

Was Paul the Author of Hebrews?

James R. Hughes (2021-01-07)

Throughout NT Church history, since the early days when the NT canon was first being received by the Church, there has been debate about who wrote the book of Hebrews. A good summary of the situation is provided by the author (John Owen, Vicar of Thrusington, Leicestershire) of the preface to an English edition, and the translator, of Calvin's commentary on Hebrews:

But with regard to the Author there has been a diversity of opinion, though, when all things are duly weighed, without reason. From the *earliest* times, the Eastern Church acknowledged PAUL as the Author. Some in the Western Church, in the third and the fourth century, did not regard PAUL as the Author, but LUKE, or CLEMENT, or BARNABAS. JEROME and AUGUSTINE in the fifth century, a more enlightened age than the two preceding centuries, ascribed to PAUL the authorship; and since their time the same opinion has prevailed in the Western, as it did from the beginning in the Eastern Church. How to account for a different opinion in the Western Church during the third and the fourth century, is difficult. Some think it was owing to the Novatian Heresy, which some parts of this Epistle were supposed to favour, though without any good reason.

As far then as the testimony of history goes, almost the whole weight of evidence is in favour of PAUL being the Author.

With regard to modern times, the prevailing opinion has been that it is THE EPISTLE OF PAUL. LUTHER, indeed, ascribed it to APOLLOS—a mere conjecture. CALVIN, as we find, supposed that either LUKE or CLEMENT was the author; for which there are no satisfactory reasons. BEZA differed from his illustrious predecessor, and regarded PAUL as the writer; and such has been the opinion entertained by most of the successors of the Reformers, both in this country and on the Continent, as proved by their confessions of Faith.¹

The belief that Paul wrote Hebrews was widely accepted during the 16th and 17th centuries, as can be seen from the inclusion of his name as the author in printed versions of the NT, such as the following:

Tyndale NT (1526)²



¹ Calvin, J., & Owen, J. (2010). [Commentary on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews](#) (p. viii). Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software.

² [1526 Tyndale New Testament](#)

Textus Receptus Stephanus (1550)³

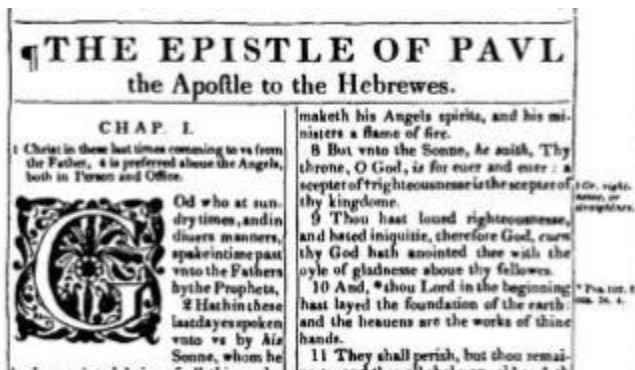
Η ΠΡΟΣ ΕΒΡΑΙΟΥΣ ΕΠΙΣΤΟΛΗ ΠΑΥΛΟΥ

Hebrews 1

ΚΕΦ. Ι

1 Πολυμερῶς καὶ πολυτρόπως πάλαι ὁ θεὸς λαλήσας τοῖς πατέρας ἐν τοῖς προφήταις

KJV (1611)⁴



The Puritan, John Owen, was emphatic in his belief that Paul wrote Hebrews⁵ and provides a thorough analysis of the matter. He argues that:

- None of Luke, Barnabas, Apollos, Clement, or Tertullian could have been the author.
- The arguments against Paul's authorship are insufficient.
- Reasons for why Paul's name is not affixed in an opening salutation are insufficient.
- Peter, writing to Hebrew believers, attests to Paul's authorship of Hebrews (2 Pt 3.15-16).
- The testimony of the early Church substantiates the claim to Pauline authorship of the book.
- There is internal evidence within Hebrews to Paul's authorship of the book.

