

Hebrews ***Background***

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Hebrews Background

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
<i>The Evidence</i>	2
The Letter Itself.....	2
Other New Testament Sources.....	3
Church Tradition.....	3
Historical Events.....	4
Conclusions.....	6
The Audience.....	6
The Date.....	6
The Circumstances.....	6
The Author.....	7

Hebrews Background

Introduction

Hebrews stands out among the books in the New Testament for several reasons. Its writing style is the most elegant. It powerfully proclaims the greatness and divinity of Jesus. It builds the case for Jesus' greatness through carefully crafted arguments using numerous quotations from the Old Testament while bluntly warning against turning away from him. It powerfully encourages the audience to persevere in their faith. At the same time, the author didn't identify himself or to whom he wrote. His blunt warnings raise questions about whether believers can "fall away."

Early Church tradition doesn't help us. The churches in the east claimed that the Apostle Paul wrote the letter, but the claims by these churches seem motivated by their desire to include the letter in the New Testament canon. The church in Rome disagreed.

5. Paul's fourteen epistles are well known and undisputed. It is not indeed right to overlook the fact that some have rejected the Epistle to the Hebrews, saying that it is disputed by the church of Rome, on the ground that it was not written by Paul. – Eusebius, *Church History*, 3.3.5 (www.newadvent.org/fathers/250103.htm)

We can read Paul's other letters and compare them to *Hebrews*. They have some similarities, but the writing styles and the approaches are clearly different. Furthermore, Paul identified himself in his letters. Someone else wrote *Hebrews*, and we still don't know to whom they wrote.

I will lay out evidence and then draw conclusions from it. Please note that there isn't enough evidence to be certain; the conclusions are educated guesses.

Hebrews Background

The Evidence

The Letter Itself

Reading through the letter, several things stand out.

The writing style and the arguments point to a person with extensive training in Greek speaking, writing, and philosophy. At the same time, the author was clearly a devout Jew highly trained in the Old Testament, although he seems to quote from the Greek translation and not the original Hebrew scriptures. This points to a Jew from Alexandria in Egypt, which was a prominent academic center and had a very large Jewish population.

The author knew his audience well and felt close to them. They respected him as an authority figure and trusted him enough to accept his sharp warnings.

The audience were Jewish believers who had recently experienced hardships because of their faith. Some of them had chosen to abandon their faith and return to Judaism; they thought that they could continue to be God's people through the Law of Moses while avoiding the hardships caused by following Jesus. Many others were tempted to follow them.

The author wrote to show them how this thinking was wrong and led to judgment. He exhorted them to remain firm in their faith.

The last few sentences provide some specific clues.

¹⁸Pray for us, for we are convinced that we have a clear conscience, wanting to conduct ourselves honorably in everything. ¹⁹And I urge you all the more to pray that **I may be restored to you very soon.**

²⁰Now may the God of peace, who brought up from the dead our Lord Jesus—the great Shepherd of the sheep—through the blood of the everlasting covenant, ²¹equip you with everything good to do his will, working in us what is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.

²²Brothers and sisters, I urge you to receive this message of exhortation, for I have written to you briefly. ²³**Be aware that our brother Timothy has been released. If he comes soon enough, he will be with me when I see you.** ²⁴Greet all your leaders and all the saints. **Those who are from Italy send you greetings.** ²⁵Grace be with you all. – *Hebrews 13:18–25*, CSB, emphasis mine

The author intended to visit the audience in the near future.

He was in contact with Timothy and hoped to bring him along.

Believers *from* Italy also sent their greetings. Note that the use of “from” is unusual; I will explore the significance in the conclusions section.

Hebrews Background

Other New Testament Sources

¹²Through Silvanus, a faithful brother (as I consider him), **I have written** to you briefly in order to encourage you and to testify that this is the true grace of God. Stand firm in it! ¹³**She who is in Babylon**, chosen together with you, sends you greetings, as does Mark, my son. – *1 Peter 5:12–13*, CSB, emphasis mine

Silvanus, or Silas, apparently wrote this letter for Peter; we might call him a ghostwriter. The result was elegant Greek that was far beyond Peter's ability. Silas accompanied Paul on the second missionary journey. Later on, he apparently moved to Rome and worked with Peter. The fact that Peter mentioned him by name indicates that he was well known to the audience consisting of believers living in the regions to the north and east of Ephesus and Asia.

Peter, speaking metaphorically, added that "she who is *in* Babylon" also sent greetings. Note the use of "in"; this is what we would expect here.

²⁴Now a Jew named **Apollos, a native Alexandrian, an eloquent man who was competent in the use of the Scriptures**, arrived in Ephesus. ²⁵He had been instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in spirit, he was speaking and teaching accurately about Jesus, although he knew only John's baptism. ²⁶He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. After Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained the way of God to him more accurately. ²⁷When he wanted to cross over to Achaia, the brothers and sisters wrote to the disciples to welcome him. After he arrived, he was a great help to those who by grace had believed. ²⁸**For he vigorously refuted the Jews in public, demonstrating through the Scriptures that Jesus is the Messiah.** – *Acts 18:24–28*, CSB, emphasis mine

Apollos was a Jew from Alexandria. Luke described him as eloquent and "competent" in the Old Testament. Both of these indicate that he had extensive formal training.

