

The Book of Hebrews: Introduction, Part 1

I. Introduction

The book of the New Testament routinely known as Hebrews is a difficult nut to crack. It is in many ways an enigma, but it is also in many ways the clearest teaching in the whole NT about the value of Christ and his ministry on our behalf before God. By setting forth basic information that we do know about the book, we will begin our study by providing a foundation on which to build.

II. Author

- A. The book itself is anonymous. The introduction, which normally would include the author, recipients, and greetings, instead launches right into the topic of concern. The closing benediction gives some clues: The author and readers appear to be closely associated from 13:19, and Timothy is named in 13:23, but this doesn't end up helping much.
- B. Paul was a candidate for a long time, but that theory is presently rejected.
 1. The earliest manuscript we have on Hebrews is P46, and Hebrews is included with Paul's writings.
 2. The eastern church accepted Paul based on the cautious assessment of notable Alexandrian scholars, but the western church resisted until Jerome and Augustine shifted opinion.
 3. During the Reformation scholars again debated the point, and in the present day general agnosticism prevails.
- C. Suggestions have included Luke, Barnabas, Silas, Clement of Rome, Apollos, Priscilla, Philip, and Mary (Jesus' mother).
- D. We have to agree with Origen: "But who wrote the epistle, in truth God knows."

III. Recipients

- A. The book does not state anything directly about the recipients.
- B. Based on the broad themes of the book which continually juxtapose Jesus over and against central aspects of Judaism, it is very reasonable to argue that the readers were Jewish Christians.
- C. Some have argued that Gentiles could be the recipients, but this is largely based on possible interpretations of individual phrases and verses which do not readily fit into the big picture.
- D. Most scholars argue that the readers were living in Rome; this is very possible, but not absolutely mandatory from the data.

IV. Date

- A. The latest possible date for the book is around A.D. 100, since *1 Clement* cites from Hebrews.
- B. The earliest possible date is around A.D. 65, as the author seems to place himself after the time of Paul and the other apostles from 13:7, 23, and these men began to die in the mid 60's.
- C. The other primary factor involves the author's failure to mention the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70, when such mention would have been a slam dunk for his argument. It is likely, then, that it had not occurred.
- D. A very reasonable date is late 60's, but this cannot be stated with certainty.

V. Occasion

- A. The broad theme of the book implies that a group of Jewish believers was considering regressing back into the fold of Judaism, which in essence was a rejection of Christ.
- B. The readers had undergone some form of persecution in the past and were under a present threat of persecution from 10:32-34 and 12:4. One reasonable inference is that the readers were near to the time of the Neronian persecutions in the late 60's.

VI. Purpose

- A. Clearly the author wanted to warn Jewish Christians against the possibility of regressing back into Judaism.
- B. He did this through a positive exposition of the complete supremacy and finality of Christ over every aspect of the Jewish system.

VII. Conclusion

There is a lot we don't know about the book. Some of the information which is most useful in understanding the meaning of a text is lacking: We don't know who the author is, and we aren't all that sure about the readers. Even so, the message of the book is clear, and we will take this up next week.