The following analysis is intended to augment Owen's arguments.

Arguments Against Paul's Authorship Countered

The 18th and 19th century saw the rise of historical scepticism in the West, and it became fashionable to question the authorship of the NT documents—along with questioning much else about the Bible including the historical accuracy of Genesis 1-11 and ascribing miracles such as those performed by Moses, Joshua, or Jesus to natural phenomena or mass hallucination. The most commonly presented arguments used by those who oppose that attribution of Paul as the author of Hebrews are the following:

Missing Opening Salutation

³ [1550 The Greek New Testament Stephanus](#)

⁴ [The Holy Bible, King James Version \(1611 Facsimile\)](#)

⁵ [John Owen: Of the Penman of the Epistle to the Hebrews.](#)

Paul typically introduces himself in his epistles. It is argued therefore that the lack of this typical greeting demonstrates that Hebrews was not written by Paul. However, throughout the Greco-Roman world writers customarily introduced themselves in epistolary correspondence. Hebrews may have been considered by its author to be different from a typical epistle—although the ending does have evident epistolary features—and more like one of the Gospels (Mathew, Mark, and John) which do not have authorship salutations (in contrast to Luke’s which does). Hebrews opens majestically, like the Gospel of John. Introducing a human author’s name before extolling God as the communicator of truth (Heb 1.1-3) would have diminished the glory of God in Jesus Christ and impact of the powerful opening of the book. The missing salutation proves nothing about the author or Hebrews, other than that he was sensitive not to draw attention to himself when his purpose was to extol Jesus Christ as the exalted high priest.

Unique Words Found Only in Hebrews

One person blogging on Zondervan Academic, about the book’s authorship, states:

The **vocabulary** is sophisticated, and it includes 150 words that are not found elsewhere in the New Testament and 10 that do not occur in any other Greek writings that have survived for our study.⁶

Our immediate responses when we see a number like this 150 ‘thrown out’ should be: 1) look for validation (fact check!), and 2) ask, “relative to what?”

Of course, ‘words’ used in the NT includes all the different forms of words (plurals, cases, etc.), including diacritical marks that make the words ‘different’. However, the author of the piece, said ‘words’ and did not specify if ‘lemmas’ or ‘root words’ (which is roughly 5,500^{7,8}) used in the Greek NT was intended. Consider the following data about words⁹ used in the NT text.¹⁰

Book	Words	%	Unique Words	% of Unique Words in NT	% of Book’s Text
Matthew	18,336	13.3%	762	7.8%	4.2%
Mark	11,300	8.2%	510	5.2%	4.5%
Luke	19,470	14.1%	1,297	13.3%	6.7%
John	15,629	11.3%	585	6.0%	3.7%
Acts	18,447	13.4%	1,824	18.7%	9.9%
Romans	7,109	5.2%	560	5.7%	7.9%
1 Corinthians	6,829	5.0%	524	5.4%	7.7%
2 Corinthians	4,477	3.2%	409	4.2%	9.1%
Galatians	2,230	1.6%	182	1.9%	8.2%
Ephesians	2,422	1.8%	164	1.7%	6.8%
Philippians	1,629	1.2%	149	1.5%	9.1%
Colossians	1,581	1.1%	139	1.4%	8.8%
1 Thessalonians	1,481	1.1%	96	1.0%	6.5%

⁶ [Who Wrote the Book of Hebrews? | Zondervan Academic](#)

⁷ *The Lexham Analytical Lexicon to the Greek New Testament*. Logos Bible Software (2011).

⁸ [Strong’s Concordance](#).

⁹ All diacritical and punctuation marks were removed from the text (leaving only Greek letters and spaces between words), and all uppercase letters were converted to lowercase letters, before this analysis was conducted.

