

HEBREWS

Fear to Faith

STUDY 1c

Introduction: Where? When? Who? Why?

A. To whom was “Hebrews” sent?

The most commonly held destinations and recipients include Jews in Jerusalem, Palestine, Alexandria and Rome, though there has been over the past century or so a spreading tendency to see the recipients as Gentiles (e.g. Moffatt and E.F. Scott)

[1] If the readers were indeed Gentiles, they were Gentiles so completely disguised in Jewish dress, and wearing a mask with so pronounced Jewish features, that the true nationality has been successfully hidden for nineteen centuries. **A.B. Bruce** *The Epistle to the Hebrews: The First Apology for Christianity*, p. 4

[2] ... the recipients of the epistle were probably Jewish believers in Jesus whose background was not so much the normative Judaism represented by rabbinical tradition as the nonconformist Judaism of which the Essenes and the Qumran community are outstanding representatives, but not the only representatives. **F.F. Bruce** *The Epistle to the Hebrews* p. xxix

[3] The addresses appear, then, to have been a group of Jewish Christians who had never seen or heard Jesus in person, but learned of Him (as the writer of the epistle also did) from some who had themselves listened to Him. ... We may infer from the epistle that they were Hellenists: they knew the Old Testament in the Greek version. It is implied, too, that their knowledge of the ancient sacrificial ritual of Israel was derived from the reading of the Old Testament and not from firsthand contact with the temple services in Jerusalem. Perhaps they formed a “house-church” within the wider fellowship of a city church, and were tending to neglect the bonds of fellowship that bound them to other Christians outside their own inner circle. **F.F. Bruce** *The Epistle to the Hebrews* p. xxx



The Epistle
to the
Hebrews
F. F. BRUCE

b. When was “Hebrews” written?

The consensus dates the book anywhere in the generation from Paul’s death to the end of the 1st century

[4] The clear evidence of the familiarity of Clement of Rome with the Epistle to the Hebrews places it firmly within the first century. Other evidence, of an internal nature, in particular the author’s consistent use of the present tense when speaking of the ministry of the levitical priesthood, points to a date for the writing of Hebrews prior to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70; for these present tenses signify that the levitical priesthood was still functioning, even though the coming of Christ and his offering of himself denoted the inauguration of the eternal priesthood of Melchizedek. Had the Jerusalem temple been in ruins and its ministry abruptly ended, the use of the past tense would have been expected throughout. Moreover, it would be incredible that the author should not then insistently have drawn his readers’ attention to the striking fact that both temple and priesthood now belonged to past history, since this would have clinched his argument with visible proof that the former covenant had given way to the new, the Aaronic order to that of Melchizedek. **Philip Edgcumbe Hughes** *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* p. 30

[5] The words in 2:3,4 do not mean that they belonged to the second generation, of course, in a chronological sense, for such words would have applied to the converts of any mission during the first thirty years or so after the crucifixion ... **James Moffatt** *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* p. xxi

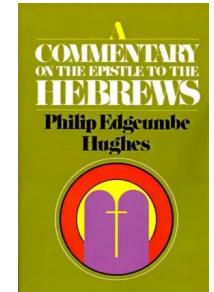
c. Who wrote “Hebrews”?

The early church had no unanimity respecting authorship. For the next 1200 years, thanks to the influence of Augustine and Jerome, Paul was assumed to be the author of “Hebrews”. Authors suggested by reputable modern commentators, besides Paul, include: Barnabas, Apollos, Silas, Luke – even Priscilla!

[6] The language of the Epistle is both in vocabulary and style purer and more vigorous than that of any other book of the N.T. **Brooke Foss Westcott** *The Epistle to the Hebrews* p. xliv

[7] His vocabulary is drawn from a wide range of reading. Whether he was a Jew by birth or not, he goes far beyond the LXX. **James Moffatt** *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* p. lxi

[8] The style is even more characteristic of a practised scholar than the vocabulary. It would be difficult to find anywhere passages more exact and pregnant in expression than i. 1-4; ii. 14-18; vii. 26-28; xii. 18-24. The language, the order, the rhythm, the parenthetical involutions, all contribute to the total effect. The writing shews everywhere traces of effort and care. In many respects it is not unlike that of the Book of Wisdom, but it is nowhere marred by the restless striving after effect



which not unfrequently injures the beauty of that masterpiece of Alexandrine Greek. The calculated force of the periods is sharply distinguished from the impetuous eloquence of St Paul. **Brooke Foss Westcott** *The Epistle to the Hebrews* p.xli

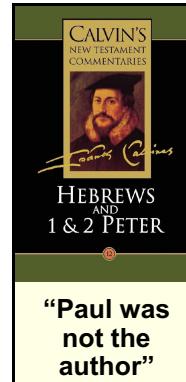
[9] The manner of teaching and the style sufficiently show that Paul was not the author, and the writer himself confesses in the second chapter that he was one of the disciples of the apostles, which is wholly different from the way in which Paul spoke of himself. **John Calvin** (translated by W.B. Johnston) *The Epistle to the Hebrews and the First and Second Epistles of Peter* p.1