¹¹For it has been reported to me about you, my brothers and sisters, by members of Chloe's people, that there is rivalry among you. ¹²What I am saying is this: One of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "**I belong to Apollos**," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ." ¹³Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in Paul's name? – *1 Corinthians 1:11–13*, CSB, emphasis mine

In Corinth, Apollos became popular enough that a faction formed around him along with Paul, Cephas—Peter, and Christ. We may assume that many preferred Apollos because of his superior speaking and knowledge of the Old Testament.

Church Tradition

6. Timothy, so it is recorded, was the first to receive the episcopate of the parish in Ephesus, Titus of the churches in Crete. – Eusebius, *Church History*, III 4.6, newadvent.com/fathers

Hebrews Background

Eusebius, the church historian, recorded a tradition that Timothy was the first bishop of Ephesus. This provides a strong indication that Timothy remained in Ephesus.

Historical Events

Three separate but intertwined events potentially influenced the author and his audience.

In July 64, a fire occurred in Rome. Of the city's fourteen districts, the fire completely destroyed three and damaged seven others. Nero immediately began repairing the damage, but rumors spread that he had started the fire. Nero decided to blame the Christians and began to persecute them. According to the Roman historian Tacitus,

Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all (Christians) who pleaded guilty; then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of hatred against mankind. Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired. – Tacitus, *The Annals*, 15.44

The worst of the persecution most likely took place in late 64 and early 65, but it continued to simmer.

In fall 66, Jewish rebels drove the Romans out of Jerusalem. The governor of Syria marched on Jerusalem in October, but his poor leadership allowed the Jews to defeat his army, resulting in the loss of 6,000 soldiers.

Nero responded by sending Vespasian and his son Titus to Judea in early 67. Vespasian quickly subdued the Jews, but he allowed the rebels to maintain control of Jerusalem.

Tradition says that Roman authorities captured both Peter and Paul and executed them, possibly in 67.

In June 68, the Roman Senate, tired of Nero's poor leadership, voted to remove him as emperor. Nero quickly committed suicide.

Nero's death apparently ended the persecution of Christians in Rome.

The Senate appointed a new emperor, but he was harsh and unpopular, and his personal guardsmen murdered him and appointed someone else in January 69. This led to a general starting a revolt and making himself emperor in April. Vespasian planned another revolt, marched on Rome, and made himself emperor in December. 69 became known as the Year of Four Emperors.

Hebrews Background

Vespasian had left his son Titus in Judea to keep the Jews in check. Early in 70, Titus decided to make a name for himself. He allowed Jews to pack themselves into Jerusalem for the Passover and then besieged the city. The Jewish rebels held out until July, and then the Romans broke through their defenses.

The Jewish rebels fought the Roman soldiers in the Temple. After a fierce battle, the Romans defeated the rebels, looted the sanctuary, and then burned it. The Romans then massacred people in Jerusalem, took tens of thousands of Jews captive, and sold them into slavery.

The destruction of the Temple quickly brought the sacrifices required by the Law of Moses to an end. Jews could no longer obtain forgiveness under the Law.

Hebrews Background

Conclusions

The Audience

The internal evidence of the letter shows that its audience was believing Jews. They were considering leaving their faith in Christ and returning to Judaism. A possible reason is that non-believing Jews were forcing out those who believed in Jesus.

There were three large Jewish communities in the Roman world: Jerusalem, Alexandria, and Rome.

The author mentioned "those from Italy," which could either imply the author wrote from Rome or that the audience was in Rome. However, the author mentioned Timothy, whom he wanted to bring along. This points away from the author being in Rome, as Timothy was most likely in Ephesus. Instead, the author was somewhere in the east, and he wrote to an audience in Rome.

This agrees with the natural sense of "those from Italy." Believers abroad sent greetings to those at home.

The Date

At the time of the letter, the priests were still making sacrifices in the Temple. This indicates that the author wrote sometime before 70.

Assuming the audience was in Rome, Nero's persecution would have prevented the author from visiting while it was ongoing. Therefore, the author must have written no earlier than late 67. Nero's death would permit the author to visit.

Bad weather made travel difficult from fall through winter. Possibly, the author wrote early in spring 68 and intended to travel later that year.

The Circumstances

Given that the audience was Jewish believers living in Rome early in 68, the circumstances become clear.

For two and a half years, the Roman authorities had persecuted Christians in Rome. Non-believing Jews had a strong motivation to distance themselves from Christians and push Jewish believers out of their synagogues. Jewish believers faced two hardships: the authorities sought them, and their community cut them off. This explains the sudden temptation to deny Jesus and to return to the Law of Moses.

Hebrews Background

The Author

Elsewhere in the New Testament, the early Church's rule that only the writings of an Apostle or a close associate of an Apostle ensured that the authors' identities were well known. In the case of this letter, the churches broke their own rule, which makes identifying the author impossible. All we can do is make informed guesses.

The least satisfying possibility is that the author is unknown to us.

Another possibility is Silas. He worked with Paul in the east and later traveled to Rome to work with Peter. His writing style in *1 Peter* is at the same level as *Hebrews*, given that Silas was writing on behalf of Peter. He may have traveled to the east with the letter and remained there.

My last suggestion is Apollos. He worked with Paul in the east and gained respect for his eloquence and powerful use of the Scriptures. Apollos was from Alexandria, where he presumably received his training.

I personally prefer Apollos because what we know of him fits so well with what little we know about the author. However, he is only a suggestion.

Bottom line: we don't need to know the author's name to understand him and the letter he wrote.