



Truth

On Tough Texts

WWW.THESCRPTUREALONE.COM

A MINISTRY OF GRACE BIBLE CHURCH

ISSUE 12 (July 2006)

Does the Authorship of Hebrews Matter? (2)

II Peter 3:15-16

AS WE SUBMITTED LAST MONTH, THERE IS AN overall nonchalant attitude toward the issue of the authorship of the Book of Hebrews. It's absolutely unthinkable that God would "hide" the authorship of such a key book of His Word.

We, therefore, submitted first the evidence offered by Peter and, second, by the Early Church. In this conclusion, we would offer three further evidences of Pauline authorship, a conclusion, and one final consideration that is rarely addressed and which will also serve to set the stage for next month's TOTT.

The Testimony of Paul

It is consistently argued that Paul was the Apostle to the *Gentiles*, not to the Jews, so he would have had no reason to write this Epistle. While it's true that Paul was the Apostle to the Gentiles, he also clearly considered himself "an Hebrew of Hebrews" (Phil.3:5). As he also makes plain in his Epistle to the Romans (9:3; 10:1), he had a great burden for his fellow Jews. He consistently taught that the Gospel should go "to the Jew first" (Rom. 1:16). In fact, he always went to the synagogue first when he arrived in a new city (Acts 17:1-2). It certainly stands to reason that Paul would write a detailed exposition of the doctrine of Christ for the benefit of his fellow Christian Jews. God revealed the depths of the doctrine of the New Covenant to Paul, so it seems obvious that he would be the one to pass it on to both Jew and Gentile. Arthur W. Pink comments on this point:

Though he was distinctively and essentially the "apostle of the Gentiles" (Romans 11:13), yet his ministry was by no means confined to them, as the book of Acts clearly shows. At the time of his apprehension the Lord said, "He is a chosen vessel unto Me, to bear My Name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel" (Acts 9:15)¹.

E. Schuyler English (a Dispensationalist) is even more convincing:

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 bound but was wholly catholic [that is, universal or general]. 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 not respecter of persons, is not limited in the employment of His messengers. He gave 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 of some new revelation?²

The Testimony of Internal Evidence

Added to the foregoing, there are several internal pointers to Paul's authorship in the Epistle itself.

First, style differences are not as insurmountable as some critics would have us believe. A common objec-

tion to Pauline authorship is that the style of this letter is supposedly far different than Paul's. Ignored, however, are the similarities. Consider, for example, several parallels with other Pauline Epistles, such as 5:13 ("For every one that useth milk is unskilful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe") with I Cor. 3:2 ("I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able"). Or how about 10:1 ("For the law having a shadow of good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with those sacrifices which they offered year by year continually make the comers thereunto perfect") with Col. 2:17 ("Which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ")? We could also note 8:6, 9 with Gal. 3:19-20; 13:10 with I Corinthians 9:13 and II Corinthians 10:18; and others.

There is also the interesting similarity between Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews, all of which quote Habakkuk 2:4: "the just shall live by his faith" (Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:11; Heb. 10:38). Does this have no significance?

Should we also ignore 13:25 ("Grace be with you all"), a statement that is so typical of Paul that it appears multiple times, in various forms, in every one of his Epistles? Is not this as good as a signature? Compare it with the closing of Paul's other 13 letters: Rom. 16:24; I Cor. 16:23-24; II Cor. 13:14; Gal. 6:18; Eph. 6:24; Phil. 4:23; Col. 4:18; I Thes. 5:28; II Thes. 3:18; I Tim. 6:21; II Tim. 4:22; Titus 3:15; Phile. 25. We ask again: *Is not this as good as a signature?*

Ironically, the so-called "stylistic differences" argument is voiced by the liberal commentator mentioned at the end of Part 1 of this article who denies Pauline authorship of Ephesians. But just as his ridiculous, Bible-dishonoring attacks are easily answered by the fact that different letters call for different emphases, words, and even style, so it is with Hebrews.