[10] "But as to who actually wrote in the epistle, God knows the truth of the matter." Even today we have not got far beyond Origen's confession of ignorance. **F.F. Bruce** *The Epistle to the Hebrews* p. xlvi

[11] Perhaps our modern pride resents being baffled by an ancient document, but it is better to admit that we are not yet wiser on this matter than Origen was, seventeen centuries ago. **James Moffatt** *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* p. xx

[12] It may be some compensation for our ignorance, however, to have it brought home to us that Early Christianity was even richer in creative minds and personalities than the exiguous surviving evidence of tradition gives us to understand. **William Manson** *The Epistle to the Hebrews* p.172

[13] We may therefore rest content that the name of the writer should remain unknown, and even find a certain satisfaction in the reflection that anonymity is a not incongruous attribute of a writing which begins by virtually proclaiming God to be the only Speaker in Scripture and Jesus Christ to be the one Speaker of God's final revelation to men. **A.B. Bruce** *The Epistle to the Hebrews: The First Apology for Christianity*, p. 24



"Paul was
not the
author"

D. Why was "Hebrews" written?

[14] Taken as a whole, the Epistle, in its apologetic aspect is a masterpiece, meeting effectually a most urgent need of the early apostolic age, and in its general principles, if not in all its arguments, of perennial value to the Christian Church. ... It is the only writing in the New Testament of a formally and systematically apologetic nature. Elsewhere may be found ideas helpful to Christians passing through a transition time, notably in the Pauline Epistles. But the stray apologetic thoughts in these Epistles, though of great value, were not sufficient. A more detailed and elaborate theology of mediation was required to make Jewish believers men who did not look back. **A.B. Bruce** *The Epistle to the Hebrews: The First Apology for Christianity*, pp. 20, 21

[15] ... the epistle was equally effective both for Jews and Christians. The Jew, without one violent wrench of his prejudices, without one rude shock to his lifelong convictions, was drawn along gently, considerately, skilfully, as by a golden chain of fine rhetoric and irresistible reasoning, to see that the New Dispensation was but the glorious fulfilment, not the ruinous overthrow, of the Old; the Jewish Christian, so far from being robbed of a single privilege of Judaism, is taught that he may enjoy

those privileges in their very richest significance. **F.W. Farrar**, *The Epistle to the Hebrews (Cambridge Bible)* p. 20

[16] ... the faults with which the writer deals are typical of a state of mind found at all times, a falling back upon the outward, a failure to penetrate to the depths of spiritual faith, a religious indolence which is confined to no one age or position. **Brooke Foss Westcott** *The Epistle to the Hebrews* p.lxi

E. Why was "Hebrews" canonized, if there could be no certainty as to authorship?



[17] ... the canonical authority of the Epistle is independent of its Pauline authorship. The spiritual insight of the East can be joined with the historical witness of the West. And if we hold that the judgment of the Spirit makes itself felt through the consciousness of the Christian Society, no Book of the Bible is more completely recognised by universal consent as giving a divine view of the facts of the Gospel, full of lessons for all time, than the Epistle to the Hebrews. **Brooke Foss Westcott** *The Epistle to the Hebrews* p.lxxi

[18] I do not doubt that it has been through the craft of Satan that any have been led to dispute its authority. There is, indeed, no book in Holy Scripture which speaks so clearly of the priesthood of Christ, which so highly exalts the virtue and dignity of that only true sacrifice which He offered by His death, which so abundantly deals with the use of ceremonies as well as their abrogation, and, in a word, so fully explains that Christ is the end of the Law. Let us therefore not allow the Church of God or ourselves to be deprived of so great a benefit, but firmly defend the possession of it. **John Calvin** (translated by W.B. Johnston) *The Epistle to the Hebrews and the First and Second Epistles of Peter* p.1

[19] If there is a widespread unfamiliarity with the Epistle to the Hebrews and its teaching, it is because so many adherents of the church have settled for an undemanding and superficial association with the Christian faith. Yet it was to arouse just such

persons from the lethargic state of compromise and complacency into which they had sunk, and to incite them to persevere wholeheartedly in the Christian conflict, that this letter was originally written. It is a tonic for the spiritually debilitated. The study of this epistle leads us beneath the surface of things to the profound depths of our evangelical faith, and enriches and establishes our understanding of the grace of God manifested on our behalf in the incarnation, self-offering, and exaltation of him who is the Apostle and High Priest of our confession. ... We neglect such a book to our own impoverishment. **Philip Edgcumbe Hughes** *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* p.1

"a tonic for the spiritually debilitated"