him because of his tendency to encourage, then this book fits with Barnabas’ personality. But that may have been appropriate to others among the apostles or sub-apostles.

D. A large number of verbal allusions and conceptual parallels exist between Hebrews and Paul's writings of Paul (13:19 and Philippians 22; 13:22 and Galatians 6:11, etc.), but such parallels exist with Peter (13:22 and 1 Peter 5:12), Luke, and Barnabas as well. Style studies abound that compare the rhetoric in Hebrews to that of other New Testament writers.

E. Since the rhetorical style of Hebrews is more polished than in any other New Testament writing, many scholars have been enamored with Luther's suggestion that Apollos wrote this epistle. Luke calls him (1) an eloquent man (Acts 18:24-28). In that same paragraph Luke says he was (2) mighty in the scriptures, which fits nicely the observation that Hebrews makes more citations of the Old Testament than does any other New Testament book. In fact, every major point in Hebrews come from an Old Testament text. Finally, Apollos was (3) fervent in spirit, which fits with Hebrews as "*a word of exhortation*" (13:22). Modern scholarship has also sought to identify the book with an Alexandrian origin, because it supposedly uses the allegorical method of interpretation as did Philo, who came from that city. According to the Acts statement, Apollos was an Alexandrian Jew.

F. 11:32 shows at least that Hebrews was written by a man (contra Harnack): ἐπιλείψει με γὰρ διηγούμενον [mas. ptc.] ὁ χρόνος περὶ Γεδεών. . . ("For time will fail me telling about Gideon," etc.)

G. In 1:1 τοῖς πατράσιν is translated "our fathers" in some versions, thus implying that the author is a Jew. But, while a possible translation, it is not a required rendering.

H. Reasons given for Paul's omitting his name from the beginning of the letter if he wrote it:

1. He omitted it so the surrounding unbelieving Jews would not know that Paul was the author; he was not concerned that the readers knew, but that the letter might be destroyed if it fell into the hands of unbelieving Jews.

2. The salutation and statement of authorship were contained in a cover letter rather than in the text itself.

3. He did not want to appear presumptuous to speak to the Jewish Christians because that was Peter's arena of endeavor.

4. If the letter was designed for Greek-speaking Jewish Christians in Palestine/Jerusalem, he may not have wanted it to fall into the hands of Hebrew-speaking Christians in Palestine lest they disregard it or destroy it.

II. Destination

A. The subjects that Hebrews treats are most appropriate to Jewish believers, who are under pressure to lapse back into Judaism. "*The heavenly Jerusalem*" and "*the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven*" (12:22-23) combine with exhortation to stay in "*the kingdom that cannot be shaken*" (12:27-28) and to look beyond their familiar homeland and Holy City to something everlasting. They were to remain faithful to the end that they might enter the "*rest of God*" that lay beyond Canaan (4:6-9). The writer argues that the

Mosaic Law, the Levitical priesthood, the tabernacle, and the sacrificial system were shadows of a later reality found in the Messiah (10:1-4, *etc.*). The readers were to go outside the gate, where he had suffered, and meet him there, bearing his reproach (13:12).

B. *The extensive use of Old Testament scriptures* makes a Jewish audience natural.

C. Hebrews was originally written in Greek since it bears no marks of being translated from a Semitic original. Palestine used Aramaic as its main language although Greek as the *lingua franca* of the Mediterranean world was used as a second language by a much of the populace. The trilingual superscription above the cross indicates the language situation in the land (John 19:20). Likewise does the Greek-language encyclical sent to Antioch by the apostles and elders at the Jerusalem conference (Acts 15:23-29; 16:4). A Greek letter written to Jerusalem would be especially appropriate for Hellenistic Christians residing there. It is obvious from Hebrews 10:32-36 and elsewhere that the readers were a socially ostracized, persecuted minority in a hostile environment. If they were Hellenistic Jews in Palestine, their plight may have been doubly severe because of the language and cultural difference that tended to separate them even from the larger Christian community there (Acts 6:1-6). If by chance Paul did write the letter, the great apostle to the Gentiles may have had a special regard for these Greek-speaking brothers since he himself, as a Jew from Cilicia, was likely a member of the Hellenistic synagogue in Jerusalem from which many of these believers hailed (Acts 6:9). More than that, as perhaps an elder in that synagogue (if not a member of the Sanhedrin), he had borne some special responsibility for the death of the first martyr of the church, a member of that synagogue—Stephen, a saint whose wisdom even Saul of Tarsus could not withstand (Acts 6:8-8:1ff).

D. *13:24: “the (brothers) of/from Italy greet you.”* (See under “Place of Writing.”)

E. *6:18: “Those who have fled,”* if identified with Roman Jews, might indicate those who had to flee because of the edict of Claudius in A.D. 49. The difficulty with this might be that the author identifies himself with the readers in this situation: “we.”

F. *(13:12): “Suffered outside the gate”* would have added punch for people living in Jerusalem itself.

G. The writer mentions *confiscation of property* at an earlier time in their faith (10:32-34). Such a thing would have accompanied Claudius’ edict in A.D. 49, which banned Jews from Rome. But that ban was against Jews in general, not just Christian Jews. Furthermore, the persecution apparently had come from Jews or there would have been no temptation to revert to Judaism to get relief.

H. Since *the readers had not yet suffered unto blood* (12:14), were they other than Palestinian Christians, who did suffer death because of the faith?

III. Date

A. *10:33ff.: “Call to remembrance the former days in which, after you were enlightened, you endured a great conflict of sufferings . . .”* (cp. 5:12).

