

Apostolic Handbook Series

Handbook
on the
General Epistles
and Revelation



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Apostolic Handbook Series

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Hebrews

I. HEBREWS' EXORDIUM

The theology concentrated in this opening *exordium* (an introduction to a discourse) is dense with meaning. The first two verses offer a history of divine revelation. In the past, God revealed Himself by means of the prophets; in the present, God reveals Himself by means of the Son. The balance of the *exordium* (Hebrews 1:3–14) consists of a paean, or ode of praise, to the Son of God who is exalted above all other celestial beings.

Missing from this letter's introduction is the author's name. Paul has often been associated with Hebrews. Ancient Alexandrian biblical manuscripts placed Hebrews just after Romans, which suggests that eastern Christians thought Paul could be the author. But there are several factors that militate against Pauline authorship—two of which I will briefly explain. First, where Paul insisted upon the fact that he received the gospel of Christ directly from Christ and no other source, the author of Hebrews speaks of himself as having received the gospel secondhand: “How shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed *to us* by *those who*

heard him [emphasis mine]” (Hebrews 2:3, NIV). Given the enormous importance Paul attached to his direct reception of the gospel from Christ (it is so important that he stakes the truth of his gospel upon it, Galatians 1:16–20), it is unlikely that Paul would here pass up the opportunity to provide a firsthand account of Christ’s announcement and instead show dependence on other eyewitnesses. Second, Paul’s letters are profoundly personal; in them he signs his name, at the beginning and the end of the letters. But in a letter that is nearly as long as one of his longest extant letters, I Corinthians, the author of Hebrews never used the opportunity to leave his name. These factors could be explained away, but the preponderance of evidence points away from Paul.

Many authors have been proposed: among them, Luke, Barnabas, Apollos, Priscilla. But, as always, where the Scriptures are silent on the identity of the author, it is probably best not to fill that silence. All we can infer about the author is that he was Christian, probably of Jewish extraction. His ornate and learned approach to argumentation and interpretation, while fairly unique among New Testament writers, was not entirely unique in broader first-century Jewish circles. As will be discussed below, he shared certain affinities with Jewish theologians like Philo, which may suggest an Alexandrian background (perhaps why Apollos, who was a scholar and orator from Alexandria, has been an attractive candidate). Hebrews 13:24 could be understood to mean either that he was with people who were from Italy at the time of writing, or it could mean that he was writing from Italy. Whoever he was, and to wherever he was writing, as Origen said long ago, only God knows.

A. CONTRASTS

The author used the literary technique of antithesis throughout this document, but especially here in the *exordium*. The antitheses help to underscore what this book was written to

clarify: namely, the radical difference between God's provision for His people under the old covenant and God's provision under the new.

1. PAST TIMES VERSUS THESE LAST DAYS

Palai (the past times, 1:1): In contrast to the way our current culture tends to privilege the present over the past, ancient cultures typically gave priority to the past. The author of Hebrews was not equipped with our modern sensibilities. For him, what was spoken through the prophets was true and holy and grew in sanctity with every passing year. Thus any new revelation had to overcome a natural barrier; its very novelty put it at a disadvantage.

Ep touton eschatou ton hemeron (in the last days or end times, 1:2): The author understood that God's revelation in his own time was God's ultimate self-revelation. The author did not congratulate himself for living in more enlightened times. The excitement of living in such auspicious times was tempered by the fact that God's end-time revelation had been so clear and compelling that all excuses for turning back had been removed.

2. TO THE FATHERS VERSUS TO US

Tois patrasin (to the fathers): The author's audience was probably Jewish Christian. When God spoke through, say, the prophet Amos to the northern Kingdom of Israel, God was speaking to the audience's direct ancestors.

Hemin (to us): The Incarnation meant that God had not relegated His self-revelation exclusively to the days of yore. The audience venerated Scripture and the prophetic figures who graced its pages, but the author here argued they themselves were living in scriptural times. And just as, for instance, King Ahab was once the audience for the prophet Elijah, the author's audience would inevitably be the subject of the Scripture now being composed for the edification of

later generations. The audience who can now plainly see that Ahab was obtuse is now, if it resists the Son of God, in danger of sharing infamously in that obtuseness and being judged as such.

3. BY THE PROPHETS VERSUS SON-NESS

En tois prophetais (through the prophets): In former times, the prophet was God's chosen medium. Oftentimes, the prophet's voice carried the revelation of God's will and nature, but sometimes the prophets used unusual means to deliver a divine message. Hosea married a prostitute (Hosea 1), Isaiah preached naked and barefoot for three years (Isaiah 20), Jeremiah used a buried linen girdle as an illustration (Jeremiah 13), Ezekiel drew a picture of Jerusalem on a tile and depicted it under siege (Ezekiel 4), Amos once struck the top of a door to symbolize a coming earthquake (Amos 9). God's voice was like a symphony, speaking through diverse and sundry means: He spoke through men from northern Israel and from southern Israel; He spoke through a pagan Balaam; through a donkey; through a rainbow; a fleece; and He spoke every day through His handiwork in the skies (Psalm 20). Whenever God's mission through Israel was in danger of stalling or being derailed, the prophetic voice, rich and various, spoke in order to carry Israel forward, back to its calling.

En huio (through Son-ness): The author used what is called an "anarthrous construct" here; the word *huio* (Son) is anarthrous, which means that an article does not precede the noun. The unusual nature of this grammatical construction is only apparent in the Greek text. English translations tend to supply for the English-speaking ear what sounds like a missing article (e.g., "His Son" or "the Son"). Whenever we come, however, to this kind of construct, the Greek text is actually intended chiefly to convey the idea of a quality and only secondarily an object. The Greek text literally reads: "In these last days God has spoken to us through Son-ness."