

Who wrote the Epistle to the Hebrews?

**A helpful analysis by E. Schuyler English,
from his book *Studies in the Epistle
to the Hebrews.***

Authorship

We take the position, of course, that "all Scripture is God-breathed." No better description of the canonicity of the Sacred Writings can be found than is given within them in II Timothy 3:16, 17: "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works." The Author of the Scriptures, then, is the Holy Spirit. Those whose pens have set down the messages are but the writers. We employ here the words "authors" and "authorship," therefore, in the general sense of the terms, bearing in mind that what the writers set down was by the Holy Spirit (cf. II Pet. 1:21).

The well-known French commentator, Godet, says of the Hebrews Epistle: "This epistle, without introduction or subscription, is like the great High Priest of whom it treats, who was without beginning of days or end of years, abiding an High Priest continually. It is entirely fitting that it should

² H. A. Ironside, Litt.D., *Studies in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Loizeaux Brothers, New York; 1932).

remain anonymous.”³ Nevertheless, the authorship of the epistle has intrigued the minds of its readers since apostolic days or shortly thereafter, some coming to one conclusion about it, and some to another. There are those who have studied the epistle and have formed a temporary decision, such as Origen, once Bishop of Alexandria, who determined that the Apostle Paul wrote Hebrews, only to declare upon another occasion: “What is the truth in this matter, God only knows.” Others have affirmed staunchly that Paul wrote it, while still others have been equally firm in their varied opinions, attributing the epistle to Luke, or Apollos, or Clement of Rome, or another.

This denial of the Pauline authorship dates back as far as the Second Century. Such illustrious names as Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons; Cyprian, of Carthage; and Tertullian, one of the Latin fathers, are to be found holding the anti-Pauline opinion as to the authorship of Hebrews.

Yet from the very beginning, in the eastern churches, that is, in Palestine and Syria, to which, as we shall seek to show, we believe the letter first was carried, it has been ascribed to the Apostle Paul by the majority who have weighed the matter. Pantaenus, early Bishop of the Alexandrian church and founder of the Catechumens missionary school, a learned and respected man, held to the Pauline authorship. So did his successor, Clement of Alexandria, and we have already indicated the leanings of his successor, Origen, though the latter confessed a slight uncertainty.

A striking plea for the Pauline authorship is given inadvertently in his summation by the German scholar, Franz Delitzsch, who, although maintaining the Lukan authorship of the first twelve chapters, admits the possibility that Paul

³ F. Godet; quoted by W. H. Griffith Thomas in his exposition of this epistle, *Let Us Go On* (Bible Institute Colportage Association, Chicago).

might have penned them, saying: "The epistle has no apostolic name attached to it, while it produces throughout the impression of the presence of the original and creative force of the apostolic spirit. And *if* written by an apostle, who could have been its author but St. Paul? True, till towards the end it does not make the impression upon us of being his authorship; its form is not Pauline, and the thoughts, though never un-Pauline, yet often go beyond the Pauline type of doctrine as made known to us in the other epistles; and even where this is not the case they seem to be peculiarly placed and applied; but towards the close, when the epistle takes the epistolary form, we seem to hear St. Paul himself and no one else."*

Questions may arise such as these: "What difference does it make who wrote the epistle? Since its source is the mind of God and it is inspired by Him, can any authority be added to it by man, however highly he may be esteemed? And if God meant us to know its writer's name, would He not have told us?"

Certainly no man's name can enhance the authority and message of God. The inquiry into the identity of the epistle's penman is not for the purpose of adding to what God has revealed. It is for a better understanding of the letter's message. It does make some difference, therefore, who wrote Hebrews. If the author was the Apostle Paul, for example, we can see an illustration of the catholic aspect of the Lord's commission to teach. For Paul was the apostle to the Gentiles. It is also, if he be the author, a demonstration of that love for his brethren according to the flesh that he claimed to possess. It is proof of the wide scope of his knowledge and ability, etc. On the other hand, if Paul is not the author, but Apollos, or Clement, or another, then we have in the New Testament an inspired writing that does not have apostolic authority. This

* Franz Delitzsch, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, English translation (1865).

would be worthy of our attention, if true. And finally, it is not said anywhere that God does not want us to know the name of the writer of the epistle. There was a reason, which we shall discuss in time, for the name, especially if Paul was the author, being withheld from the letter. But perhaps God has given other means for us to identify the writer, in His Word. We believe that He has. And we propose, also, that He delights to have us want to know all that we can about the Scriptures, and that we should, therefore, diligently seek to learn all that it reveals.