Now we readily admit that there are some style differences. A notable one is that Hebrews is an extremely polished letter, much more so than Paul's other letters. This is easily answered, however, by two points. First, most of Paul's other letters were written earlier, during a busy life filled with traveling, conflict, struggle, and danger. In contrast, Hebrews was a later letter, one which Paul could have taken much more time to compose.

One other comment on the style question is in order, of which a friend of mine reminded me.³ Higher critics have been challenging Scripture for many years. One of the ways they do so is by rejecting the traditional view that Isaiah wrote the book that bears his name and

instead insist on a dual- (or even tri-) authorship. And what is one of their major arguments? *Style!* The point to be made is that while conservative scholars won't allow Isaiah to be ripped apart (or while we're at it, the Pentateuch by the long ago refuted "Documentary Hypothesis" of four authors), then why do they entertain any doubt about Hebrews for supposed style differences?

Second, as J. Sidlow Baxter offers,⁴ we could even concede, without doing any damage to Paul's authorship, that Luke aided Paul in polishing the letter, just putting some finishing touches on it. Alternately, we could concede, as noted scholar R. Laird Harris writes, that this is "a genuine Epistle of Paul with Barnabus as his secretary."⁵

Further, Paul was writing to different people and with a different purpose, which would in-turn demand different language. Another example of different language, in fact, is I Corinthians, which contains expressions that do not occur in any other of the Apostle's letters. This was part of Paul's genius. Baxter offers another illustration using the Apostle John:

What a difference between the Greek of the Gospel according to John and the Apocalypse!—yet on weighty evidence, both external and internal, John is accepted by first rank scholars as the author or both.⁶

Let us also note again the closing of the letter. Who can deny that this is

Paul?

And I beseech you, brethren, suffer the word of exhortation: for I have written a letter unto you in few words. Know ye that our brother Timothy is set at liberty; with whom, if he come shortly, I will see you. Salute all them that have the rule over you, and all the saints. They of Italy salute you. Grace be with you all. Amen. (13:22-25)

This leads us right to a second internal evidence.

Second, as noted in 13:23 above, the writer refers to "our brother Timothy," which is typical of Paul since Timothy was his convert, disciple, and co-worker. As Owen, Gill, and Barnes all point out, in light of the fact that Timothy was with Paul in Rome during the latter's imprisonment (Phil. 1:13, 14, 2:19-24), who but Paul would not only mention Timothy, who was unknown to the letter's recipients, but also make special note of him being released from prison? This is, in fact, as the old expression goes, "a dead giveaway" of the author's identity.

Third, as Baxter observes, there is the striking use of the pronoun "we" in addressing his readers, "as though he speaks representatively of a group (5:11; 6:9,

Let us also note again the closing of the letter. Who can deny that this is Paul?

11; 13:18, 23).” This is characteristic of Paul alone, as it “is never found in John, Peter, James, [or] Jude.” Baxter explains:

It often occurs, of course, in verses where the writer includes himself with his readers in some large class, as for instance in I John 1:7, “If *we* walk in the light,” where the writer includes himself with *all* Christian believers; but not once is it used by the writer as associating others cooperatively with himself. Yet it is found everywhere in *Paul’s* epistles, and again in Hebrews.⁷

Fourth, the writer speaks of himself in 2:3 as one who had not witnessed Jesus’ earthly ministry. While this verse is used by critics to “prove” that Paul *wasn’t* the author, it actually indicates he *was*! It is argued that the verse implies that Paul never *heard* the Lord, which, of course, he did on the road to Damascus. But the verse goes deeper than just a single incident: “How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation; which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was *confirmed unto us by them that heard him*” (emphasis added). The picture here is obviously what people heard and saw over a period of time, that is, during Jesus’ earthly ministry, nothing of which, to our knowledge, did Paul ever witness. Paul didn’t witness Jesus’ miracles or teaching, but others did and subsequently “confirmed” it to Paul and his readers.

Fifth and finally, we might also add here that the date of writing (62-65) fits Pauline authorship. Since there is no mention of the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., the letter had to be written before that. This coincides with Paul’s writings. His last letter (II Tim.), for example, was written in about 68 A. D.

