

– THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS –

Introduction

I. The Audience

A. Hebrews By Lineage

- Not a single reference to Gentiles or Gentile controversies (e.g. issues surrounding idolatry, circumcision, equality of Jews and Gentiles)
- Emphasis on Abraham and his descendents (2:16, 7:4, 11:11-12, etc.)
- Extensive quotation and argumentation from the Old Testament, the most extensive of any New Testament book:
- *“...the thoughts, the hopes, the consolations of these readers were entirely associated with those things found in the Old Testament writings”* (King 11).

B. Christians of Hebrew Lineage

- Heard the gospel from the immediate disciples of Christ, with signs and wonders (2:3-4)
- Had become “partakers” of Christ (i.e. a sharer of, a participant in, a fellow in, cf. Rom 6:1-4; I Cor 5:17; Gal 3:26-27; Eph 3:6 etc.), but needed encouragement to stay faithful (3:1,14)
- Had shared with the saints in need, Heb 6:10
- Had suffered and endured persecution, though not to the point of shedding their own blood (10:32-34; 12:4)
- Had been Christians for some considerable amount of time: enough to be teachers (5:12)
- At one point understood well the first principles of the gospel, though at the time this letter was written they had become dull of hearing and sluggish (6:1, 12; 5:11), and in danger of falling away from Christ completely (6:4-8)
- Urged to “go outside the camp” to bear the reproach of Christ, figuratively meaning to break from the bonds of Judaism even in spite of ensuing persecution (13:11-13)

C. A Specific Congregation of Hebrew Christians (?)

- So many details specific to one group but probably not to the entire community of Jewish Christians (more details below)
- The writer hoped to visit them shortly (13:23), as he had visited them before (13:19)
- However, the fact that the immediate audience was probably one specific congregation of Jewish Christians does not in any way preclude the fact that the writer intended all Jewish Christians (and truly, all Christians) to read and learn from it!
- Other letters of the New Testament are similarly structured and addressed to an immediate person or persons, but obviously intended for instruction of a much broader audience (cf. Luke 1:1-4; Acts 1:1; Col 4:6; II Pet 3:15-16; I Cor 4:17; etc.)
- The letter had to have an initial destination, and this specific congregation is unknown:

Jerusalem:

- History indicates that for some time the church in Jerusalem was entirely composed of Hebrews (see King 14)
- It is difficult to imagine a church made up entirely of Jews anywhere in the world except in Palestine, though this is not impossible
- Soon after conversion, these Christians experienced persecution (10:32-34; 13:3,7)
- 13:7 *may be* an indication that their first leaders had passed away: could these fallen leaders be the first martyrs among the apostles and elders in Jerusalem?
- They had been and still were generous to the saints: does this preclude Jerusalem (cf. Acts 11:27-30; Rom 15:25-26; etc.)? No! See Acts 2:44-45, 4:32-37, 5:2, 6:1-7. And even in their subsequent poverty, could they not still be generous? See II Cor 8:2-3!
- It appears from the language of Hebrews that some kind of crisis is imminent (cf. 1:2; 3:13; 10:25; 12:27), probably the desolation of Jerusalem, 66-70 AD.
- Do 2:3-4 and 12:4 rule out the church in Jerusalem as the initial recipients?

Rome:

- Quoted first by Clement of Rome (in extant literature), c. 95-97 AD (though he also quotes from Ephesians and I Corinthians, cf. Kent 24).
- "Those from Italy greet you" (Heb 13:24) could mean that those saints originally from Italy but now living elsewhere greet their brethren at home, though this is clearly not the exclusive meaning.
- Lenski argues that there was a church in Rome that was exclusively made up of Jews in addition to another church made up of Gentile Christians (cf. *Interpretations of Hebrews*, 14-23).

II. The Author

There is disagreement about the author of this text from as early as the early 2nd Century. For extensive discussion of the possibilities refer to:

- Kent, Homer. *The Epistle To The Hebrews: A Commentary*.
- King, Daniel. *Truth Commentaries: Hebrews*.
- Milligan, Robert. *New Testament Commentary Vol. IX: Hebrews*.
- Reese, Gareth. *The Epistle To The Hebrews*.

Traditionally, authorship of this letter is attributed to the apostle Paul; there is virtually no limit to the authors suggested amongst so-called Biblical scholars (some much more imaginative than others).

III. Date

Dating this epistle depends on both the author and the intended recipients.

- It must have been written before 97 AD since it is quoted by Clement of Rome
- Heb 13:23 informs us that Timothy was still alive at the time of writing – assuming he was between 20 and 30 years old when Paul met him (Acts 16, c. 50 AD), this fact could

place the writing of the letter just about anywhere before 100 AD, since history attests that Timothy was killed in Ephesus in 80 AD (this date is slightly controversial).

- Heb 7:8; 8:4,13; 9:4,5; 10:1,2,8,11; 13:10,11 all refer to the Jewish sacrificial system in the temple as currently in practice, placing the writing of the book before the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD.
- Heb 10:32-34, 12:4 suggest that these Christians had been persecuted, but not to the point of bloodshed, which probably places the writing of the letter before the 64 AD decree of Nero to kill Christians for their supposed involvement in the burning of Rome (this point is also somewhat controversial).
- An early date for the book (perhaps 40-50 AD) is not likely since:
 - Heb 2:3 suggests that these Christians did not hear Jesus first-hand but later learned of Him from eyewitnesses
 - Heb 5:12 reminds us that these Christians had been in Christ long enough to have learned the fundamental principles of the gospel and forgotten them, and that by the time the letter was written they should have been teachers themselves
 - Heb 13:7 could suggest that some of their leaders had already died (see NIV, NASU)

Therefore, weighing the internal and external evidence, the date of this letter can be placed sometime in the early- to mid-60s AD.