There are a number of arguments offered by those who reject the Pauline authorship of the Epistle to the Hebrews. We need not state all of them, but we do offer five outstanding suggestions of that school:

(1) The name of the Apostle Paul, prefixed without exception to the thirteen epistles of which he is the accepted author, is not found in Hebrews, in whose opening sentence God is the subject. This objection to the Pauline authorship of the letter is unquestionably the seed of all the other disallowances, which are the results of investigations which seek to offer this omission as proof positive that Paul was not the writer.

(2) There is a difference in style in Hebrews from that found in other Pauline works. Important words and phrases common only to the Third Gospel and The Acts have caused some to attribute the epistle to Luke.

(3) The language is, perhaps, the purest Greek in the New Testament, superior in composition and style to the universally accepted Pauline epistles. Those who submit this suggestion remind us of Paul's self-criticism, that he was "rude in speech" (II Cor. 11:6), and propose that if Paul was the author of Hebrews, it must have been penned in Hebrew and translated into Greek. Luke, they say, would be the translator, and this would account for certain parallels between

the language of this letter and the two N. T. books ascribed to him.

(4) Paul was chosen by God and recognized in the apostolic church as "the apostle to the Gentiles" (Acts 9:15; Gal. 2:7, 8), whereas this epistle speaks as though salvation were for the Jews only, being singularly silent about the heathen, or the Gentiles.

And (5) there is considerable discrepancy in attitude between the writer of Galatians, who says: "But I certify you, brethren, that the Gospel which is preached of me is not after man. For I neither received it of man, neither was I taught it, but by the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1:11, 12), and the author of Hebrews, who begins his discourse: "God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by His Son" (1:1, 2). In the first instance we have a man who claims to have received a direct and personal revelation from God; in the second, one who shared with others the message from on High. "*I* received it . . . by the revelation of Jesus Christ"; "God . . . hath . . . spoken unto *us*." It is this seeming contradiction which caused both Martin Luther and John Calvin to reject the Pauline authorship.

It is not another anti-Pauline argument but is a result of the reasoning already set forth, that others have been suggested as the likely or possible authors of the Epistle to the Hebrews, most prominent among them being: Luke, whose literary style so resembles that of Hebrews; Barnabas, the companion of Paul on his first missionary journey; Apollos, "an eloquent man, and mighty in the Scriptures" (Acts 18:24); Aquila, or his wife Priscilla, both of whom were versed in the knowledge of God's Word (Acts 18:26); and certain post-apostolic writers, notably, Clemens Romanus (1st and 2nd Centuries), and Tertullian of Carthage (2nd and 3rd Centuries).

There is not one shred of evidence that any one of these had any part in writing the Epistle to the Hebrews. Only in one instance, that of Luke, could there be any possible reason for suggesting his authorship, and that because of his known ability, style, and association with the Apostle Paul. But to attribute the epistle to him is conjecture only, and nothing else.

Now let us examine the evidences which point to the Pauline authorship of the Hebrews Epistle. There is a feasible answer to every one of the five objections delineated above, as well as other indications, both external and internal, for assigning the letter to him.

(1) While Paul's name does not prefix the epistle, it is true, neither does the name of any other writer. This omission, then, does not deny his authorship. Furthermore, Hebrews does have one mark of Paul's which is found, in one of two forms, in every one of the thirteen epistles which bear his name. We refer to his closing salutation: "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you" (Rom. 16:24; I Cor. 16:23; cf. II Cor. 13:14; Gal. 6:18; Eph. 6:24; Phil. 4:23; I Thess. 5:18; II Thess. 3:18; and Phile. 25); and, "Grace be with you" (Col. 4:18; cf. I Tim. 6:21; II Tim. 4:22; and Tit. 5:15). This mark, by the way, is one to which he draws particular attention in his Second Epistle to the Thessalonians, in view of the fact that the Thessalonians had received a letter purported to have been his, which was spurious. For in II Thessalonians 3:17, 18, he says: "The salutation of Paul with mine own hand, which is the token in every epistle: so I write. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen."

(2) Admittedly there is a decided difference in style between Hebrews and the thirteen epistles that are acknowledged as Paul's. But it is a different letter, written to a different people, and for a different purpose. One might also scan First Corinthians and find therein expressions that do not occur

in any other of the apostle's letters. There are, too, a great many coincidences between the Hebrews Epistle and some of Paul's writings, as, for example: compare Hebrews 5:13 with I Corinthians 3:2; Hebrews 8:6, 9, with Galatians 3:19, 20; Hebrews 10:1 with Colossians 2:17; Hebrews 13:10 with I Corinthians 9:13 and II Corinthians 10:18; etc.

