

# Studies in Hebrews

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## *Lesson I*

### Author

The letter to the Hebrews is written without introduction. Perhaps the author wanted to remain anonymous as a sign of humility or didn't want the name to detract from the message. For some time, it has been the popular opinion that Paul is the author of Hebrews, since its teachings reflect the theology that Paul articulated so well in Romans and Galatians. Most contemporary Bible scholars, however, disagree based on internal evidence—the grammar and style being inconsistent with Paul's writing. Historically, Paul, Luke, Silas, Barnabas, Apollos, Phillip the Evangelist, and even the husband-wife duo Priscilla and Aquila have been suggested as the authentic voice behind the letter. Here are three of the most likely candidates:

#### Paul

- **Proponent:** Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-215)
- **Argument For:** Internal evidence reveals the author was a colleague of Timothy (Heb. 13:23) who resided in Italy (13:24). Paul wrote two letters to Timothy, who also accompanied him on missions. Paul also spent two years in Rome under house arrest, awaiting trial before Caesar (c. AD 60). This would fall within the estimated date of Hebrews. Clement argued that Paul originally wrote the letter in the Hebrew tongue for the Jews and that later Luke translated it into Greek for the Gentiles, since the work reflects Paul's towering intellect, but someone else's writing style. The author also quotes Old Testament passages in the rabbinical tradition of the day—Paul was a trained rabbi.
- **Argument Against:** The epistle does not include the standard greeting that Paul included in his 13 epistles. Thus, there was not unilateral agreement in the early church about the author. Some see Hebrews 2:3 as evidence that the author received the Gospel through the testimony of other disciples, while Paul plainly stated that he received the Gospel directly from the Lord (Gal. 1:12).

#### Barnabas

- **Proponent:** Tertullian (c. 160-220)
- **Argument For:** Tertullian (famous for inventing the theological term "trinity" and popularizing the terms "Old Testament" and "New Testament") believed Hebrews to be the product of a Levite (the priestly class of Jews) who was influenced by Paul. Barnabas—a close companion of Paul—was thought to be the most likely candidate.
- **Argument Against:** According to Galatians 2:13, Barnabas buckled in the face of opposition from the legalists, seeking to introduce Jewish religious rituals into Christian practice. Nor was Barnabas regarded as much of a public speaker or teacher (Acts 14:12).

#### Apollos

- **Proponent:** Martin Luther (1483-1546)
- **Argument For:** A companion of Paul, Apollos was revered for being "mighty in the Scriptures" (Acts 18:24). He spent time in Corinth, where he had a reputation as an eloquent minister for Christ. Apollos was a Jew, with the necessary background to address Jewish history and tradition in depth. He was from Alexandria, where the Septuagint—a Greek translation of the Old Testament—originated (Hebrews pulls its quotes exclusively from the Septuagint).
- **Argument Against:** Neither the Alexandrian church nor the influential Catechetical School of Alexandria (founded c. 190) credited Apollos as the author, suggesting instead Paul by way of Luke.

In the end, perhaps Origen (c. 185-254) was correct in noting, "Men of old time have handed it down as Paul's, but who wrote the Epistle God only knows certainly."

# Audience

While we may be uncertain of its author, we know that the early church adopted it into the canon of Scripture shortly after its writing. Hebrews is different from other New Testament epistles, in that it is not addressed to specific churches or individuals. Rather, Hebrews was intended to be read by Christians in general (Heb. 2:3, 3:1). One can imply, however, that the original recipients were likely Jewish converts to Christianity (or Gentiles influenced by Judaism). The title ("Hebrews"), incidentally was not added until after the letter was in circulation.

# Date

Three important observations help narrow down a date for Hebrews:

1. Timothy was still alive (Heb. 12:23).
2. There is no mention of the fall of Jerusalem (A.D. 70).
3. Clement of Rome quotes Hebrews in c. A.D. 95, indicating that the letter had become generally accepted as Holy Scripture.

Based upon these facts, scholars believe Hebrews was penned between A.D. 64-68.

## Text: Hebrews 1:1-4 (NIV)

**1** In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, **2** but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. **3** The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. **4** So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.

# Questions for Thought & Discussion

1. Break into pairs and scan each chapter, looking for words and themes that jump out at you.

Key Words:

Themes:

2. Historically, how has God communicated with humankind? (vs. 1) How does he communicate with us now? (vs. 2)
3. When are the last days? (vs. 2; cf. Acts 2:16-17)
4. What makes Jesus perfectly qualified to be God's spokesman? (vs. 2-4) How does this passage make a case for the deity and sovereignty of Christ?