

Hebrews: A Christological Treatise?

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Of the many books written and included in the New Testament canon of the Bible, no single book has generated so much speculation as to who the author could possibly be. Hebrews is a great write up whose Christology and blending with the Old Testament remains unmatched. It has a rich reference to the Old Testament and any well-versed Bible scholar cannot miss the Old Testament flavour lurking in the back ground as they read (Africa Bible Commentary 1489). Without a good balanced grasp of ancient Hebrew Biblical history, one cannot fully understand the book of Hebrews, its import or message. Books like Leviticus furnish a great background to the book as the author races through the great Christological arguments as relates to the person, nature and work of Jesus Christ. However, with all these great truths oozing out of the book at every pore, the real actual author remains veiled and enshrouded in history. The reader therefore does well to focus more on the message rather than the identity of the author, important as that may be. This paper therefore gives a bird's eye view of the entire epistle landscape touching on some special features, possible author and significance of the book before lessons drawn and conclusion is arrived at.

Author, Primary Target Readership, Date and Location

The author of the book was for a long time thought and assumed to have been the apostle Paul, though the epistle itself does not state its author (The Zondervan NIV study Bible; Ryle 208). This epistle, sometimes accorded a treatise status, has historically been attributed to Paul because of the following reasons, which some however dispute: Firstly, the book sounds/feels "Pauline" as one reads it in terms of logical argument, thought and form. Secondly, the language employed in the greater part of the treatise carries some Pauline sentiments and vocabulary though admittedly some words are uniquely found in this book. Thirdly, the broadness of the thought and cohesion of the racy book is very refined, and probably only a fine scholar like Paul would have matched those standards. Fourthly, the quality of the writing is in good high quality Greek and often quotes the Septuagint which befits a Jewish writer like the apostle Paul. These and other solid arguments have been summoned over the centuries until some begun to question the Pauline authorship based on the ensuing reasons: First, the language is not uniformly Pauline in all senses. Second, the statements asserted in the book are not 100% in sync with Paul's Christology, as

it sounds/feels rather more refined and deeper in this book. Third, the arguments and issues addressed in the book sound/feel too developed to have been a first century writer but of a later. That said, Hebrews is inspired by God and possesses the divine stamp and in agreement with the rest of scripture. Since the author is not known, the date of its writing is not definitely known either but some suggestions have been advanced. Some have argued that by the internal evidence, it appears the book was written before destruction of Jerusalem and therefore discontinuity of the Temple sacrifices (i.e. before AD 70). The book nowhere suggests the cessation of these religious practices or else the writer would have mentioned. Others have argued that the writer took it for granted that his hearers knew about the destruction of the Temple and proceeds from that premise or that the Temple demolition event was already in the distant past and hence not needing mention. Whichever the case, the exact date is unknown but some have put it at about AD 69, earlier or later (Africa Bible Commentary 1489; Hale 577). The location could have been within the Roman empire and written for the Hellenistic Jews then scattered all over the empire because the Koine Greek used is suited for such an audience. The debate rages on until definite evidence comes forth to settle these age old questions.

Purpose of Writing the Book

As earlier hinted at, the book is primarily written to Jewish believers¹ or people of Jewish decent resident in the Roman Empire but away from Palestine (Africa Bible Commentary 1489; Hale 577). The writer commences his presentation by stating how God in the past and at sundry times communicated through various means but has now spoken through His Son, Jesus Christ. The Son is said to be "*the exact representation and radiance of God's glory*" (Hebrews 1:3). Further, the writer aims at encouraging a discouraged lot of Jewish believers who were showing signs of abandoning the faith or severely tried to the point of cowering away from the faith (Hebrews 2:1; 6:9; 10:25). There is evidence of fierce persecution hinted at in the book with some dropping the faith on that score but the author summons all sorts of arguments both from Jewish history and what God had done to some Gentile believers like Rahab to prove the point that God is aware and able to sustain them as well as demonstrate that it is far worse to abandon the faith than to stay on board (Hebrews 11). The author accordingly argues that it is a fearful thing to fall in the hands of the living God because He is a consuming fire (Hebrews 10:31; 12:29). In addition, the writer argues that what Jesus has achieved through his sacrificial death is once and for all of greater essence and effect than even the sacrifices practiced in the Temple regime (Hebrews 7-10). At this point some suggest that the writer is indirectly suggesting the cessation of these rituals but the evidence is not strong enough. Be that as it may, the writer traces Jesus' ancestry likening it to Melchizedek (Hebrews 7), and how that he was both the priest and sacrifice at the same time (Hebrews 4:14-5:10; 8). His work on the cross is therefore of inestimable eternal value.