The Testimony of Alternative Authors

If Paul didn’t write Hebrews, who did? Many alternatives have been offered through the centuries, but no more than four are worth mention: Luke, Barnabus, Clement of Rome, and Apollos.

Luke is, if not impossible, highly improbable since he was a Gentile and would, therefore, not have been qualified to write such a letter, much less been accepted by Jewish readers.

Barnabus, on the other, was a Jew, a Levite, in fact, but the only ancient writer to even suggest him was Tertullian (160-230) and he had no proof.

How about Clement of Rome, who we know wrote an excellent letter to the Corinthians? For one thing, there are absolutely no similarities between his letter to the Corinthians and the Epistle of Hebrews, and for another, there is no ancient support for his authorship.

Finally, Apollos has been suggested. The first one to suggest him was actually Martin Luther, but again with no ancient support. Frankly, Apollos is almost as

ridiculous a suggestion as Priscilla, who also has been offered because of “‘certain dainty feminine touches,’ which a lady expositor thinks she has seen in it”!⁸

The truth of the matter in all these and all others is that there is not one shred of evidence that any of them penned this Epistle. Men’s conjectures have served only to muddy the water.

Conclusion

To conclude, I offer three points.

First, one question that still remains is, “Why didn’t Paul just *say* he was the author of the Epistle and clear up any confusion?” For one thing, *there wasn’t any confusion in that day*. As we’ve demonstrated, Paul’s authorship becomes clear to the discerning reader, and Paul’s readers were discerning. For another, however, it is quite reasonable that Paul didn’t mention his name “up front” because it would have immediately put off certain Jews who were prejudiced against him and viewed him as having become an enemy of the Mosaic Law. Both Matthew Poole⁹ and Harry Ironside make this point, but Ironside makes it much better:

Paul is here writing to his own brethren after the flesh. They were greatly prejudiced against him and his ministry, though he yearned after them with all the fervor as a devoted brotherly love. Yet many of them repudiated his apostleship and feared his attitude toward their ancient ritual. He had tried to overcome this opposition. Upon the occasion of his last visit to Jerusalem [Acts 21:18-40], he went so far, in accordance with the suggestion of James, as to pay for the sacrificial offering of certain brethren about to be released from Nazarite vows. But God would not permit this, for it would have been a virtual denial of the sufficiency of the one offering of the Lord Jesus Christ upon the cross, and so the divinely permitted insurrection against Paul saved him from this apparent inconsistency. Probably during the time of his release, after his first imprisonment and before his second arrest (cf. Heb. 13:23), he was chosen of God to write this letter calling upon believers in the Lord Jesus to separate completely from Judaism, as the entire system was about to be definitely rejected with the destruction of the Jewish temple so soon to take place. Paul therefore acts in accordance with the principle laid down elsewhere, “Unto the Jews I became a Jew that I might gain the Jews” (I Cor. 9:20). And so he hides his identity for the time being and does not insist upon his own apostolic authority, but rather makes his appeal to the Old Testament Scriptures, in the light, of course, of the new revelation.¹⁰

Second, I think E. Schuyler English best summarizes our discussion:

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 truth 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?¹¹

Third, and finally, we come full circle back to our original question: "Does all this really matter? Why is the authorship of Hebrews important?" As stated when we began, without knowledge of the author, *we have a New Testament letter with no apostolic authority and which therefore simply cannot be Scripture.*

In his book, *Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible*, scholar R. Laird Harris makes a vital point concerning how the Early Church recognized Scripture:

Our conclusion is that the Early Church was not misled when it used the principle that that is inspired which is apostolic. They clearly included in their concept that which was prepared under direction of the apostles.¹²

We must conclude, then, if that which is inspired is apostolic, it must also be true that that which is not apostolic is not inspired. I submit, therefore, that for the Epistle of Hebrews to be inspired we *must* know the Apostolic authority behind it, and that authority can be no one else but the Apostle Paul.

One Final Consideration

In his classic *Halley's Bible Handbook*, Henry Halley makes a very significant statement:

In the King James Version [Hebrews] is called, in the title, the Epistle of Paul. In the American Revised Version [ASV of 1901] it is anonymous, because in the older manuscripts, found since the King James Translation was made, the Author is not named.

While some readers would conclude that Halley says that to *deny* Pauline authorship and attack the KJV, that is not the case, for he goes on to add:

On the whole, the traditional view, held through the centuries, and still widely held, is that Paul was the Author.¹³

Why is that significant? We submit that it is so because Halley rightly states *the traditional view*, the view that is quite frankly obvious and has been recognized through the ages. *It was not until the rise of rationalistic textual criticism that this view was seriously challenged.* It was, in fact, not until the rise of so-called "older and more reliable manuscripts," which omit the traditional view of Pauline authorship, that this view was categorically denied. Does no one see a problem here?

That question serves to prepare us for the question of next month's anniversary issue of TOTT: "What's Really At Stake in the Textual Issue?"

Dr. J. D. Watson
Pastor-Teacher
Grace Bible Church

NOTES

¹ Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of Hebrews*.

² E. Schuyler English, *Studies in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Findlay, OH: Dunham Publishing Company, 1955), p. 23 (emphasis in the original).

³ Thanks to my friend and colleague Dr. James Bearss, pastor and director of On Target Ministry, an international education ministry founded in 2006 (www.OnTargetMinistry.org).

⁴ J. Sidlow Baxter, *Explore the Book* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1960), p. 279

⁵ R. Laird Harris, *Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957), p. 269.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 279.

⁷ Baxter, p. 277 (emphasis in the original).

⁸ Cited in H. A. Ironside, *Studies in the Epistle to the Hebrews and the Epistle to Titus* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1932, 1958), p. 8.

⁹ Matthew Poole, *Matthew Poole's Commentary of the Bible* (electronic edition in *The Online Bible*).

¹⁰ Ironside, pp. 13-14.

¹¹ English, p. 26 (emphasis added).

¹² Harris, p. 270.

¹³ Henry H. Halley, *Halley's Bible Handbook*, New Revised Edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1965), p. 646.

I will give you this as a most solemn observation, that there never was anything of false doctrine brought into the church, or anything of false worship imposed upon the church, but either it was by neglecting the Scripture, or by introducing something above the Scripture. — Puritan John Collins

We endeavour to teach the Scriptures, but, as everybody else claims to do the same, and we wish to be known and read of all men, we say distinctly that the theology of the Pastors' College is Puritanic. We know nothing of the new *ologies*; we stand by the old ways. The improvements brought forth by what is called "modern thought" we regard with suspicion, and believe them to be, at best, dilutions of the truth, and most of them old, rusted heresies, tinkered up again, and sent abroad with a new face put upon them, to repeat the mischief which they wrought in ages past . . . Both our experience and our reading of the Scriptures confirm us in the belief of the unfashionable doctrines of grace; and among us, upon those grand fundamentals, there is no uncertain sound . . . Those who think otherwise can go elsewhere; but for our own part, we shall never consent to leave the doctrinal teaching of the Institution vague and undefined, after the manner of the bigoted liberalism of the present day. This is our College motto: "I Hold And Am Held."

C. H. Spurgeon's Autobiography (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1992 reprint), Vol. II, pp. 149-150

The world depends on promotion, prestige, and the influence of money and important people. The Church depends on prayer, the power of the Spirit, humility, sacrifice, and service. The Church that imitates the world may seem to succeed in time, but it will turn to ashes in eternity. The Church in the book of Acts had none of the "secrets of success" that seem so important today. They owned no property; they had no influence in government; they had no treasury . . . ; their leaders were ordinary men without special education in the accepted schools; they had no attendance contests; they brought in no celebrities; and yet they turned the world upside down.

Warren Wiersbe, *We Wise* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1983), pp. 49-50

Truth *On Tough Texts*

A Ministry of
Grace Bible Church
P.O. Box 235
Meeker, CO 81641
www.TheScriptureAlone.com
docwatson@nctelecom.net

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.

This publication is sent free of charge to anyone who requests it. To aid in the ministry, tax-deductible donations will be greatly appreciated, but never demanded. If you know someone you think would enjoy TOTT, please send along their address.

