

A LOOK AT A BOOK: Hebrews

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Who are the leading candidates for the authorship of Hebrews?

To whom was Hebrews written, where did they live, and what was their spiritual state?

What is the distinctive christological emphasis in Hebrews, and how does it relate to the dissuasion of the readers from apostasy?

Theme

The author of Hebrews portrays Jesus Christ distinctively as the Great High Priest who, having offered none other than Himself as the completely sufficient sacrifice for sins, ministers in the heavenly sanctuary. The purpose of this portrait, which emphasizes the superiority of Christ over every aspect and hero of Old Testament religion, was to prevent the first readers of the epistle from reverting to Judaism.

Authorship

Early church tradition is uncertain about the authorship of the anonymous book of Hebrews. Nevertheless, at a very early date (c. AD 95), Hebrews was known and used in 1 Clement. In the eastern part of the Roman Empire, Paul was usually regarded as the author. The theology of Hebrews does resemble that of Paul when we compare the preexistence and creatorship of Christ in Hebrews 1:1-4 and Colossians 1:15-17, the humiliation of Christ in Hebrews 2:14-17 and Philippians 2:5-8, the new covenant in Hebrews 8:6 and 32 Corinthians 3:4-11, and the distribution of gifts by the Holy Spirit in Hebrews 2:4 and 1 Corinthians 12:11. The western segment of the church doubted Pauline authorship, however, and even excluded Hebrews from the canon at first because of the uncertain authorship. This fact shows the early church did not gullibly accept books into the canon without first examining their credentials as to authorship, trustworthiness, and doctrinal purity.

The western church had good reasons to doubt authorship by Paul. None of his acknowledged epistles are anonymous, as Hebrews is. The polished Greek style of Hebrews differs radically from Paul's rugged style, more than can be explained easily by a difference in amanuenses. And Paul constantly appeals to his own apostolic authority, but the writer of Hebrews appeals to the authority of those who were eyewitnesses to Jesus' ministry (Hebrews 2:3, but cf. Acts 13:31).

Barnabas. Others have suggested Barnabas, whose Levitical background (Acts 4:36) fits the interest in priestly functions exhibited throughout Hebrews and whose association with Paul would explain the similarities to Pauline theology. But as a resident of Jerusalem (Acts 4:36, 37), Barnabas probably heard and saw Jesus, whereas the author of Hebrews includes himself among those who had to depend on others for eyewitness testimony (Hebrews 2:3).

Luke. Luke, another companion of Paul, is also a candidate for the authorship of Hebrews because of similarities in the polished Greek style of Hebrews and that of Luke-Acts. But Luke-Acts is Gentile in outlook, Hebrews very Jewish.

Apollos. Martin Luther suggested Apollos, whose acquaintance with Paul (1 Corinthians 16:12) and being tutored by Priscilla and Aquila (Acts 8:26) would account for the likenesses to Pauline theology in Hebrews. Apollos's eloquence (Acts 18:24, 27, 28) could have produced the refined literary style of Hebrews. And his Alexandrian background fits Hebrews' exclusive use of the Septuagint in Old Testament quotations, for the Septuagint was produced in Alexandria, Egypt. But the lack of early tradition favoring Apollos leaves us in doubt.

Silvanus. To suppose that Paul's companion Silvanus (Silas) was the author would again explain the similarities to Pauline theology. Not much more can be said for or against authorship by Silvanus.

Philip. The same is true of the suggestion that Philip wrote Hebrews.

Priscilla. Harnack suggested Priscilla because of her close association with Paul and ingeniously argued that she left the book anonymous because female authorship was unacceptable to the public.

Addressees

In spite of the traditional appendant heading, "To the Hebrews," some have thought Hebrews was originally addressed to gentile Christians. For support, an appeal is made to the polished Greek style and the extensive use of the Septuagint with only an occasional departure from that Greek translation of the Old Testament. But these phenomena imply nothing about the original addressees. They indicate only the background of the author. The frequent appeal to the Old Testament, the presupposed knowledge of Jewish ritual, the warning not to relapse into Judaism, and the early traditional title all point to Jewish Christians as the original recipients.

