

A Commentator's Perspective: Authorship of Hebrews

Notably, there is no ascription of authorship for Hebrews. From the earliest formation of the church, the authorship of Hebrews has baffled church leaders and commentators. No less than nineteen options have been offered for Hebrews's authorship. While a majority of commentators agree with Origen who claims the author is unknown, a large number agree with Martin Luther who argued that Apollos wrote Hebrews. Yet several good reasons exist for suggesting that Barnabas wrote the letter.

First, there is the early testimony of several Western church leaders. On the one hand, Tertullian (d. 220), a North African apologist from Carthage assumes Barnabas wrote Hebrews. He considers Barnabas to be a man of equal stature to Paul and offers the Epistle of Barnabas as supporting evidence. On the other hand, Gregory (d. 392), Bishop of Elvira (southern Spain) and defender of the Nicene Creed quotes Hebrews and attributes it to Barnabas. Finally, Philastrius (d. 397; also known as Filaster), Bishop of Brescia, Italy, considered Barnabas to be the author of Hebrews. Yet it must be acknowledged that Jerome (A.D. 345–419), best known for his translation of the Latin Vulgate and ministry in Rome, mentions Barnabas as just one of several possibilities along with Luke and Clement of Rome. The Eastern Church, however, tended to favor Pauline authorship, a view still held by a few commentators today.

Second, the Jewishness of the letter, personal awareness of those to whom he has written, and the description of the author's purpose seems to support Barnabas as the author of Hebrews. As to Jewishness, Barnabas was a Levite born in Cyprus and acquainted with the Jewish cultic system (Acts 4:36). The author of Hebrews was also aware of Judea's cultic ritual practices (i.e., 7:11; 9:15; 13:11–13) and customs (i.e., 7:11; 9:15; 13:11–13). As to personal awareness of those to whom he wrote, he knows his readers (13:19, 23), identifies with his readers (2:1, 3; 3:1, 14; 6:4; 10:19–25; etc.), and expresses his disappointments with his readers (5:11–6:4). He asks for prayer (13:18), gives them news of their friend Timothy (13:23), and recalls their "earlier days" in the faith (10:32; cf. 2:3–4). He knows of the persecutions they've endured (10:32; 12:4), of their generosity to fellow believers (6:10; 10:32–34), and of their attitude toward their leaders (13:17). Naturally, this awareness enables the author to encourage them (Heb. 13:22) which in turn appears to fit the description of Barnabas about whom Luke describes as "a good man, full of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 11:24), an apostle (Acts 14:14; 1 Cor. 9:6), and nicknamed "son of encouragement" (Acts 4:36).

Finally, Barnabas *may have been* among those who "heard the message" from the apostles Peter and John (Acts 2:5–11; 4:4). The author of Hebrews tells us: "It (= the gospel) was first communicated through the Lord and was *confirmed to us by those who heard him*" (2:3; NET, emphasis mine). We know that Barnabas was associated with the leaders of the Jerusalem church (Acts 4:36–37; 9:27; 11:27–30). He was part of the group of Hellenistic Jews who sold property and gave the proceeds to the apostles in Jerusalem (Acts 4:36–37). He served as a mediator for Paul before the apostles (Acts 9:27), took Paul with him to Antioch (Acts 11:25–26), and like Paul, persuaded people to believe the message about Jesus (Acts 13:43, 46). Barnabas seems, then, to be an orator of sorts with some rhetorical skills of persuasion. He also witnessed signs and wonders of the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:12; 11:8–11; 14:8–12; 15:12; Heb. 2:3–4).

Admittedly, there is no explicit connection between the description of Barnabas's character in Acts (4:36) and the statement in Hebrews concerning the author's encouraging words (13:22). Furthermore, there is no definitive evidence that distinguishes Barnabas as the *absolute* author of Hebrews. Nevertheless, Barnabas appears to rise above the other options. Yet, Origen's statement is worth repeating: "But who it was that really wrote the epistle, God only knows" (Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 6.14 § 3 [Oulton]).

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