There are similarities, in addition, between Galatians and Hebrews, as, notably, the previously mentioned citation of Habakkuk 2:4 in both epistles (as in Romans, also), and again, the references to Jerusalem, in both letters, as being "above," or "heavenly."

(3) Let us admit the purity of the Greek, the epistle's "great abundance of sonorous words," and the fact that it is "more rhythmical" than the Pauline letters in general. First, in answer, we submit that according to reliable authorities, the epistle was undoubtedly written originally in the Greek language. For there is no evidence whatever of its having first been penned in Hebrew. We do not recall ever having heard of any who have seen early Hebrew MSS, but only Greek. Its copious and flowing style bears further testimony to its having been written in the Greek, for it would be most difficult for a translator to maintain these and other marks of an original, and still hold exactly to the precise meaning and sense of inspiration. And further, all the Old Testament quotations in the epistle are given in the verbatim language of the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the ancient Hebrew Scriptures, which indicates that the author of Hebrews was thinking in Greek and that he had a copy of the Septuagint by his side.

It is not beyond the realm of possibility that the Apostle Paul, if he was the author, should have employed an amanuensis, to whom he dictated, as he dictated the Epistle to the Romans to Tertius (Rom. 16:22). Such an one, if he were a Greek scholar or a man like Luke, with whom the author

might have discussed the epistle, might well have suggested a turn of a phrase here and a different expression there, though we doubt Tertius having done so with Romans.

But why should we think that one with the education and background of the Apostle Paul could not pen a letter of such perfection of language and style as Hebrews? Was he not writing under inspiration, whatever his name? Nor was the apostle's writing, in the epistles recognized as his, as poor and inelegant as some, who oppose the Pauline authorship of Hebrews, would have us believe. Romans is not bad writing, though in style it does not reach the beauty of Hebrews. At least one of the ancients did not think Paul beggarly in the Greek tongue, namely, Chrysostom, who declared: "For eloquence he [Paul] was esteemed a Mercury by the Gentiles."

It is true that the apostle once referred to himself as "rude of speech." The occasion was a significant one. He was writing to the Corinthians about false teachers who were beguiling them to depart from the simplicity of the Gospel of Christ. The language which these heretics made use of was eloquent, stylish, and rather affected. No doubt they would have accused the apostle of being ignorant and unskilful, not worthy to teach his hearers. Paul admitted his rudeness of speech but not his lack of knowledge; for he preached the Gospel of God to them. No, we cannot accept it as factual that the great apostle did not have the ability to produce, under divine unction and inspiration, a work of this kind.

We leave this portion of our considerations with a quotation from the 16th Century French theologian, Theodore Beza: "When I will consider the genius and character of the speech and style of this apostle [Paul], I confess I never found that grandeur in Plato himself, as in him, when he thundereth out the mysteries of God; nor that gravity and vehemency in Demosthenes as in him, when he intends to terrify the minds of men with a dread of the judgments of God, or would

warn them, or draw them to the contemplation of His goodness, or the performance of the duties of piety or mercy; nor do I find a more exact method of teaching in those great and excellent masters, Aristotle and Galen, than in him.”⁴

(4) It is too well known that Paul was “the apostle to the Gentiles” to require comment. But it is also familiar that he was “of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews” (Phil. 3:5). And who can forget his heart’s desire for the salvation of Israel, and his willingness to be accursed for their sakes? “I say the truth in Christ,” declares the apostle in Romans 9:1–4, “I lie not, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart. For I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh: who are Israelites . . .”

Was the commission that the Lord Jesus Christ left for His apostles, to go to the Gentiles *only*, or to Israel *only*? No, it was to all nations. It had no bounds but was wholly catholic. Peter was “the apostle of the Circumcision” (cf. Gal. 2:7); yet it was he, first of all, who proclaimed the Gospel of Christ to the Gentiles, in the house of Cornelius (Acts 10). God, who is no respecter of persons, is not limited in the employment of His messengers. He gave the Apostle Paul the apostolic, prophetic, and evangelistic gifts. He also gave him the teaching gift. Could He not, then, have used him in this capacity to the Hebrews, rather than in that of prophet or apostle announcing the future or some new revelation?

And (5) as to the discrepancy between the Paul, who asserted that his revelation was direct from the Lord (Gal. 1:11, 12), and the writer to the Hebrews, who acknowledged that others were recipients with him of the message of God:

⁴ Quoted by John Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Vol. I (Thomas Teg, London; 1840).