Destination

Prima facie it might seem most likely that these Jewish Christians lived in Palestine. But according to 2:3, they had neither seen nor heard Jesus for themselves during his earthly ministry, as many Palestinian Christians had doubtless done; and according to 6:10 they had materially assisted other Christians, whereas Palestinian Christians were poor and had to receive aid (Acts 11:27-30; Romans 15:26; Corinthians 8, 9). Furthermore, the readers' knowledge of Jewish ritual appears to have come from the Old Testament in its Septuagintal version rather than from attendance at the temple services in Jerusalem. And the statement, "Those from Italy greet you" (13:24), sounds as though Italian away from Italy are sending greetings back home. If so, Rome is the probable destination. Substantiating this conclusion is the fact that evidence for the knowledge of Hebrews first appears in Rome (1 Clement).

Purpose

Wherever the addressees lived, they were well-known to the author. He writes about their generosity (6:10), their persecution (10:32-24; 12:4), their immaturity (5:11-6:12), and his hope of revisiting them soon (13:19, 23). Two additional details may be significant: (1) the readers are exhorted to greet not only the leaders and fellow Christians in their own assembly, but "all the saints" (10:24); and (2) they are rebuked for not meeting together often enough (10:25). Possibly, then, they were a Jewish Christian group or house-church who had broken away from the main body of Christians in their locality and who stood in danger of lapsing into Judaism to avoid persecution. The main purpose of the epistle is to prevent such apostasy and to bring them back into the mainstream of Christian fellowship.

Date

The use of Hebrews in 1 Clement requires a date of writing before c. AD 95, the date of 1 Clement. A date of writing before AD 70, however, is favored by the lack of any reference in Hebrews to the destruction of the temple as a divine indication that the Old Testament sacrificial system had been outmoded. The author would probably have used such an historical argument had he written after that event.

Literary Form

As other epistles, Hebrews concludes with personal allusions; but unlike other epistles, it has no introductory greeting. The oratorical style and remarks such as "time would fail me to tell" (11:32) might seem to indicate a sermon. But the statement, "I have written to you briefly" (13:22), requires us to think that Hebrews is an epistle after all, written in sermon style.

Christ's Superiority

To keep his readers from lapsing back into Judaism, the writer of Hebrews emphasizes the superiority of Christ over all else, especially over the various features of Judaism arising out of the Old Testament. The phrase "Better than" epitomizes the dominant theme of Christ's superiority, a theme punctuated throughout the book by exhortations not to apostatize.

Over the Prophets. Christ is better than the Old Testament prophets because He is the Son of God, the heir of the universe, the creator, the exact representation of divine nature, the sustainer of the world, the purifier from sins, the exalted One, and therefore God's last and best word to the human race (1:1-3a).

Over Angels. Christ is also better than the angels, whom contemporary Jews regarded as the mediators of the Mosaic law on Mount Sinai (Acts 7:53; Galatians 3:19), for Christ is the divine Son and eternal creator, but angels are servants and created beings (1:3b-2:18). Even His becoming lower than the angels through incarnation and death was only temporary. He had to become a human being to qualify as the One who by His death could lift fallen humanity to the dignity in which God originally created it. For that sacrifice, Christ has received great honor. In the middle of this section occurs an exhortation not to drift away from Christian profession (2:1-4).

Over Moses. As the divine Son over God's household, Christ is better than Moses, a servant in God's household (3:1-6).

Over Joshua. Christ is better than Joshua; for though Joshua brought Israel into Canaan, Christ will bring believers into the eternal resting place of heaven, where God rests from His work of creation (4:1-10). It is obvious Joshua did not bring Israel into this heavenly rest; for long after Joshua lived and died, David spoke of Israel's resting place as yet to be entered (Psalm 95:7, 8). The comparison between Jesus and Joshua is all the more pointed in the Greek New Testament in that the Hebrew name "Joshua" has "Jesus" as its Greek form. In other words, the Greek text knows no distinction between the names of the Old Testament Joshua and the New Testament Jesus.