¹ Hale suggests that the letter was targeted at Aramaic speaking Jewish believers (577).

Based on these and other arguments, the author rightly and logically concludes that it is senseless to abandon the faith at this point but rather to remain strong, putting on holiness without which no one shall see the Lord (Hebrews 10:19-39). In the closing chapter, the writer ends with greetings as he closes off. As one reads through the book, they are instantly amazed at the achievements of the Lord Jesus Christ on the cross in our stead.

The Main Themes of the Book

Although the books' main theme is on the work of Christ on the cross as a basis for encouraging the weary tried saints, there are several points that become apparent as one peruses through the book. For one thing, the names 'Christ', 'Jesus', 'Son' etc. are used repeatedly across the book in reference to Jesus Christ. Jesus is said to be the eternal Son of God whose mission was to offer an eternal sacrifice on behalf of God's people thereby offering an acceptable atonement for sin once and for all. Whereas in the Old Testament, the high Priest used to repeatedly go to offer sacrifices for the Israelite community, Jesus has done this once and for all. He has offered a perfect sacrifice by offering his own body on the tree in the stead of God's people. Whereas the high priest had to first offer a sacrifice for his own sins in the Old scheme of things lest God struck them dead in the Holy of Holies, this Jesus was without sin but went and suffered in the stead of others. He was both the Priest and the sacrifice or ransom for sin (Hebrews 9:11-28). Because he was both man and God at the same time, he was qualified to be a fit saviour in his passive and active obedience, hence his sacrifice was accepted by God the Father. The Hebrew Christians must therefore pay more careful attention to what was passed on to them lest they lose out slipping into apostasy with eternal damning consequences (Hebrews 2:1-3). Furthermore, Jesus is more than just any mere ordinary High Priest but a Great high Priest whose genealogy cannot be fully traced because his priest hood is from eternity into eternity. Thus, all those that would benefit from his finished work (and hence sat down at the father's right hand), must come to him by faith, trusting in his work of atonement and putting on holiness. The saint is further urged never to lose heart in the face of afflictions and trials because these come for a purpose. One purpose is to correct his disobedient children, which in itself proves that they are loved by God (Hebrews 12:7). If no discipline is mated out, then they are illegitimate children that grope around unguided and in darkness whose ultimate end is eternal destruction. Holiness is therefore the only antidote against sin, especially the sin that so easily entangles the children of God. Another antidote is to keep in "*koinonia*" or fellowship so that there may be mutual encouragement and edification. The book touches on many pertinent issues that the reader does well to investigate and grasp the import of the rich words. They will certainly go away much more energised to go and live for Christ, no matter how frowning providence might be. As often as the saint has read this book, they have been cheered on to fight the good fight of the faith knowing that there is a great cloud of witnesses that stand as monuments and trophies of

Grace (Hebrews 12:1-3). All said, it can safely be concluded that the book of Hebrews touches on many issues relating to the nature of God, His Son, the great plan of redemption and why the saints should persevere come what may. Thus, we can safely conclude that the book focuses on Jesus Christ and the sufficiency of his finished work of atonement on the cross. Indirectly, this book renders Temple sacrifices overtaken by that one great sacrifice for the sins of the world. The Child of God may therefore pass through life joyfully as they head to the celestial city. Hebrews is a land mark Christological work, unmatched and unique in many senses.

