



Truth

On Tough Texts

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A MINISTRY OF GRACE BIBLE CHURCH

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Does the Authorship of Hebrews Matter? (1)

II Peter 3:15-16

CONCERNING THE AUTHORSHIP OF HEBREWS, commentators often write such things as, “This great epistle is anonymous . . . This, however, does not affect the genuineness of the epistle.”¹ Another writes, “Today [Pauline authorship] is considered very unlikely.”² Still another says, “Current scholarship admits the puzzle still has no solution.”³

Such statements, as well as the overall nonchalant attitude toward this issue, have puzzled (and troubled) me for several years. As the beloved Harry Ironside writes:

May we be certain as to its human authorship, or is it merely a matter of intellectual speculation at best? I believe God has given us definite information on this point.⁴

I wholeheartedly agree. It’s absolutely unthinkable that God would “hide” the authorship of a key book of His Word.

But does this really matter? What difference does it make who wrote Hebrews? It’s still in the Bible, right? I am convinced that it matters a great deal and that there is a point here that is not often addressed. Few seem to realize that without knowledge of the author, *we have a New Testament letter with no apostolic authority and which therefore simply cannot be Scripture*. Among other writers, commentator E. Schuyler English, in his excellent “Introduction” to Hebrews, makes this very point:

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.⁵

Is such a strong statement justified? I believe it is when we consider the requirements for a book of the Bible to be considered a part of the “Canon” of Scripture. “Canon” (from the Greek *kanōn* and the Hebrew *keneh*) literally means “cane” or “rod of measurement,” since such was used in ancient times for measuring purposes, much like we still do today. The term came to be used for testing writings to determine whether or not they “measured up” to the standards required to be considered the Word of God.

Briefly, there were four major tests for the canonicity of a New Testament book.⁶ One test was whether the book agreed with the books already in the canon. There certainly was no question here concerning Hebrews “in view of its agreement with all of the Scriptures and its revelation of Christ’s Deity, His grace, His sacrificial death, His present mediatorial work, and His coming again.”⁷ At first, however, Hebrews was questioned because chapter 6 seemed “out of sorts with apostolic teaching,” but this was actually resolved “when the early church concluded that Hebrews was written by Paul.”⁸

A second test that goes along with that one is inspiration. Does the book give clear, unmistakable evidence of being “God-breathed” (II Tim. 3:16)? In light of the above subjects, the answer was yes to Hebrews.

A third test was that a book had to be gladly received by the Early Church, which Hebrews was. By the

time of Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-215) and Origen (c. 185-253), the Eastern Church accepted the Epistle (as well as attributed it to Paul), while the Western Church came along a little later. We will come back to this point in more detail.

A final test of canonicity was apostolic origin, that is, a book either had to be written *by* or attested *to* by an apostle. The two examples here, of course, are Mark and Luke, neither of whom were apostles, but were *sanctioned* by an apostle, Peter in Mark's case and Paul in Luke's case.

It is that last test, in my view, that is really at the heart of this issue. Without knowing who the author of Hebrews is, how can anyone attest to him? How can someone sanction an unknown writer? This is the equivalent of me writing a letter to recommend a man for a job without knowing who the man is. The whole idea is just plain silly. Further, who is doing the attesting anyway?

Again, it is often said that, "Hebrews is anonymous," but we agree with J. Sidlow Baxter who adds "it is only superficially so."⁹ I, for example, could write a letter and not sign it, but still be recognized as the author by people who know me or know my writing habits. Likewise, I, with others, see no doubt whatsoever that the Apostle Paul was the author of the Book of Hebrews. I would offer the following evidences, after which we will come back to our main question: "Does it really matter?"

The Testimony of Peter

This point and the next are on almost equal ground, but this one must be first because it deals with Scripture itself. One of the most underrated indications of Pauline authorship (which is virtually ignored by some and even missed by others) is II Peter 3:15-16:

And account that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation; 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 in them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction.

The brilliant Puritan John Owen, who exhaustively defends Pauline authorship in his monumental and mammoth exposition of Hebrews, writes of this verse:

Amongst the arguments usually insisted on to prove this Epistle to have been written by St Paul,

the testimony given unto it by St Peter deserves consideration in the first place, and is indeed of itself sufficient to determine the inquiry about it.¹⁰

In other words, *this verse alone is enough to settle the whole matter.*

Peter is here writing, of course, to Jews of the dispersion (that is, Jews scattered in lands outside Israel). In his clear reference to Paul, he not only accepts Paul's letters as "Scripture," but also refers to the fact that Paul has already written to these very same Jews. Therefore, if Paul did not write Hebrews, where is the letter that he wrote to the dispersed Jews? Arthur W. Pink concurs:

That this Epistle *was* written by Paul is clear from 2 Peter 3:15. Peter was writing to saved Jews as the opening verses of his first Epistle intimate; 2 Peter 3:1 informs us that this letter was addressed to the same people as his former one had been. Then . .