Over Aaron. Christ is better than Aaron and his successors in the priesthood (5:1-12:29). The author of Hebrews first indicates two points of similarity between the Aaronic priests and Christ" (1) like Aaron, Christ was divinely appointed to

priesthood; and (2) by sharing our human experiences, Christ has a sympathy for us at least equal to that of Aaron (5:1-10).

Points of Christ's superiority over Aaron are that (1) Christ became priest with a divine oath, but the Aaronites (Aaron and his priestly descendants) did not; (2) Christ is eternal, whereas the Aaronites died and had to be succeeded; (3) Christ is sinless, but the Aaronites were not; (4) the priestly functions of Christ deal with heavenly realities, those of the Aaronites only with earthly symbols; (5) Christ offered Himself voluntarily as a sacrifice that will never need to be repeated, whereas the repetitiousness of animal offerings exposes their ineffectiveness as inferior creatures to take away sins; and (6) the Old Testament itself, written during the period of the Aaronic priesthood, predicted a new covenant that would make obsolete the old covenant under which the Aaronites functioned (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

Melchizedek

Taking his cue from the statement in Psalm 110:4 that the messianic king will be a priest after the pattern of Melchizedek, the author of Hebrews draws several parallels between Christ and that shadowy Old Testament figure, to whom Abraham gave a tenth of the spoils of battle after rescuing Lot (Genesis 14). Melchizedek was a priest of God' so also is Christ. The name "Melchizedek" means "King of Righteousness" (more literally, "My king is righteous"); the man by that name was king of "Salem" (perhaps a short form of "Jerusalem"), which means "peace" (in the sense of full divine blessing); and righteousness and peace are characteristics and results of Christ's priestly ministry. The absence in the Old Testament of a recorded genealogy for Melchizedek and of accounts of his birth and death (of course he had parents and ancestors, was born, and died) typifies the real eternity of Christ as the Son of God, in contrast with the dying of all Aaronic priests. The superiority of Christ over Aaron is furthered symbolized by Melchizedek's receiving a tenth of the spoils of battle from Abraham, whose descendant Aaron was. Solidarity with one's ancestors is here presupposed. The same superiority appears again Melchizedek's blessing Abraham, rather than vice versa, for the greater man blesses the lesser.

Exhortation

Hebrews closes with a long horatory section and final greetings (10:19-13:25). The author urges his readers to use the superior method of approaching God through Christ rather than the outdated Old Testament method, especially in collective worship, which they were neglecting (10:19-22). He warns them again, as in chapter 6, of the terrifying judgment that comes on those who openly and

finally repudiate their Christian profession, but states his confidence, based on previous endurance of persecution by his readers, that they will not fall into apostasy (10:23-31).

A Summary Outline of Hebrews

Theme: The superiority of Christ as a deterrent against apostasy from Christianity back to Judaism.

- I. The superiority of Christ over the Old Testament prophets (1:1-3a)
- II. The superiority of Christ over angels (1:3b-2:18), and a warning against apostasy (2:1-4)
- III. The superiority of Christ over Moses (3:1-6), and a warning against apostasy (3:7-19)
- IV. The superiority of Christ over Joshua (4:1-10), and a warning against apostasy (4:11-16)
- V. The superiority of Christ over the Aaronites and warnings against apostasy (5:1-12:29)
 - A. Christ's human sympathy and divine appointment to priesthood (5:1-10)
 - B. Warning against apostasy with exhortation to maturation (5:11-6:20)
 - C. The Melchizedek pattern of Christ's priesthood (7:1-10)
 - D. The transitoriness of the Aaronic priesthood (7:11-28)
 - E. The heavenly realities of Christ's priesthood (8:1-10:18)
 - F. Warning against apostasy (10:19-39)
 - G. Encouragement from Old Testament heroes of faith (11:1-40)
 - H. Encouragement from the example of Christ (12:1-11)
 - I. Warning against apostasy with the example of Esau (12:12-29)
- VI. Practical exhortations (13:1-19)

Conclusion: greetings, news of Timothy's release, and benedictions (13:20-25)