

Introduction to Hebrews:

The Nature of the Book

The most obscure NT book as to author, recipients, date, place of writing, etc.

Unique among NT books, doesn't follow any of the other epistolary models, "yet it constitutes one of the most majestic presentations of Christology in the entire New Testament."¹

Begins like a sermon, ends like an epistle.

- No epistolary introduction (see Heb 1.1-4)
- But an epistolary conclusion (Heb 13.20-25)

Hebrews is a sermon prepared to be read aloud to a group of auditors who will receive its message not primarily through reading and leisured reflection but orally. Reading the document aloud entails oral performance, providing oral clues to those who listen to the public reading of the sermon. This complex reality underscores the importance of rhetorical form and the subtleties of expression in this homily. Hebrews was crafted to communicate its point as much aurally as logically. In point of fact, aural considerations, in the event of communication, often prove to be the decisive ones.²

Allen observes that the aural effect is lost in translation.

The writer was clearly a gifted preacher. Hebrews is characterized by a skillful use of alliteration, of oratorical imperatives, of euphonic phrases, of unusual word order calculated to arouse the attention, and of literary devices designed to enhance rhetorical effectiveness.³

References to speaking and hearing in Hebrews: 2.5, 5.11, 8.1, 8.5, 11.32, called a "word of exhortation" 13.22

Compare Acts 13.15, where Paul and Barnabas are invited to give a 'word of exhortation' in Antioch of Pisidia

¹ David Allen, *Hebrews*, The New American Commentary 35 (Nashville, Tenn: B & H Publ. Group, 2010), 24.

² William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1-8* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2017), lxxv.

³ Lane, lxxv.

Constable notes that the book alternates between Exposition and Exhortation:

Exposition	Exhortation
Ch. 1	2.1-4
2.5-18	3.1-4.14
4.15-5.10	5.11-6.12
6.13-10.18	10.19-39
Ch. 11	Chs. 12-13

Chapter 12, mostly exhortation, also alternates between the two styles:

- 12.1-2 Exhortation
- 12.3-11 Exposition
- 12.12-13 Exhortation
- 12.14-17 Exhortation
- 12.18-24 Exposition
- 12.25-29 Exhortation

“His aim is to furnish an elaborate argument in favour of one definite thesis though varied by many side-lights of illustration; and he describes what he has written as ‘a word of exhortation’ (13:22).”⁴

Authorship

Unlike other epistles, there is no internal statement of authorship. This has not held anyone back from speculation. Usually, the names suggested are either one of the apostles or someone connected very closely with the apostles.

Luke, Apollos, Barnabas, even Clement of Rome, and of course Paul

Clement wrote an epistle to the Corinthians (1 Clement) dated near the end of the 1st century, in which he quotes Hebrews extensively.

Pantaenus of Alexandria and his student, Clement of Alexandria, said Paul wrote Hebrews (Clement said Paul wrote Hebrews in Hebrew with Luke translating it into Greek).

⁴ F. W. Farrar, *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews, With Notes and Introduction.*, Cambridge Greek Testament for Schools and Colleges (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1893), xiii.

“In the manuscript tradition of the NT Hebrews appears exclusively in association with the letters of Paul. The oldest copy of this document is found in a collection of Pauline letters, the Chester Beatty Papyrus (P⁴⁶), which is dated at the beginning of the third century.”⁵

Eusebius quotes Origen who says the “thoughts are those of the apostle” [Paul] but the writing is of someone else. Origen suggests Clement or Luke, but with no certainty.

Tertullian suggests Barnabas.

The eastern church included Hebrews in the letters of Paul, the western church disputed Paul as author until the end of the fourth century, which solidified its position in the canon.

Jerome and Augustine, towards end of fourth century tentatively identify Paul as author.

In the Reformation, the question of authorship rose again, with Luther suggesting Apollos, Calvin suggesting Luke or Clement of Rome.

Controversy continued since, even producing suggestions of Priscilla or Mary the mother of Jesus, assisted by Luke and John.

The clues included in 13.23-24:

1. The author and readers are associated with Timothy (“our brother”)
2. Both the author and Timothy were at some distance from the recipients and planned to travel to them.
3. Timothy was imprisoned recently but was now released.
4. The author was in the same place as Timothy at the time of writing, but not imprisoned himself.
5. The recipients are exhorted to greet their leaders, implying a location with a church large enough to have multiple leaders.
6. The author sends greetings to the recipients from “those in Italy” ... presumably the place of writing (although not certain).

⁵ Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, lxix.

David Allen:

I propose that Luke wrote Hebrews from Rome after the death of Paul and before the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. Scriptural evidence for this thesis can be adduced upon a correlation of the statements made in the Pastoral Epistles with the text of Hebrews. While imprisoned in Rome, Paul penned 2 Timothy around AD 66 or 67, in which he hinted at his coming execution. Addressing Timothy, Paul said, “Do your best to come to me quickly” (2 Tim 4:9). Either before Timothy arrived or shortly thereafter, Paul was beheaded and then Timothy was probably imprisoned. Hebrews 13:23 says Timothy had been “set free,” most naturally implying an imprisonment. The description of Timothy as “our brother” in this verse is reminiscent of Paul and links both Timothy and our author with the Pauline circle. In 2 Tim 4:11 Paul stated, “Only Luke is with me,” thus placing Luke in Paul’s company at or near the time of his death in Rome, probably AD 67 but no later than June 9 of AD 68, the date of Nero’s suicide and the *terminus ad quem* for Paul’s death.⁶

Style of Luke-Acts and Hebrews “alone approach the standard of Classical Greek style.”⁷

Vocabulary of Luke-Acts and Hebrews very similar: “The significance of the coincidences may have been overrated, but no impartial student can fail to be struck by the frequent use of words characteristic of St Luke among the writers of the N. T.”⁸

Nevertheless:

“The limits of historical knowledge preclude positive identification of the writer. No firm tradition concerning his identity exists from the earliest period. He was clearly known to the community to whom he wrote (13:19). The brief personal notes in chap. 13, however, are not sufficiently specific to establish his identity. While the use of the masculine pronoun in referring to the writer is advisable in the light of the formulation in 11:32, Hebrews is anonymous.”⁹

⁶ Allen, *Hebrews*, 48.

⁷ Allen, 48.

⁸ Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 3rd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1903), xlviii.

⁹ Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, xlix.