

Authorship of Hebrews

Hebrews is anonymous; it does not identify its author. Nevertheless, interpreters have investigated the matter over the centuries and tried to figure out who the author might be.

The Traditional Suggestion: Paul

Hebrews came to be associated with Paul in the second and third centuries. The primary reasons for suggesting Paul wrote the letter seem to be:

- Paul is known to have written many letters, including lengthy ones.
- In 13:23, this letter mentions Timothy (who was a companion of Paul).
- The benediction and greetings with which the letter closes (13:20–24) are reminiscent of Pauline letter closings.

Even in the early church, however, most scholars granted that these reasons were not terribly convincing. The real motivation behind ascribing the letter to Paul seems to have been to help the letter attain canonical status as a work of scripture.

The Council of Trent in 1546 insisted on Pauline authorship of Hebrews and supposedly established this as the official position of the Roman Catholic Church. Likewise in 1611, the King James Version of the Bible (a Protestant work) credited Paul as the author in its title for the work: “The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews.” Nevertheless, almost no scholar in the modern world, Catholic or Protestant, would argue for Pauline authorship of Hebrews.

Reasons for Doubting That Paul Is the Author

- The linguistic style of Hebrews is radically different from that of Paul, and many of Paul’s characteristic expressions cannot be found here (e.g., “Christ Jesus,” used over ninety times in Paul’s letters, never appears in Hebrews).
- Paul regarded himself as “an apostle to the Gentiles” (Rom. 11:13; Gal. 2:8).
- Paul claimed that he was an eyewitness to the risen Jesus (1 Cor. 15:8); contrary to what is suggested in 2:3–4, he would not have described himself as someone who had come to faith through the preaching of others or as someone whose authority as an apostle was dependent on the testimony of others (see Gal. 1:11–17).
- Many of Paul’s most prominent themes are not found here, and conversely, the dominant theme of Hebrews (the high priesthood of Jesus) is never mentioned by Paul.

There are, of course, statements and themes in Hebrews that parallel things that can be found in Paul’s letters, but these are no more pronounced than what we would expect to find in the writings of any two Christian theologians from the same era.

Alternative Suggestions

Many other suggestions regarding the author of this book have been offered.

- *Barnabas*. As an alternative to Paul, some scholars have suggested one of Paul's closest companions: Barnabas, who worked with Paul in his early years. Barnabas would have known Timothy, and he had a Levitical background (Acts 4:36). This suggestion was first offered by Tertullian in the early third century (*On Modesty* 20).
- *Luke*. Quite a few interpreters have suggested that Hebrews might be the work of the same person who wrote the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts. Luke's Greek is more polished and closer in style to the Greek of Hebrews than any other writer in the New Testament. Clement of Alexandria (150–215) thought that Luke was translating a letter into Greek that Paul had written in Hebrew. This same view was espoused later by Thomas Aquinas. But modern scholars note that many of the rhetorical wordplays used in Hebrews would only work if the letter were written originally in Greek. John Calvin thought that either Luke or Clement of Rome was the most likely author of Hebrews.
- *Philip*. Many scholars have suggested Philip or one of the other Hellenists who were colleagues of Stephen (Acts 6:5; 8:5–40; 21:8–9). The reason for this is that Stephen's speech in Acts 7:2–53 is said to recount Jewish history and deprecate Jewish shrines in a manner similar to Hebrews (cf. Acts 7:2–34 with Heb. 11; Acts 7:44–50 with Heb. 9). Since Stephen himself cannot be the author (having been martyred immediately after delivering that speech), the "next best thing" may be to ascribe the book of Hebrews to one of his colleagues, who presumably would have thought in a similar vein. Philip was the most prominent of those colleagues. One problem with this thesis is that Hebrews deals with the tabernacle, not the temple, and it does not question the historical legitimacy of either institution (cf. Acts 7:48) but merely claims that sacrificial institutions have now been rendered obsolete (Heb. 8:13; 9:25–26).
- *Apollos*. The suggestion that Apollos might be the author of Hebrews was put forward by Martin Luther. Apollos had Alexandrian connections, he was said to be well versed in the scriptures, and he was famous for his eloquence (Acts 18:24–28; 19:1; 1 Cor. 1:12; 3:4–22; 4:6; 16:12; Titus 3:13). This view continues to attract support. Paul Ellingworth calls it the "least unlikely of the conjectures that have been put forward" (see Ellingworth, *The Epistle to Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993], 21). Luke Timothy Johnson is intrigued by the possibility that Apollos might have written Hebrews to Corinth prior to Paul's writing of 1 Corinthians to that same city (see Johnson, *Hebrews*, NTL [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006], 42–44).
- *Priscilla*. Some modern scholars have favored Priscilla (Acts 18:2, 18, 26; cf. Rom. 16:3; 1 Cor. 16:19; 2 Tim. 4:19), whose name would have been subsequently removed to avoid the scandal of instruction being offered by a woman. This view was first put forward by Adolf von Harnack in 1900. It was more recently championed in Ruth Hoppin, *Priscilla: Author of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (New York: Exposition Press, 1969). An obstacle for many is that Hebrews 11:32 employs a masculine construction in Greek implying that the "I" who is speaking is male; this probably requires an assumption that Priscilla is intentionally hiding her identity.

- *Clement of Rome*. A number of scholars have thought that the letter could be the work of Clement, a bishop of Rome who is probably the author of at least one letter utilizing much of the same language employed here (*1 Clement*). According to Origen (third century), some Christians in his day thought that Clement had written the letter based on notes from things that Paul had said (see Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.14.13). This possibility was taken seriously by John Calvin. There are many undeniable parallels between the letter known as *1 Clement* and the letter to the Hebrews, but those similarities usually are explained as the result of Clement having a copy of Hebrews and quoting from it. Furthermore, modern scholars note that *1 Clement* espouses a positive attitude toward Levitical sacrifices that may be incompatible with the attitude taken toward those sacrifices in Hebrews.
- *Mary the Mother of Jesus*. This proposal was put forward in a journal article by Josephine Massyngbearde Ford (*The Bible Today* 82 [1976]: 673–94). Raymond Brown averred that this proposal wins “the prize for dubious ingenuity” (Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, ABRL [New York: Doubleday, 1996], 695).
- *Others*. Other suggestions include *Silas* (Acts 15:22–18:17; cf. 2 Cor 1:19; 1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1; 1 Pet. 5:12) and *Epaphras* (Col. 1:17; 4:12; Philem. 23).

Accepting the Letter as Anonymous

Virtually all scholars today would grant that the definitive view on this question was offered by Origen, a prominent Christian teacher in the third century: “Who wrote this epistle? Only God knows!” (reported in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.25.13).

Raymond Brown has summed up the matter this way: “We have to be satisfied with the irony that the most sophisticated rhetorician and elegant theologian of the New Testament is an unknown” (*Introduction to the New Testament*, 695).

Many interpreters note that the letter comes to us like Melchizedek the priest, “without father or mother or genealogy” (Heb. 7:3); Abraham was expected to recognize the divine voice in Melchizedek though he knew nothing of his origins, and Christians are in a similar position regarding the anonymous letter to the Hebrews.

The Author of Hebrews—What We Can Know

- The author of Hebrews was a person of prominence in the early church.
- He knew people who had known Jesus (2:3).
- He was well educated with regard to both Greek rhetoric and the Jewish scriptures.
- He knew the readers personally.
- He assumes a mandate to speak to these readers authoritatively, even though he does not appear to have been the founder of their community.
- He is planning to visit the readers soon (13:19, 23), which may indicate that he exercises a supervisory role for the congregation beyond that of its local leaders (13:7, 17, 24).