The readers had been Christians for some time, as “the former days” indicates. Significant time had passed since their conversion. Considering Palestine as the destination moves that beginning back to the beginning and moves with it the subsequent time Hebrews would be talking about. If the letter was sent into the Gentile territories, the date of the letter

moves later, toward the time indicated by the considerations below. That factor shortens the range of time within which the letter would have originated.

B. **10:11:** *“Indeed, every priest stands day in and day out ministering and offering time and time again the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins”* (cp. 8:4-5; 9:11-9; 13:10).

The Levitical priesthood is still operating, fulfilling its responsibilities in the temple, which is still standing. All the texts in chapters 7-13 picture the priesthood system, the temple, the sacrificial system, and the Law still active.

C. **8:13:** *“In that he says, ‘A new covenant,’ he has made the first old. But what is becoming old and growing aged is near to vanishing away”* (cp. 4:6-11; 10:25; 12:18-29; 13:14).

The destruction of the land, the city, and the temple lies not too far in the future. The Hebrew writer has just appealed to a lengthy citation from Jeremiah 31:31-34 in which the prophet predicts the coming of a “new covenant.” Hebrews explains that remark as implying that the Mosaic covenant—made with the fathers when Yahveh brought them out of Egypt—was going to be replaced rather than amended. The author follows with the comment that this “old covenant” was near to vanishing away. There are three times he could refer to in saying that the Mosaic Law was ready to end.

The first time the Law could be considered taken away is the (a) “theoretical time”—as regards salvation particularly—it was taken away in the crucifixion-resurrection: “... he has taken [the bond written in ordinances] out of the way, nailing it to the cross . . .” (Colossians 2:14-15).

The next time, soon afterward, we could call the (b) “practical time” when the Law was taken away—on Pentecost, when the Spirit came and the gospel was preached for the first time as a historical reality. Neither of these past times qualifies for the future reference in Hebrews.

That leaves the (c) “historical time” when the Law was taken away—at the fall of Jerusalem. Historically speaking, the fall of the Jewish state and the accompanying destruction of the Jerusalem temple meant that Mosaism could no longer operate as the Torah laid out. Even with the partial restoration of Israel in 1948, Mosaism was not restored because temple rituals and the priesthood system that officiated in them were not restored, even though “*the times of the Gentiles*” (Luke 21:24)—when Jerusalem was trodden underfoot by the Gentiles—in a sense came to an end then. God allowed the Jewish people about one generation to see that Jesus of Nazareth was not another fly-by-night Messianic claimant, and then he removed his protecting hand and let the “old” vanish away (cp. Gamaliel’s speech in Acts 5:33-40). Historically, there was about a generation’s overlap between the beginning of Christianity and the end of Judaism. Jerusalem fell to the Romans in A.D. 70 after a four-year war that began on the Mediterranean coast in A.D. 66. Hebrews evidently precedes this date a little while, because the recipients are still in the land.

D. **6:18:** *“We . . . who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us”* is sometimes taken as referring to Jews fleeing from Rome at the edict of Claudius in A.D. 49.

Maybe the imagery relates to fleeing to the altar and laying hold of its horns as an analogy to reprieve from punishment for sin.

E. **13:23: “Timothy has been set free”** shows that the letter is within Timothy’s lifetime.

IV. Place of writing: “*the (brothers) of/from Italy greet you*” (13:24b)

A. Rome

The phrase ἀσπάζονται ὑμᾶς οἱ ἀπὸ τῆς Ἰταλίας has traditionally been taken to mean ἀπό in the weak sense “of,” implying that they are with the writer as he writes from their city, Rome. Palestine becomes a natural destination, and Paul is the author who writes from the Eternal City in anticipation of a visit to Palestine with Timothy, who has been recently released from prison (too? Acts 28:30-31?).

The prepositional phrase ἀπὸ τῆς Ἰταλίας (“from Italy”) is not adverbial—“salute from Italy.” “Of Italy” *versus* “away from Italy” is broader (hence, minimum affirmation), which means it could be either from Rome or from elsewhere back to Rome. The more restricted meaning “away from” has to be the idea in ἀπό if we claim that it means away from Rome.

B. Alexandria

The same phrase ἀσπάζεται ὑμᾶς οἱ ἀπὸ τῆς Ἰταλίας has more recently been taken to mean ἀπό in the more original sense “away from,” implying that they and the writer are somewhere else, and they are sending greetings back to their home in Rome. Alexandria is then picked as this other place because of the allegorical method of interpretation supposedly used in Hebrews. Philo of Alexandria pioneered the use of allegory among the Jews as a way of trying to show that the ideas of Greek philosophy, many of which he had accepted, originated from the Jewish Old Testament. Apollos, who came from Alexandria, becomes then a candidate for authoring this book.

A comparable example appears in Acts 17:13: “*When those from Thessalonica knew that the word of God was preached by Paul in Berea . . .*” (ώς δὲ ἔγνωσαν οἱ ἀπὸ τῆς Θεσσαλονίκης Ἰουδαῖοι . . .). They were not so much “away from” Thessalonica as “from/of” Thessalonica. A parallel exists also in the case of Joseph of Arimathea in Matthew 27:57 and John 19:38 (ἀπὸ Ἀριμαθαίας). The point is not that Joseph was away from Arimathea at that time, but that he originated in that town. Likewise, John 1:44 says that Philip was from (ἀπό) Bethsaida, the city of (ἐκ) Andrew and Peter; this case is like the one with Joseph of Arimathea. In these cases, the person is away from his place of origin at the time of writing.

C. The author is not in prison and has no immediate prospect of imprisonment because he plans to travel (13:23).