

SESSION TWO

INTRODUCTORY MATTERS

Session Objectives: By the end of this session, the student should . . .

- 1) be able to explain and defend the general date of the Book of Hebrews
- 2) understand the issues concerning the historical views of the authorship of the book.

I. THE DATE OF THE EPISTLE

A. The *terminus ad quem*

Since Clement of Rome is known to have made clear reference to Hebrews in his epistle I Clement (c. AD 95-96), the Book of Hebrews must have been written prior to this time.

[most scholars date I Clement c. AD 95-96, although some have pushed it back to the early 70's (e.g., J.A.T. Robertson)]

B. Probable that Hebrews was written before AD 70

1. Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed in AD 70.

In light of the author's intense argument that the New Covenant ministry under the priesthood of Jesus has surpassed that of the Old Covenant, it would be astonishing that he would not have made reference to this monumental event if he had written after this occurred (especially since Jesus had prophesied this event - Lk 21:20-24). One of his primary arguments was the superiority of the New Covenant sacrifice compared with the Levitical system (which was inoperative after AD 70).

2. Other references within the book seem to suggest that the Temple ministry was still going on when the author wrote.¹
 - a. Heb 8:4 - "Now if He were on earth, He would not be a priest at all, since there are those who offer the gifts according to the Law."
 - b. Heb 13:10 - "We have an altar, from which those who serve the tabernacle have no right to eat."

¹Peter Walker, "Jerusalem in Hebrews 13:9-14 and the Dating of the Epistle." See P. E. Hughes (*A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 30-32) for a list of 18 passages using the present tense. Some would argue, however, that the use of the present tense is just a literary device.

- c. The references to a temptation faced (ch. 3-4) would seem more acute if the temple system were still in operation; there would also be a greater need for faith if the Temple were still standing in all its glory.
- C. Some evidence that a certain measure of time had passed since the crucifixion
1. The reference to Timothy in Heb 13:23
 - a. Must be in Timothy's lifetime.
 - b. The mention of his "release" suggests a time after his imprisonment. It is possible that Timothy shared in Paul's first Roman imprisonment (see Phil 2:19-20 and note the introductions to Phil, Col, & Philemon), but it would be doubtful that Timothy had an imprisonment prior to Paul's.

[Paul's first imprisonment at Rome was probably in the early part of AD 60 through the spring of 62].
 2. Possible Implications if a Roman destination is in view
 - a. Heb 10:32-34

Although the text is vague about what precise event may be in view, apparently it was well known to both the author and his audience. Lane (1:lxiv-lxvi) makes a strong defense that this is a reference to the Claudian edict of AD 49 against Roman Jews (expelling them from Rome -- see further Acts 18:2).
 - b. Heb 12:4

Those who argue for a Roman destination also contend that the epistle was written prior to the Neronian persecution of AD 64-67, since the audience had not yet shed blood.
- D. Conclusion
1. The epistle was probably written between AD 60-70.
 2. Lane: AD 64-68 (1:lxvi)
 3. Ellingworth: not long before AD 64 is possible
 4. Hodges: perhaps AD 68-69 (after the martyrdom of Paul); does not favor the Roman destination, as argued by Lane and Ellingworth.

II. AUTHORSHIP

A. Introduction

Numerous suggestions have been made, the more prominent being Paul or Barnabas. But most scholars today do not hold to Pauline authorship, and most will say that we honestly do not know.

B. The possibility of Pauline authorship

1. In Favor

- a. The author obviously had a profound understanding of the OT.
- b. The author knew and was associated with Timothy (13:23).
- c. The author stressed the New Covenant, as Paul did elsewhere (Gal 4:24; 2 Cor 3:6).
- d. Hab 2:4 is quoted three times in the NT (Rom 1:17; Gal 3:11; and Heb 10:38).

2. Historical View of Pauline Authorship

- a. Although Clement of Rome knew of the epistle (AD 95), he makes no mention of the author.
- b. Pantaenus (d. c. 190) and Clement of Alexandria (c. 155-c. 220)

Pantaenus was head of the school of Alexandria. There is some evidence that he held to Pauline authorship, for his pupil Clement of Alexandria apparently infers so. From the time of Pantaenus onward, the tradition of Pauline authorship was held in Alexandria.

Clement's opinion was preserved in the writings of Eusebius:

"But now, as the blessed elder [*Pantaenus, d. c. 200*] used to say, since the Lord, being the apostle [cf. Heb. 3:1] of the Almighty, was sent to the Hebrews, Paul through modesty [διὰ μετριότητα], since he had been sent to the Gentiles, does not inscribe himself as an apostle of the Hebrews, both to give due deference to the Lord and because he wrote to the Hebrews also out of his abundance [ἐκ περισθίας], being a preacher and apostle of the Gentiles."²

- c. Origen (c. 185- c. 254)

Origen succeeded Clement as head of the school. Origen's opinion is preserved for us in Eusebius. After commenting that the style of Greek is "higher" than Paul's, he mentions other views of the authorship:

"But I would say, that the thoughts are the apostle's, but the diction and phraseology belong to some one who has recorded what the apostle said,

²Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 6.14.4; cited in Ellingworth, 4. In this same chapter of Eusebius, Clement is said to have said that Paul wrote the epistle in the Hebrew tongue, following which it as carefully translated by Luke and published among the Greeks.

and as one who noted down at his leisure what his master dictated. If then, any church considers this epistle as coming from Paul, let it be commended for this, for neither did those ancient men deliver it as such without cause. **But who it was that really wrote the epistle, God only knows.** The account, however, that has been current before us is, according to some, that Clement who was bishop of Rome wrote the epistle; according to others, that it was written by Luke, who wrote the gospel and the Acts."³

Elsewhere, however, Origen seems to preserve the tradition that Paul was the author. He attributes 14 letters to Paul (thus including Hebrews), and introduces quotations from it by such phrases as "the apostle says"⁴ and "Paul says."⁵

d. The View of the West

- (1) Eusebius (writing about AD 325) preserves the general view of the Roman church:

"The fourteen letters of Paul are obvious and plain, yet it is not right to ignore that some dispute the Epistle to the Hebrews, saying that it was rejected by the church of Rome as not being by Paul . . ."⁶

- (2) The position of Jerome and Augustine, however, swayed the opinion of the West in favor of Pauline authorship

Jerome (c. 345 - c. 419)

"This must be said to our people, that the epistle which is entitled 'To the Hebrews' is accepted as the apostle Paul's not only by the churches of the east but by all church writers in the Greek language of earlier times, although many judge it to be by Barnabas or by Clement. It is of no great moment who the author is, since it is the work of a churchman and receives recognition day by day in the churches' public reading. If the custom of the Latins does not receive it among the canonical scriptures, neither, by the same liberty, do the churches of the Greeks accept John's Apocalypse. Yet we accept them both, not following the custom of the

³From Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 6.25 (pp 246-47 of Baker Book House popular edition, 1976).

⁴*Commentary on John*, 1.20; *Patrologia Graeca* 14.53.

⁵*De Principiis* 1.5.1; *Patrologia Graeca* 11.15.7.

⁶Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 3.3.5 (cited in Ellingworth, 6). It is obvious, however, that Eusebius himself favored the Pauline authorship of Hebrews (cf. *Hist. Eccl.* 6.41.6 and *Martyrs of Palestine* 11.9).

present time but the precedent of early writers, who generally make free use of testimonies from both works. And this they do, not as they are wont on occasion to quote from apocryphal writings, as indeed they use examples from pagan literature, but treating them as canonical and ecclesiastical works."⁷

Augustine (354-430) played a decisive role in several important councils that determined the limits of the canon (see Sess One).

e. The Reformation

Pauline authorship was questioned by Erasmus, Luther, and Calvin.

3. Against Pauline Authorship

a. The Greek of the Book of Hebrews is a more literary and polished Greek than is typical of Paul (but see footnote 2 above).

b. There are significant differences between the vocabularies of Paul and Hebrews (see Ellingworth, 7-12, for details).

There are 154 words found in Hebrews but nowhere else in the NT.⁸

c. The subject matter is characteristically not Paul's

(1) flesh-Spirit tension not present

(2) "in Christ" concept not present

(3) The forensic language of justification by faith is central for Paul, but absent in Hebrews.

(4) Paul does not mention the High-priesthood of Christ, so central to Hebrews

d. Uncharacteristic of Paul not to have identified himself as the author (the author does not even call himself an apostle).

e. Most modern scholars (including Ellingworth, Lane and Hodges) reject Pauline authorship.

C. The Possibility of Barnabas as the Author

⁷Jerome, *Epistle* 129.3 written c. 414 (cited in F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, 226-27). Tertullian (a western representative writing around AD 196-212) attributed the epistle to Barnabas.

⁸Listed in Ellingworth, 12-13.

1. Rationale in Favor

- a. Barnabas and Paul are the two names having early ecclesiastical support.
 - (1) Tertullian (c. 160/70 - c. 215/20) quotes the epistle as that of Barnabas in citing Hebrews 6.⁹
 - (2) Filaster (d. c. 397) - 4th century bishop in Brescia (N. Italy)
Ascribed to Barnabas in *Liber de Haeresibus*.
 - (3) Gregory of Elvira (d. after 392) - bishop of Elvira near Granada
Cites Heb 13 text with this introduction: "The most holy Barnabas says"
 - (4) Jerome mentions that some held to Barnabas as the author [see 2 d (2) above]
- b. Barnabas was a Levite, and would have been acquainted with the temple ritual (see Acts 4:36)
- c. Barnabas was sent out by the Jerusalem church and had close connections with the Jewish believers (Acts 4:36-37; 9:26-27; 11:22, 29-30).
- d. Barnabas did have apostolic authority (Acts 14:4,14; 1 Cor 9:1-6).
- e. Barnabas was known as a "son of consolation" (υἱός παρακλήσεως - Acts 4:36, and the author of Hebrews calls his epistle a "word of consolation" (τοῦ λόγου τῆς παρακλήσεως - Heb 13:22).

D. Conclusions

Paul was probably not the author based on linguistic and stylistic grounds, though it is difficult to say who might have been. The matter of authorship must remain a mystery.

⁹Tertullian, *de pudicitia* 20. The Latin account of Tertullian's testimony is recorded in James Moffatt, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1924), xvii-xviii.