The Historical Context of the Book of Hebrews

Historical Context for BI5500 Hermeneutics

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Author

The author of the Book of Hebrews is unknown but many think of it to be the apostle Paul. The Bible knowledge commentary points out “the tradition of Pauline authorship is very old and has never been decisively disproved.”[[1]](#footnote-1) The belief that Paul’s hand is the one that wrote Hebrews can be traced back to the time of Pantaenus in Alexandria, more specifically the belief was held by a person named Clement of Alexandria who originally believed that Hebrews was written by Paul in the Hebrew language and then translated to Greek by Luke. Many doubt this because of evidence such as “style” and “internal characteristics” that rule out Paul as being the author but they cannot definitively prove it. There is another person that is thought to have written the Book of Hebrews and his name is Barnabas who is Paul’s “former missionary partner”. Many believe there to be better claim for Barnabas as the writer but “the authorship of Barnabas cannot be proved, anymore than authorship by Paul can be disproved” which leaves us where we started but regardless of which was the author we still have God as the divine authority behind the words.

Date

It is hard to pinpoint the exact date of this writing but we can use clues to put the Book of Hebrews with a certain time frame. We know that the book was used by Clement of Rome so that puts it no later than A.D. 95 and we also know that it has to be before A.D. 70 because the author talks about the “Old Testament sacrificial system” as still being in operation which means it was before the destruction of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem. The Bible Knowledge Commentary states the most accurate date of Hebrews from sometime between A.D. 68 or 69.

Recipients

The original audience of the Book of Hebrews is just as much of a mystery as the authorship of the book is. The writer discusses points like “earlier days” which point us to believe that he had some type of past with the audience. We also see the author knowing things about the audience such as spiritual condition (Heb. 5:11-14) and also requested prayers from them (Heb. 13:18) so whoever the author is they definitely had a connection with the audience. The main belief is that the author’s audience is of Jewish decent because he stress’s not falling back into the “Levitical system.” Many places have been brought as possible locations for the setting like Rome but Zane C. Hodges brings up an interesting point that “if Barnabas is the author of the epistle, one locale which might fit all the requirements is the ancient Libyan city of Cyrene in North Africa.” Cyrene was founded around 630 B.C mainly as a Greek colony but had many Jewish people in the community. The one thing we do know is that the most possible setting for Hebrews is a “Christian church, largely Jewish in membership, in such a city as Cyrene.” This setting helps us picture the audience as believing Jews feeling pressure from unbelieving Jews to return to their ancestral faith.

1. Zane C. Hodges, “Hebrews,” in The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament and New Testament, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983), 776. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)