Perceived Problems and Challenges of Book

This fine treatise or, may we say, epistle has some challenges that confront the reader. Sceptics and critics have greatly leveraged their arguments based on some of the arguments earlier alluded to when we considered the authorship of the book. Some of these arguments are repeated here for the record while others may appear new. First, the book does not state to have been written by Paul. Unlike other epistles that expressly state from the beginning that a particular person wrote the epistle, Hebrews does not have such. Second, the book does not have the traditional salutations and benediction that are characteristic of Pauline letters but straight goes on to state big concepts. Instead, the greetings come at the end which in itself is unusual. Third, the author greets some uncertain set of people that were probably not directly associated with Paul from a place (Italy) which he probably had not yet visited (if epistle was written earlier than AD 68). No names are mentioned in the greeting section contrary to Paul's general custom. Although Timothy is mentioned, this in itself is not positive proof that Paul is indeed the author. Fourth, the Christology highlighted in Hebrews is very refined and, may we say, a continuation to that found in Colossians but some scholars argue that they are different claiming the writers do not say or teach the same thing, at least not in the same way. Fifth, the style and quality of arguments appear more refined and advanced as one would have expected in the second not first century. Pundits therefore suggest that the book is a spurious work that was probably used as a polemic in the gnostic heresy of the second century. The puzzling thing for those favouring Pauline authorship is that some of the Gnostics liked and appreciated the book of Hebrews hence its delay to be recognised as canonical. Furthermore, if it was used as a polemic against gnosticism, one would have expected them to retest the book but this is not so. However, more and more scholars today attribute the book to others like Barnabas, Apollos (with his polished way of speaking and training), Silas, Priscilla or some other such writer. The final argument is the presentation of faith in the book is evidently different from other Pauline epistles. Faith in this book is not mere trust in God but action as evidenced by the people of faith in the Old Testament. The theology of Hebrews however remains superiorly unmatched in its lucid and clear presentation which one cannot miss as from the hand of God,

though its canonicity acceptance lingered into the fourth century by the western church (Berkhof 151).

Lessons Gleaned From the Book

The treatise at hand has hordes of countless lessons especially as relates to the person and work of Jesus Christ. Below are some of the succinct lessons emanating from this classic treatise:

- 1, Jesus' sacrifice is once and for all complete atoning for all our sins
2. Jesus was at once the Great High Priest and the sacrifice itself.
3. It is highly dangerous to abandon the faith after having professed because one risks suffering the eternal wrath of God.
4. Although God is presented as a consuming fire into whose hands to fall is dreadful, he is none the less a loving caring father to his faithful and loyal children.
5. If a saint is disciplined for sin, they should take it well, submitting to correction and therefore built up.
6. Sin can easily harden someone and hence the need to vigilantly watch and keep away from its deceitfulness.
7. There is a great cloud of witnesses to which the Christian can look for encouragement and support.
8. The besetting sin must be especially watched because it promises to wreck havoc in one's spiritual pilgrimage. Although the writer does not define this sin or its nature, it is probable a sin that one is most susceptible to.
9. The book mentions at least two major concepts that everyone must adhere to or observe as they come to God. First, they must believe that He exists, second they must flee from sinning and sinning, third, they must exercise faith and finally trust God to do what he has promised.

As can be seen, Hebrews stands as a beacon of hope in a dark, dark world full of sin and unrighteousness. The more often one reads it, they more encouraged they will be.

Conclusion

Having briefly scanned through the book at hand, one cannot help but return thanks to God for the Great salvation that has been procured for the elect. Jesus was in every way fit to be our mediator, priest and saviour. His passive and active obedience radiate much hope for the saint, hence the need to stand firm, resilient and be holy to the glory of God. Jesus ever lives to intercede for the saint and certainly will usher the spirits of just men made perfect when they meet him in the air. On this footing, our solid assurance rests, no need for human mediators, priests or sacrifices. Jesus is all in all! The epistle of Hebrews achieves the distinction of explaining the covenants, their distinction and unity. This book is definitely a great treatise on the person and work of Christ, may these themes be the resounding echoes in our churches once again.

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