. . he declares that his beloved brother Paul "also according to the wisdom given unto him hath written *unto you.*" If the Epistle to the Hebrews be not *that* writing, where is it?¹¹

The great 18th Century expositor John Gill likewise agrees:

Above all, the testimony of the Apostle Peter is greatly in favour of [Hebrews] being [Paul's], (2 Peter 3:15,16) from whence it clearly appears, that the Apostle Paul did write an epistle to the Hebrews; for to them Peter wrote; (see 1 Peter 1:1; 2 Peter 3:1) and what epistle could it be but this?¹²

We could add to these quotations others from commentators such as Jamison, Fausset, and Brown, Matthew Poole, B. W. Johnson, and E. Schuyler English. The point, however, is clear: if Hebrews isn't the letter that Paul wrote to the same Jews of the dispersion that Peter wrote to, where is the other letter? Are we to believe he wrote another such letter that didn't make it into the Canon? John Owen answers this question by offering a scenario that would be just as ridiculous:

[If] we give place to such rash and presumptuous conjectures, we shall quickly have nothing left entire or stable; for why may not another as well say, "It is true Moses wrote five books; but they are lost, and those that we have under his name were written by another?"

One other point can be made here, namely, Peter specifically says that Paul wrote a letter that contained

Hebrews is anonymous, but "it is only superficially so."

J. Sidlow Baxter

“some things hard to be understood,” which immediately, of course, brings to mind such passages as Hebrews 6 and 10. It’s significant, then, that Paul also makes mention of this point in Hebrews 5:11: “Of whom we have many things to say, and hard to be uttered.” And in point of fact, Peter and Paul speak of some of the same things. Compare, for example, 6:2 with I Peter 3:20-21, and especially 10:26-27 with II Peter 2:20-22.

The Testimony of the Early Church

Another underrated indication of Pauline authorship is the testimony of the Early Church. As Baxter puts it, “We believe that the Pauline *tradition* is much weightier than is generally allowed.”¹³ In other words, it seems irrelevant to many that the Early Church, especially the Eastern branch, unhesitatingly recognized Paul as the author. By A.D. 150, in fact, only 70 years after Paul’s death, Panteanus (the head of the celebrated Christian school at Alexandria) referred to it as a generally accepted Epistle of Paul. Of Panteanus, trusted commentator Albert Barnes writes that he

lived near Palestine. He must have been acquainted with the prevailing opinions on the subject, and his testimony must be regarded as proof that the epistle was regarded as Paul’s by the churches in that region.¹⁴

While virtually every doubter falls back on the overused statement by the famous 3rd Century Origen (“As to who wrote the Epistle, the truth God knows”), few even acknowledge, much less quote, the *context* of that remark, which actually argues *for* Paul’s authorship:

I, to declare my own opinion, should say that the thoughts are the apostle’s, but the diction and composition that of some one who recorded from memory the apostle’s teaching, and, as it were, interpreted [or “wrote a commentary on”] what had been spoken by his master. If, then, any Church receives this Epistle as Paul’s, let it be well esteemed, even also on this account [i.e., let it not for this reason lose any recognition as a witness to the truth]; for not without good reason have the men of old handed it down as Paul’s. But as to who wrote the Epistle, the truth God knows. The account that has reached us is, on the part of some, that Clement, who became Bishop of the Romans, wrote the Epistle; on the part of others, that Luke, who wrote the Gospel and the Acts, did so.¹⁵

Turning again to John Owen, the great Puritan tallies the rest of this external evidence for Pauline authorship. In the *Alexandrian* church, besides Panteanus and Origen, there was “Dionysius, Theognostus, Peter, Alex-

ander, Hierax, Athanasius, Theophilus, Serapion, Didymus, and Cyril of Alexandria.” In the *Western* church, “from the fourth century, this view was held by Hilary, Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine, Rufinus, Chromatius, Innocent of Rome, Paulinus, Cassian, Prosper, Eucherius, Salvian, and Gelasius.” In the *Greek* church, “the synod at Antioch A.D. 264, Gregory Thaumaturgus, the council of Nice A.D. 315, Gregory of Nazianzum, Basil the Great, the council of Laodicea A.D. 360, Gregory of Nyssa, Titus of Bostra, Epiphanius, Chrysostom, and Theodore of Mopsuestia, assign it to the same author.” In the *Syrian* church, “the same opinion generally prevailed, as appears from Justin Martyr, Eusebius of Caesarea, Cyril of Jerusalem, Jacob of Nisibis, Ephraim Syrus.” Finally, in the *African* church, “the council of Hippo A.D. 393, the third council of Carthage A.D. 397, and the sixth council of Carthage A.D. 419, decide in favor of the same view.”

