

Hebrews: Background

AUTHOR: Anonymous, though after the first few centuries AD until the Reformation, it was believed to be Paul. The author was male (11:32) Hellenistic Jewish Christian; well-known to the readers (13:19); expected to travel with Timothy and so likely part of Paul's circle (11:23); and is someone who heard the Gospel from an evangelist, not directly from Jesus (2:3-4). The Greek is so good that some have suggested Apollos, who is described in Acts as "an eloquent man" (18:24), a technical phrase indicating a high level of rhetorical skill. As Barclay puts it, "[The introduction] is the most sonorous piece of Greek in the whole New Testament," and according to the DLNTD, the Greek of Hebrews is "far superior in vocabulary and sentence construction to that of Paul." According to the DLNTD, the author's educational level is comparable to that of Philo. Early proposals for authorship include also Barnabas, Luke and Clement of Rome (who quotes Hebrews). Contemporary proposals include also Silvanus, the deacon Philip, Priscilla and Aquilla, Jude, Aristion, and others. Origen summarized it well: "Who wrote this epistle? Only God knows!" (Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.*, 6.25.13)

READERS: A second-generation Jewish-Christian house church, likely in an urban setting (given the exhortations of ch. 13), with a history of fidelity to Christ. They came to Christ because of the Gospel and various miracles and signs and wonders and spiritual gifts (2:4).

DATE: If their previous hard times were the expulsion of the Jews from Rome by Claudius, then it was written after 49, which is in keeping with the second-generational status. If you think the author should have mentioned the destruction of the Temple, it was written before 70. Otherwise, you can be sure it was written before 1 Clement, which quotes it in the 90s.

SITUATION: They have gone through some difficult times before requiring them to endure abuse, persecution, and loss of property (10:32-33; 12:4). They are faced for the first time with the danger of persecution, and as Christians do not enjoy the protection that Jews did under Roman law.

SOME REASONS WHY WE SHOULD READ HEBREWS:

- Hebrews is in the form of a sermon which would have been preached after the reading of Scripture in a first-century Jewish-Christian synagogue, giving us a unique peek into the early church
- Hebrews speaks to anyone who feels afraid and out of control, about the supremacy of Jesus in addressing our fears
- Hebrews speaks to us of entering God's rest
- Hebrews shows us a way to read Scripture which is very different from ours and can open our eyes in our study of the OT

COMMENTARIES:

- N. T. Wright's *Hebrews for Everyone* was surprisingly useful. Written completely at a devotional level, he occasionally had some useful material to stimulate group discussion.

- Carson actually says some nice things about William Barclay's *The Letter to the Hebrews* from the New Daily Study Bible. Barclay really hits his stride in this volume, which doesn't seem out of date and provides some useful background (though Carson thinks he may over-emphasize the parallels between Hebrews and Hellenistic Judaism as exemplified by Philo).
- Also at this level is Raymond Brown's IVP commentary *The Message of Hebrews*, which is solid, if not remarkable.
- *Sue recommended, and I found useful, Dr. Constable's Notes on Hebrews (2014), p. 59 (<http://soniclight.com/constable/notes/pdf/hebrews.pdf>), which reviews the contributions from all the standard commentaries, for each passage. This I scanned reasonably often.*
- Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, from the Hermeneia series (Fortress, 1989) is also at a technical level, but I found it more useful when I dipped into it.
- *Letter to Pilgrims*, Robert Jewett, 1981. This book explores the implications of the idea that the context for Hebrews is the same as that of Colossians (based on the correct observation of the similarities between the two letters—though he pushes it perhaps beyond what it can bear), and reads the book in the context of a pilgrimage motif. Worth consulting, but not a central resource
- *Word Biblical Commentary Vols 47A, 47B*, William L. Lane, (1991). This is a very well respected commentary containing technical information for exegesis. I used it only a little, but it appears solid and definitely at a higher level than the more devotional commentaries. Craig R. Koester's Anchor-Bible volume is also supposed to be good (according to Carson), though I didn't use it. Carson also says nice things about Paul Ellingworth's *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, in Eerdman's New International Greek Testament Commentary series, though again, I didn't use it.
- Donald Guthrie's *The Letter to the Hebrews* in the IVP Tyndale series is also supposed to be good, and at a level comparable to the rest in that series (i.e., not terribly technical), though I didn't use it.