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Who Wrote Hebrews?

Why It May Not Be Paul . . .

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Who wrote Hebrews? The short answer: only God knows.

In the following excerpt adapted from Lexham Press' Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary volume: *Hebrews* by Thomas R. Schreiner,¹ we see whose names have been put forward—and why the author of Hebrews probably isn't Paul.

The authorship of Hebrews is a fascinating issue that continues to interest Christians today.

Who put forward Pauline authorship of Hebrews?

Clement of Alexandria (ca. AD 150–215) thought the letter was written by Paul in Hebrew and then translated into Greek by Luke.²

Origen (ca. AD 185–253) said the thoughts are Pauline but suggested someone else made short notes and wrote up what the apostle taught and said.³ Origen passed on the tradition that either Luke or Clement of Rome was the writer, but he remained

¹ Schreiner, Thomas R. *Hebrews, Evangelical Biblical Theological Commentary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2021), 2–5.

² Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 6.14.1.

³ Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 6.25.13

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noncommittal on the identity of the author. Most scholars believe Origen was agnostic about the author since he wrote, "But who wrote the epistle, truly only God knows."⁴

David Alan Black, however, argues Origen believed Paul was the author but someone else was the penman.⁵ Black's interpretation of Origen should be rejected. It has been shown that when Origen speaks of who wrote the epistle he was referring to the author, not merely the secretary.⁶ Hence, the notion that Origen believed Paul was the author fails to persuade.

As time passed, however, the notion that Paul was the author gained credence, and by the third century Pauline authorship was accepted in the East.⁷

The situation in the West was different.

Tertullian (ca. AD 155–220) suggested that Barnabas was the author, which indicates there was no inclination in the early centuries in the West to ascribe the letter to Paul.⁸

Identifying the author as Barnabas is interesting since Barnabas was a Levite (Acts 4:36), which could explain the interest in and knowledge of priestly matters in Hebrews. Pauline authorship, however, finally triumphed in the West due to the influence of Jerome and Augustine.⁹

Views on Pauline authorship in the Reformation and today

Pauline authorship reigned as the view of the Church until the time of the Reformation.

Erasmus inclined against Pauline authorship but said he would submit to ecclesiastical authorities since the matter was inconsequential.¹⁰

⁴ This is my translation of Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 6.25.14.

⁵ David Alan Black, "Who Wrote Hebrews? The Internal and External Evidence Re-examined," *Faith and Mission* 18 (2001): 3–26. See also David Alan Black, *The Authorship of Hebrews: The Case for Paul* (Gonzales, FL: Energion, 2013).

⁶ See David L. Allen, *Hebrews*, NAC (Nashville: B&H, 2010), 32.

⁷ See here Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 1–2, n7. See, e.g., Eusebius who accepts Hebrews as Pauline, though he thinks it was originally written in Hebrew and translated by Clement of Rome into Greek (*Hist. eccl.* 3.3.5 and 3.3.8.2–3).

⁸ Attridge, *Hebrews*, 3.

⁹ For the views of Jerome and Augustine, see Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977), 21–22.

¹⁰ For Erasmus's comments on Hebrews, see *ibid.*, 23.

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Luther rejected Pauline authorship, believing that Hebrews 2:3 proves the book could not have come from Paul. Luther had a novel but brilliant guess regarding authorship, proposing that the book was written by Apollos.¹¹

Hebrews is beautifully written and has an Alexandrian feel, fitting with Apollos's eloquence and Alexandrian roots (Acts 18:24). Calvin also agreed that Paul wasn't the writer based on Hebrews 2:3, suggesting that either Luke or Clement of Rome penned the letter.

In the contemporary period, scholars continue to propose various authors, such as Priscilla, Silas, Epaphras, Jude, Aristion, etc.¹² In recent years a vigorous defense of Lukan authorship has been proposed by David Allen,¹³ and there is also a significant defense of Pauline authorship by David Alan Black.¹⁴

Why Paul is not the author of Hebrews

Pauline authorship should be rejected despite the attempts, both ancient and modern, to mount a defense.

First, in Paul's 13 letters he identifies himself by name, thus the absence of a name in Hebrews renders it doubtful that Paul wrote the letter.¹⁵

Second, stylistic arguments should not be relied on too heavily since the Pauline corpus is so limited. Still, the polished Greek style of Hebrews doesn't accord with what we find in the Pauline letters.

Third, the writer separates himself from the original eyewitnesses in Hebrews 2:3. Paul, by way of contrast, emphasizes repeatedly his authority as an apostle of Jesus Christ and

¹¹ Guthrie nicely summarizes the evidence favoring Apollos, and he also provides a historical overview of those who have supported Apollos as the author (including Zahn, Lenski, Montefiore). Guthrie is not dogmatic on the matter but suggests Apollos as the author. George H. Guthrie, "The Case for Apollos as the Author of Hebrews," *Faith and Mission* 18 (2001): 41–56. For the development of Luther's views, see Hughes, *Hebrews*, 23; Attridge, *Hebrews*, 4. In support of Apollos, see Ceslas Spicq, *L'Épître aux Hébreux*, 2nd ed., 2 vols., EB (Paris: Gabalda, 1953), 1:197–219.

¹² Adolf von Harnack defended Priscilla as the author (Adolf von Harnack, "Probabilia über die Adresse und den Verfasser des Hebräerbriefes," *ZNW* 1 [1900]: 16–41). For Silas, see Thomas Hewitt, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, TNTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1960), 26–32. For Epaphras, see Robert Jewett, *Letter to Pilgrims: A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (New York: Pilgrim, 1981), 7–9.

¹³ Allen, *Hebrews*, 29–61. David L. Allen, *Lukan Authorship of Hebrews* (Nashville: B&H, 2010).

¹⁴ See note 4 above.

¹⁵ See John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews*, trans. J. Owen (repr.; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005), 54, 358. Despite the title of the commentary (which doubtless doesn't come from Calvin), Calvin clearly rejects Pauline authorship in his comments on 2:3 and 13:23.

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refuses to put himself in a subordinate position to the apostles and eyewitnesses. This last reason, in particular, rules out the notion that Paul was the author.

If not Paul, then who wrote Hebrews?

Once Paul is excluded, the door is pushed wide open for any number of candidates.

David Allen argues intriguingly for Luke, but one can only say that he has shown that Lukan authorship is possible. He has certainly not proved his thesis. The linguistic evidence is not decisive, and the differences between Hebrews and Acts call into question Lukan authorship.¹⁶

Barnabas is an attractive choice since he was a Levite, and the book has an interest in all things Levitical.

Similarly, Luther's guess that the author was Apollos is appealing, for Apollos's eloquence accords with the letter's elegance, and his Alexandrian background fits with the character of the letter. Many scholars have seen an affinity between Hebrews and Platonic/Philonic thought, and Alexandria was a fertile center for such thought.

But we come face-to-face here with the paucity of evidence in assigning an author.

All the theories are guesses, though some are fascinating and alluring to be sure. We don't really know who wrote Hebrews. No theory of authorship has won the day and for good reason, for the answer to our quest lies outside the domain of historical knowledge.

Origen's words about the author still ring true today: "God only knows."

This post is adapted from Hebrews from the Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary (EBTC) series by Thomas R. Schreiner, available now from Lexham Press. The title and headings above were added by an editor.

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<https://blog.logos.com/who-wrote-hebrews-why-it-may-not-be-paul>

¹⁶ Rightly Gareth Lee Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 9.