“God . . . hath . . . spoken unto *us*” (Heb. 1:1, 2), we need to remember the different circumstances attending these remarks. In the Galatian Epistle Paul was declaring himself as the apostle to the Gentiles; in the Hebrews Epistle, the writer was declaring himself as one of the Hebrews: “God . . . hath . . . spoken unto *us*.” To paraphrase it, supposing Paul to be the author, he might have said: “God, who in former days spoke by the prophets to the nation Israel, has in these last days spoken to us, Israelites, by His Son. I, ‘of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews,’ am one of you, for He was ‘sent [by God] to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.’ ”

When the Apostle Paul testified of the special revelation which was given him by the Lord, it was in order to defend his apostolic authority. But he who was writing anonymously, as the Hebrew Epistle’s author was, would certainly not speak of such a special revelation as Paul had had. And it is not unusual to find the apostle identifying himself with the needs of his readers, and rightly so, since his need either had been, or still was, the same. Thus he includes himself in the description of what all men are apart from Christ: “among whom *we* all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of *our* flesh . . . and were by nature the children of wrath” (Eph. 2:3). And he identifies himself with the Israelites, in contrast to the Gentiles, by the use of “we” and “ye” respectively in Ephesians 1:11 and 13.

Other circumstances, too, point to the Pauline authorship of the epistle. If this letter was first sent to Palestine, which we believe and shall seek to show, then the statement in chapter 10:34, “for ye had compassion of me in my bonds,” has some meaning to us, granted Paul was the writer. For you will recall his imprisonment in Caesarea in earlier years. Again, the allusion to Timothy (13:23) surely implies Paul’s

authorship, for he and his son in the faith lived on terms of close intimacy.

But need we depend upon such suggestions as to the Pauline authorship, pointed as they may be? We think not. The Epistle to the Hebrews was written anonymously to its earliest recipients for a reason; and that reason is, if Paul was its writer, that he was not held in high esteem by Hebrews, who were prejudiced against him as an apostate, not only from Judaism in general but from the Pharisaic school which persecuted the followers of the Lord Jesus. But did God intend that this letter should continue to hold anonymity for every generation of believers? Has He perhaps indicated its authorship elsewhere within His Word?

The Apostle Peter wrote two epistles. They were both to the same people, for in his second letter he says: "This second epistle, beloved, I write unto you" (II Pet. 3:1). To whom did he write this letter? To those whom he addressed in his first epistle, "sojourners of the dispersion," that is, Jewish Christians (I Pet. 1:1). Now Peter states in his second letter, written to Hebrews: ". . . even as our beloved brother Paul, also according to the wisdom given unto him hath written unto you; as also in all his epistles, speaking to them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood" (II Pet. 3:15, 16).

At some time, then, Paul sent a communication⁵ to Hebrew Christians. In it he spoke of things which Peter also mentioned. And in this were things difficult of understanding. Well, the Epistle to the Hebrews that is bound in our New Testament speaks of some of the same things which Peter

⁵ Some have suggested that Romans 9-11 might qualify as this communication. But we think not. The passage in Romans is *about* Hebrew Christians, and not *to* them specifically. Note the address: Romans 1:7. We are impressed, too, that the implication of II Peter 3:15, 16 is that Paul's communication to Hebrew Christians was a letter ("as also in all his epistles") and not merely a portion of a letter.

writes, and in it are things “hard to be understood.” There come to mind immediately Hebrews 6 and 10. But lest some might think these not to be sufficient evidence, we have a definite statement that seems to apply perfectly, namely, Hebrews 5:11: “. . . we have many things to say, and hard to be uttered, seeing ye are dull of hearing.” If a thing is hard to be uttered because its hearers have dull ears, then it is hard to be understood.

We recapitulate: (1) Peter, writing to the Hebrews, declares that Paul wrote to them also, a communication that teaches the same truths and has some things hard to be understood; (2) the Epistle to the Hebrews is a letter that teaches the same truths and contains in it some things hard to be understood. In other words, (a) Paul wrote to the Hebrews; (b) we have a letter to the Hebrews; and (c) there is no other letter to the Hebrews extant. Therefore this must be Paul’s letter. If not, where is it?

We know that the Epistle to the Hebrews was written anonymously. It may be that God intends its author’s name to remain hidden. It seems to us, however, that He has indicated who he is. If we err, then we can know that it is better that the writer’s identity remain a secret, for assuredly there is not sufficient evidence to attribute the epistle to any other than Paul. But whoever its author—whether it was written by the Apostle Paul, as we believe, or by an unknown hand—its authority remains unchanged and undimmed; for it is God’s Word. We conclude, therefore, in the words of another: “We may compare it [Hebrews] to a painting of perfect beauty, which had been regarded as a work of Raphael. If it should be proved that it was not painted by Raphael, we have thereby lost not a classical piece of art, but gained another master of first rank.”⁶

⁶ Thiersch, quoted by Adolph Saphir, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Vol. I (Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids).