

The Book of Hebrews Study Guide

Introduction

Date of Writing

There are a number of details provided in the book of Hebrews that enable us to establish chronological limits for its composition.

- Before 95 A.D. – Many quotations from Hebrews are found in the First Epistle of Clement, which is one of the earliest writings of the Apostolic Fathers (church leaders who came after the original Apostles). It is believed to have been written c. 95 A.D.
- Before 70 A.D. – Since that was the year when the second temple was destroyed by Rome and the book of Hebrews contains many verses describing the acts of priests and ritual sacrifice taking place in the present tense (i.e. 9:6-7), it is an indication that the temple was still standing. In 8:13 the author describes the Mosaic covenant “becoming obsolete and growing old [and] is ready to disappear.”
- After 65 A.D. – Shortly before his death, Paul wrote in final epistle—2 Timothy. In that book he made it clear that Timothy was free to travel about and conduct ministry. But in Hebrews 13:23 the author states that “our brother Timothy has been released [from prison].” That means that Timothy had had been imprisoned and released after Paul’s death, which occurred between 65 and 68 A.D.
- After 66 A.D. – That was the year when the first Jewish revolt against Rome began, and would lead to the eventual destruction of the temple and the death of a tremendous number of Jewish people. In 12:4 the author commends his audience by saying, “You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin,” which may be a reference to the revolt if the intended audience lived in Judea (see discussion below).

With a fair amount of confidence, then, we can conclude that the book of Hebrews was written around the time when the revolt against Rome was underway or about to begin. And shortly after its composition, temple worship would come to an end. Thus we can infer a date close to 67 A.D.

Author

Unlike other books of the New Testament, there is no direct statement in Hebrews regarding its writer. All we can do is to evaluate the evidence within the book and arrive at some potential candidates.

Here are some things that we know for certain:

- His identity was known to his audience (13:19).
- He was not someone who encountered Yeshua (Jesus) directly, but learned about salvation through Him from those who heard Yeshua speak (2:3).
- He was a master of Koine Greek. He used 154 words that are not used in any other New Testament book and ten words that were never used in any kind of Greek literature prior to Hebrews.

- He knew the *Tanakh* (Old Testament) thoroughly, plus the customs and traditions of the Jewish community and the ritual practices at the temple. Those facts make it highly likely that he was Jewish.
- His quotations of the *Tanakh* are taken entirely from the Septuagint (the translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek that was completed during the Second Century B.C.). That suggests that he may have been raised as a Hellenistic Jew in another land besides Israel, as was the case with Paul, Barnabas, and Apollos.
- He wrote with a rhetorical style used by elite Greek authors that is not found anywhere else in the New Testament.
- He was an associate of Timothy (Heb 13:23)

Evaluating the potential authors

	Evidence in Favor	Evidence Against
Paul	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The earliest leaders of the church after the time of the Apostles did not cite Paul as the author. But by the late 4th century, many leaders credit Paul with authorship. This includes influential church fathers like Jerome, Augustine and Chrysostom. This tradition is only asserted today by Roman Catholicism. • Paul was a Hellenistic Jew (born in Tarsus). • Some themes are common to Hebrews and the epistles of Paul, such as spiritual gifts, the obedience of Messiah, the superior nature of the New Covenant, and God’s promises to Abraham. • Paul was close with Timothy. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unlike the Hebrews’ author who heard about Yeshua through His Disciples (2:3), Paul had a personal encounter with Yeshua. • There is no self-identification or mention of Apostleship, both of which Paul consistently stated in his 13 epistles. • While it is easy to conclude based on the English translation that Paul wrote Hebrews, the Greek literary style and vocabulary of the book is very different than the known writings of Paul (i.e. Paul uses the term, <i>Christo Iesou</i> – Christ Jesus – 168 times in his letters, but it does not appear even once in Hebrews). • There is no mention of themes that Paul consistently addressed, including the relationship between Jews and Gentiles, justification by faith, and minimal attention to grace. • In addition, Paul never addressed sacrificial atonement, priestly rituals, and the role of the high priest in his epistles, but these themes are preeminent in Hebrews.

<p>Barnabas</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Second Century church father Tertullian argued that Barnabas was the author. • He was a Hellenistic Jew from Cyprus (Acts 4:36). • He was a Levite (Acts 4:36), so he was familiar with temple rituals. • He was likely familiar with Timothy. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No genuine writings of Barnabas exist for comparison or to indicate that he was an accomplished writer. • Hebrews makes no mention of the specific role of the Levites.
<p>Apollos</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Martin Luther came to the conclusion that he was the author. • He was a Hellenistic Jew from Alexandria. • He was a great speaker and had a “thorough knowledge of the Scriptures” (Acts 18:24). • He was associated with Timothy (1 Cor 16:10-12). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No support from the church fathers. • Comparison is not possible because no writings exist by him.
<p>Luke</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contrary to the popular views of the past, there is virtually no evidence that Luke was a Gentile (it was a weak argument based on flawed interpretation of Col 4:14). Many scholars now believe that Luke was Jewish and that he was educated as a doctor in a Hellenistic Jewish environment. • His linguistic style is superior to other New Testament authors, and is similar to Hebrews. • The gospel of Luke and the book of Acts share a significant number of words with Hebrews. • The author of Hebrews uses a number of medical terms and imagery. • Luke had a relationship with Timothy. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some themes are evident in Hebrews that Luke never addressed in his gospel or Acts, such as the Sabbath rest or Yeshua’s priesthood after the order of Melchizedek. It should be noted, however, that Luke is the only gospel writer who mentions that right before His ascension into heaven, Yeshua raised His hands and blessed His disciples, which was done in the manner of a high priest (Lk 24:50). • The sacrificial aspect of the death of Yeshua is central to Hebrews, but it is not emphasized in the gospel of Luke (i.e. Luke does not include the encounter recorded in Mark 10:35-45 in which Yeshua’s death is the focus).

Peter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He writes about some themes and metaphors that are shared with Hebrews . 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He heard the gospel directly from Yeshua. • He was neither a Hellenistic Jew nor wrote as eloquently in Greek.
Priscilla and Aquila	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In the book of Acts, this married couple taught the gospel to others, including Apollos. According to modern feminist-oriented writers, they co-authored Hebrews or it was written exclusively by Priscilla, but it was done anonymously in order to avoid disapproval from male church leaders. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The author is clearly male (he uses “I say” – a first person masculine singular participle in 11:32).

A few other candidates have been proposed, including Mary, who met none of the criteria, and Stephen who died at least 25 years before the book was written. In the end, the only persons who did not have any disqualifying characteristics are Barnabas, Apollos and Luke, and the strongest case exists for Luke.

Ultimately, it seems reasonable to agree with Origen, who wrote in the 2nd century: “Who wrote the epistle? God only knows the truth” (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6:25:14).

Audience

No group or location is specifically cited in the book. But we are able to draw some conclusions based on clues in the text.

- Ethnicity** ✧ The name of the book, "*Pros Hebraious - To the Hebrews*," dates back to the Second Century (given by Tertullian).
- ✧ Terms like “the fathers” (1:1) specifically refer to people with a Jewish heritage.
 - ✧ The author addresses themes in such a way that it is clear that the readers must have already had an understanding of the *Tanakh* and the rituals taking place in the Temple. Had the audience been Gentiles or even a mixed congregation, the author would be expected to explain each of the ritual acts before giving the spiritual application in light of the New Covenant.

- Location** ✧ The city of Rome has been proposed as the setting of the recipients of the letter, primarily based on the phrase “those from Italy greet you” (13:24). But the Greek syntax in this verse is more of an indication of where the greeting originates, not the destination. Moreover, in the previous verse, when the author mentions that Timothy has been imprisoned and released, presumably in Rome, it would not make sense for this news to have been conveyed to people already in Rome.
- ✧ The evidence is far stronger for the letter being sent from Rome to recipients living in Jerusalem or in the nearby region of Judea. 12:22 states that they had come to Mt Zion. 13:13 describes believers going “outside the camp,” which is a Hebrew idiom for leaving the place where the Holy Place is located (originally the tabernacle and

later the temple). The letter refers to two persecutions that precisely match that which occurred in Jerusalem. A previous one is described in 10:32-35 involving public defamation, imprisonment, and seizure of their property, which aligns with the events of the book of Acts in chapters 8,12,22,26. A second persecution associated with the imminent Jewish revolt is implied in 12:4 in which the author exhorts the people to resist the temptation to fight back. All of these details match the historical setting of Jerusalem and Judea.

- Culture** ✧ We know from Acts 6:1 that the believing community of Jerusalem was comprised of native Judeans and those who came from distant Hellenized cities. We also know that synagogues in the city were organized according to their cultural background (Acts 6:9). Services would be conducted with their respective first languages of Hebrew or Greek. Since the book of Hebrews is written with a high form of Greek, and the Septuagint is used for all quotations from the *Tanakh*, it is reasonable to conclude that the audience is comprised of Hellenized Jews.
- Spiritual condition** ✧ To a great extent, these were immature believers. This is evident in 5:12, where the author writes: “For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food.”
- ✧ The author expresses concern that some members of the congregation will turn away from the Messianic faith and return to Levitical Judaism, primarily due to persecution (10:25-33) and he exhorts them not to “throw away your confidence” (10:35) and to gain endurance (10:36).

Genre

Hebrews incorporates two literary methods that reflect the author’s mastery of both Greek and Hebrew language and culture. One is rhetoric, which is persuasive speaking or writing, using figures of speech and other techniques that were common in the First Century A.D.

- One of these rhetorical devices is called *synkrisis* in Greek. It is a comparison between two or more subjects with the goal of convincing an audience to agree with the speaker or writer. An example of *synkrisis* in Hebrews is found in 7:11-28, where the author shows that Yeshua was a royal priest like Melchizedek, using a comparison of their respective parentage, genealogy, birth, death, office, actions, status and achievements. The purpose was to convince the reader that Yeshua truly was a great, royal High Priest.
- Another rhetorical device employed in Hebrews is *exempla*, which are examples that support a particular conclusion. Chapter 11 uses a lengthy *exempla* of the faithful men and women in the history of Israel as a means of persuading the reader to remain faithful in their own times of difficulty and persecution.
- A third rhetorical device, commonly used in both Greek and Hebrew cultures is known as *kal-ve-homer*, meaning “simple and complex.” Literally the word *kal* means “light” and *homer* means “heavy.” It gives the sense that if something is true in a simple, light situation, it will also be true in a more complex, heavy one. An indicator of this kind of reasoning is the phrase, “How much more,” which is used in 10:28-29.

Hebrews is also written with a Jewish interpretive style called a *midrash*, in which an author or teacher shows the content of an ancient text is relevant in a contemporary context. While other books of the Bible contain occasional quotations, Hebrews is the only one that is predominately in this form.

Purpose

1. To persuade immature Jewish believers to hold fast (have a firm grip) in their faith in Yeshua (4:14).
2. To show that Yeshua is superior to the way of temple worship. A repeated theme is how Yeshua is better than the pillars of Judaism—prophets, angels, Moses (Law), and Aaron (priesthood).

Application

A study in the book of Hebrews will enable us to understand the deeper meaning behind Old Testament practices and how they are fulfilled in Yeshua. This will be beneficial not only on personal level, but will enable us to be better witnesses of God's message in the Bible. The exhortations in the book will also strengthen us in our own times of trials, so that we, too, may "hold fast" to our faith.