Special note should be made of Eusebius, that well-known bishop of Caesarea and historian in Palestine (4th Century). As Barnes points out, his testimony is extremely significant:

He took pains, from all quarters, to collect testimony in regard to the Books of Scripture. He says, “There are fourteen epistles of Paul, manifest and well known: but yet there are some who reject that to the Hebrews, alleging, in behalf of their opinion, that it was not received by the church of Rome as a writing of Paul.” The testimony of Eusebius is particularly important. He had heard all the objection to its canonical authority. He had weighed that objection. Yet, in view of the testimony in the case, he regarded it as the undoubted production of Paul. As such it was received in the churches in the East.

So, are we to shrug our shoulders at all that and say, “I guess we’ll just never know?” Is it not obvious that the knowledge of Paul’s authorship was known and then handed down by “the men of old?” On this point, Baxter writes, “Decades *before* Panteanus those who immediately followed the apostles regarded it as truly Paul’s.”¹⁶

Still there are those who insist, “But Paul nowhere identifies himself as the author, so we can’t be sure.” Really? Can we be sure that he wrote Ephesians? “Of course,” we answer, “he says so in the first verse.” Ah, yes, but “modern scholarship” tells us that he didn’t! Contemporary commentator Andrew L. Lincoln writes, “The more I have worked on the text as a whole, the more persuaded I have become that seeing the letter as the work of a later follower of Paul makes better sense of its contents.” He then even adds, “This is now the consensus view in NT scholarship, though a sizable minority continues to uphold Pauline authorship.”¹⁷ Based on five ridiculous reasons that he goes on to detail, this man

denies what the text clearly says,¹⁸ despite the fact that, similar to Hebrews, Eusebius recognized that the entire Orthodox Church considered Ephesians as belonging to Paul. So, if we “can’t be sure” when Paul says he is the author, should we be unsure when he *doesn’t* say he is?

We’ll continue with other evidences next time.

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NOTES

- ¹ Merrill F. Unger, *Unger’s Bible Handbook* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1967), p. 748.
- ² *Eerdman’s Concise Bible Handbook* (Minneapolis, MN: Worldwide, 1973), p. 365.
- ³ John MacArthur, *MacArthur’s Quick Reference Guide to the Bible* (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 2001), p. 291.
- ⁴ H. A. Ironside, *Studies in the Epistle to the Hebrews and the Epistle to Titus* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1932, 1958), p. 9.
- ⁵ E. Schuyler English, *Studies in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Findlay, OH: Dunham Publishing Company, 1955), p. 17.
- ⁶ See, for example, such discussions in Merrill Unger, *Unger’s Bible Handbook* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1966), p. 885, and Henry Thi-

- essen, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1943, 1989), p. 10.
- ⁷ English, p. 14.
- ⁸ R. C. Sproul, *Foundations: An Overview of Systematic Theology* (Orlando, FL: Ligonier Ministries, 1999), p. 23.
- ⁹ J. Sidlow Baxter, *Explore the Book* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1960), p. 277.
- ¹⁰ John Owen, “The Works of John Owen,” Vol. 17: *Concerning the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Rio, WI: Ages Software CD-ROM, 2000). Other quotations are from this work.
- ¹¹ Arthur W. Pink, “The Arthur W. Pink Collection,” *An Exposition of Hebrews* (Rio, WI: Ages Software CD-ROM, 2000) (emphasis in the original). Other quotations are from this work.
- ¹² John Gill, “The Collected Writings of John Gill,” *Exposition of the Old and New Testaments* (Rio, WI: Ages Software CD-ROM, 2000). Other quotations are from this work.
- ¹³ Baxter, p. 275 (emphasis in the original).
- ¹⁴ Albert Barnes, *Barnes Notes on the New Testament* (electronic edition in *The Online Bible*). Other quotations are from this work.
- ¹⁵ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 6.25.
- ¹⁶ Baxter, p. 276 (emphasis in the original).
- ¹⁷ Andrew T. Lincoln, *Word Biblical Commentary: Ephesians* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1990), p. lx, lxii.
- ¹⁸ See my “Introduction and Overview of Ephesians” on our web site for this detailed discussion.

