

# NEW TESTAMENT 4

## UNIT ONE INTRODUCTION TO HEBREWS

### AUTHORSHIP

- Hebrews is a written sermon, and is an anonymous work.
- We do not need to try to identify the author, as any suggestion would be based on theory rather than fact.
- Some late manuscripts attribute authorship to Paul, but Tertullian (d. AD 220) viewed Barnabas as the author.
- By AD 420, the most common view was that Paul was the author, supported by several leading scholars.
- There are several arguments against Paul being the author - its anonymity being one of them.
- Paul always stated that he received the gospel directly from Jesus, and this does not fit with Hebrews 2:3.
- The content seems different from Paul's letters, and the style of writing is also different.
- There is a reference to Timothy (13:23) which could suggest the author was part of Paul's circle.
- In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Erasmus raised more questions about whether Paul had written Hebrews.
- The Greek is more 'polished' and elegant than Paul's letters, seeming to be more 'educated' like Luke and Acts.
- Luther suggested Apollos (Acts 18) as the author.
- The letter refutes some things that non-Christian Jews believed, and the author certainly seems to have been familiar with the Septuagint.
- Calvin believed that either Luke or Clement of Rome wrote Hebrews - Clement was the first to cite Hebrews.
- Many 20<sup>th</sup> century commentators supported Luther's idea that Apollos was the author.
- However, some contend that if there were the case it would have been mentioned in early Christian writings.
- Another suggestion is the Priscilla and Aquila wrote Hebrews - certainly the first person plural is used several times.
- It may be that the author was an early Christian leader not mentioned in the New Testament.
- Although we do not know who the author was, the anonymity of Hebrews in no way diminishes its authority.

### THE IDENTITY OF THE HEBREWS

- The designation 'to the Hebrews' is first found in a manuscript from c. AD 200, but it may be a late addition.
- It is possible that an editor added the title on the basis that it was written for Hebrew Christians.
- Hebrews was written in Greek, and draws from the Septuagint - some claim that it was originally in Hebrew.
- However, it is highly likely that it was written for Greek-speaking Jewish Christians.
- Some have argued that the original readers were Gentiles who were in danger of returning to Gentile ways.
- It is most likely though that they were Jews under pressure to renounce their faith and return to Jewish customs.
- Could the readers be 'God-fearers' who had attended the synagogue but not converted to Judaism?

- Could they be the converted priests of Acts 6:7, or struggling 'Hellenists' (Greek-speaking Palestinian converts)?
- We may not be able to identify them exactly but they may be an established Jewish group within a congregation.
- All the evidence relating to the inferiority of Levitical worship makes a Gentile audience highly unlikely.
- Although they may have been 'God-fearers', it seems most likely that the readers must have been Jewish.

## **HEBREWS AND THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS**

- Hebrews seems to have an affinity with some of the ideas expressed in the Dead Sea Scrolls.
- These were probably written at Qumran by the Essenes, who lived a very pure and strict lifestyle.
- The scrolls consist of Biblical texts, extra-canonical texts and texts from the community at Qumran itself.
- The group may have developed in response to priests flouting the Levitical code in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC.
- The community was scattered around AD 66-70, and its buildings were destroyed.
- Although there are similarities, any connection between Hebrews and the Qumran group is speculative.

## **THE SITUATION OF THE HEBREWS**

- Hebrews shows that the readers were undergoing a crisis of confidence and identity.
- Having become Christians, they experienced persecution and came under pressure to renounce their faith.
- The writer exhorts them to resist the soft options that confront them, recalling their earlier endurance.
- Given the situation, the writer is keen to make clear the implications of the finished work of Christ.
- This brings privileges for believers but dire consequences for those who turn away.
- The Hebrews need to persevere and hear the word of God that brought them to faith.

## **DESTINATION**

- As with the question of authorship, any suggestions about where the Hebrews lived are speculative.
- Suggestions have included Jerusalem, Caesarea, Alexandria, Rome, Corinth, Ephesus and Antioch.
- HW Montefiore argued for Corinth, on the grounds of Jews having stirred up strife against converts (Acts 18:17ff).
- However, similar situations had occurred in Ephesus, Thessalonica and Pisidian Antioch.
- Many favoured Rome, with records of rioting leading to the expulsion of Jews from the city.
- The crisis alluded to in Hebrews may refer to the persecution of Christians in Rome at the time of Nero.
- Hebrews 13:24 may suggest a greeting from Italian contacts to those in Rome, or an Italian place of writing.
- Resistance in Rome to the idea of Paul as the author may suggest that those there knew the origins of the letter.
- Rome seems the likely destination, but anywhere Jewish Christians were under pressure is a possible candidate.

## **THE CRISIS AND HISTORICAL SITUATION**

- If the Hebrews had left the synagogue, it is possible that they were being pressured to return.
- CFD Moule argued that the Jewish War (AD 66-70) decisively separated Jews and Christians.
- This would have put pressure on Jewish Christians to show loyalty to their ancestral religion and nation.
- The crisis would therefore have come out of a perceived Gentile threat to Jewish survival.
- There was increasing violence and threats to Jewish security throughout the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD.

- Jews and Greeks clashed in various places, including Alexandria where Jews demanded equal rights within the city.
- The Emperor Claudius denied this, and savage rioting ensued in AD 66.
- In these circumstances the Jewish Christians would have been alienated from the synagogue but without full rights of citizenship.
- However, with the evidence favouring Rome as the destination of the letter, persecution under Nero is more likely.

## **THE TEMPLE AND THE DATING OF HEBREWS**

- Questions of date are related to other historical questions, but do not really affect the message of the book.
- Discussion of the date has been related to the fate of the temple in Jerusalem.
- Temple worship is mentioned in the present tense - the temple was destroyed in AD 70.
- Many argue that if Hebrews was written later that this, arguments about the temple cult would have been obsolete.
- It is said that it will 'soon disappear' (8:13) - a statement that would be unnecessary if it was after AD 70.
- The letter implies that the priests in Jerusalem were still ministering.
- For some, the focus on the system of worship does not help in determining the date of Hebrews.
- The author is concerned with contrasting Jesus' achievements with the weakness of the Levitical cult.
- Early Christian literature shows that even after AD 70, Jews lived as though the temple worship was still going on.
- As Jews and Christians continued to think of the Mosaic cult as present, ruling out a date after AD 70 is unwise.
- Jewish Christians addressed in Hebrews were attracted to an ancient and familiar way of approach to God.
- As Clement referred to Hebrews in the late 1<sup>st</sup> century, an early date is wise, possibly c. AD 60-70.

## **HEBREWS AND WORSHIP**

- Hebrews has much to say about worship and about Jesus superseding the Levitical system in particular.
- In the Greco-Roman world, worshipping gods involved approaching them through sacrifice.
- This required sacred places, times, procedures and ministers, and 'cultivating the favour' of the gods.
- The inner attitude of the worshipper was irrelevant to the validity of the worship - external ritual mattered.
- In many formal aspects, the Levitical system had much in common with this, with rules and procedures.
- However, there was only one God, making idols was forbidden and there was no sense of sacrifice to gain favour.
- God gives procedures for approaching him, and worship is a response to and an acknowledgement of him.
- Levitical worship provided the people with a way of approaching God - Israel worships God on his terms.
- Jesus has offered the one true sacrifice for sin - far superior to Levitical animal sacrifice.
- No further literal sacrifice is needed, neither are specific routines, acts or rituals.
- Under the new covenant worship is primarily giving thanks for what God has accomplished through Jesus.
- Hebrews states that Jesus is the one true sacrifice for sin, and worship involves the 'sacrifice' of praise.