I sometimes think if I were in heaven I should almost wish to visit my work at the Tabernacle, to see whether it will abide the test of time and prosper when I am gone. Will you keep in the truth? Will you hold to the grand old doctrines of the Gospel? Or will this church, like so many others, go astray from the simplicity of its faith, and set up gaudy services and false doctrines? Methinks I should turn over in my grave if such a thing could be. God forbid it!

Charles Spurgeon, *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, Vol. 23, p. 514.

JESUS – The Central Theme of the Bible

In *Genesis* He is the Beginning and the Creator of all things.

In *Exodus* He is the Deliverer and the Redeemer.

In *Leviticus* He is the Priest, the Sacrifice, the Blood, and the Offering.

In *Numbers* He is the Chastizer and the Purifier.

In *Deuteronomy* He is the Law.

In *Joshua* He is the Conqueror,

In *Judges* the King,

And in *Ruth* the Kinsman-Redeemer.

In *I and II Kings* He is the reigning King,

In *I Chronicles* He is the Genealogy,

And in *II Chronicles* He is the Reviver.

In *Ezra* He is the Temple,

In *Nehemiah* the Walls,

And in *Esther* the Deliverer.

In *Job* He is the Suffering Servant,

In *Psalms* the Praise of God,

In *Proverbs* Our Wisdom,

In *Ecclesiastes* the Teacher,

And in *The Song of Solomon* He is (poetically) the Beloved Bridegroom.

In *Isaiah* He is the Coming Messiah,

In *Jeremiah and Lamentations* He is the Compassionate Judge,

In *Ezekial* He is Watchman,

And in *Daniel* He is the Returning Messiah.
 In *Hosea* He is the Loving Redeemer,
 In *Joel* the Merciful Jehovah,
 In *Amos* the Judge of Sin,
 And in *Obadiah* the Condemning Judge.
 In *Jonah* He is the Sent One,
 In *Micah* the Prince of Peace,
 In *Nahum* the Counselor,
 And in *Habakkuk* the Just One.
 In *Zephaniah* He is the Protector,
 In *Haggai*, the Temple,
 In *Zechariah* the Shepherd,
 And in *Malachi* He is the Messenger.
 In *Matthew* He is the King,
 In *Mark* a Servant,
 In *Luke* a Man,
 And in *John* He is God.
 In *Acts* He is the Risen Savior in Power,
 In *Romans* He is the Gospel,
 In *I Corinthians* He is the Right Conduct,
 And in *II Corinthians* He is *The Authority*.
 In *Galatians* He is the Only Salvation,
 In *Ephesians* the Church,
 In *Philippians* the Only Joy,
 In *Colossians* the Eternal Glory,
 And in *I and II Thessalonians* He is the Returning
 Christ.
 In *I Timothy* He is the Good Minister,

In *II Timothy* the Faithful Minister,
 And in *Titus* the True Minister.
 In *Philemon* He is the Law of Love,
 In *Hebrews* the Priest,
 And in *James* the Works of Righteousness.
 In *I Peter* He is the Glory of Suffering,
 In *II Peter* the Basis for Growing in Grace,
 In *I John* the Basis of Fellowship,
 And in *II and III John* He is the Truth.
 In *Jude* He is the Faith We Contend For,
 And in *Revelation* He is the Reigning King.
 In addition to all this, He is the Light of Creation,
 the Ark of the Flood, Aaron's Rod, David's Sling, The
 Lamb Without Blemish, and the Cloud and the Pillar of
 Fire in the Wilderness.
 He is also Jacob's Ladder, Manna From Heaven,
 the Bronze Serpent, the Cities of Refuge, and the Book
 of Life.
 In the Tabernacle, He is the Ark of the Covenant,
 the Shewbread, the Lampstand, the Laver, the Veil, the
 Brazen Altar, and the Altar of Incense.
 And finally, men such as Adam, Abel, Noah,
 Melchizedek, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Sampson,
 David, and Jonah were all types of Christ.
*Indeed, the Lord Jesus Christ truly is the central
 theme of the Bible.*

Pastor Watson

A godly man holds no more than he will die for. The martyrs were so confirmed in the knowledge of the truth that they would seal it with their blood.

Thomas Watson, *Godly Man's Picture*, p. 21

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This monthly publication is intended to address Scriptures that have historically been debated, are particularly difficult to understand, or have generated questions among Believers. We hope it will be an encouragement and challenge to God's people to carefully examine and discern Truth. Periodically, we will also include book reviews of popular books, for much that is published today demands discerning reading. While the positions presented here are based on years of careful Biblical research, we recognize that other respected men of God differ.

If you have a question that perplexes you, please send it along so that we might address it either in an article or in our "Q & A" section. Other comments are also warmly welcomed.

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