¹⁰ Nestle, E., Nestle, E., Aland, B., Aland, K., Karavidopoulos, J., Martini, C. M., & Metzger, B. M. (1993). [The Greek New Testament](#) (27th ed.). Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft.

2 Thessalonians	822	0.6%	48	0.5%	5.8%
1 Timothy	1,590	1.2%	236	2.4%	14.8%
2 Timothy	1,235	0.9%	168	1.7%	13.6%
Titus	659	0.5%	98	1.0%	14.9%
Philemon	324	0.2%	22	0.2%	6.8%
Hebrews	4,953	3.6%	631	6.5%	12.7%
James	1,741	1.3%	215	2.2%	12.3%
1 Peter	1,683	1.2%	255	2.6%	15.2%
2 Peter	1,099	0.8%	171	1.8%	15.6%
1 John	2,141	1.6%	57	0.6%	2.7%
2 John	245	0.2%	10	0.1%	4.1%
3 John	219	0.2%	25	0.3%	11.4%
Jude	461	0.3%	64	0.7%	13.9%
Revelation	9,843	7.1%	556	5.7%	5.6%
	137,955	100.0%	9,757	100.0%	

The results of this analysis indicate that there are far more than 150 unique *words* in Hebrews —i.e., *words* that occur only once in the entire NT text. There are 631.

The data do show that Hebrews contains a higher percentage of the NT’s unique words (6.5%) relative to its proportion of the total words in the NT (3.6%). However, this is to be expected, not necessarily because of a more complex vocabulary, but because of its introduction of a topic (the priesthood of Jesus and his replacement of the OT sacrificial system) that is not addressed in detail in the rest of the NT and its extensive use of quotations from the OT. However, other books of the NT show higher proportional differences—for example, 1 Timothy and 2 Timothy together contain about 2% of the words in the NT, but about 4% of the unique words. Another consideration is that Hebrews contains a lower percentage of unique words (12.7%) relative to the number of words in the text, than other books such as Paul’s epistles to Timothy (14.8% and 13.6%) and Titus (14.9%) and both of Peter’s epistles (15.2% and 15.6%). Also, the percentage of unique words in Hebrews, relative to the total number of words in the text, is higher than in either of Luke’s writings (Luke and Acts), even though Luke included words not found elsewhere, such as historical references and nautical terms. [As an aside, John’s writings, with the exception of 3 John, are among the books with the lowest percentages of unique words, as we might expect since it is often noted that his vocabulary is simple.]

Mapping the 631 unique words against the Logos Bible Software’s *The Lexham Analytical Lexicon to the Greek New Testament*, indicates that there are 124 word roots used in Hebrews which occur uniquely (one time) and are not variants (e.g., cases, tenses, moods, voices, etc.). One example is $\gamma\nu\omicron\phi\omicron\varsigma$ (“darkness”) which occurs about a dozen times in the LXX, but only once in Hebrews (Heb 12.18). However, reporting an absolute number of unique roots provides little useful information. The number must be considered in relative terms. These 124 roots account for 7.1% of all the unique roots used in the NT and 2.5% of the text of the book of Hebrews. In comparison, Luke’s Gospel and Acts have a higher percentage of the unique roots (11.4% and 18.2% respectively) in the NT, as does Revelation (7.9%). In the case of Acts and Revelation the higher percentage of unique roots can probably be attributed to the subject matter under consideration in those books. Also, in other books (2 Timothy, Titus, James, and 3 John) the percentage of their text made of up of words based on unique roots is higher than in Hebrews; and Philippians and 1 Peter are close in terms of the percentage of their text containing unique roots.

Book	Unique Roots	% Unique Roots in NT	% of Book's Text
Matthew	120	6.9%	0.7%
Mark	73	4.2%	0.6%
Luke	198	11.4%	1.0%
John	104	6.0%	0.7%
Acts	316	18.2%	1.7%
Romans	113	6.5%	1.6%
1 Corinthians	108	6.2%	1.6%
2 Corinthians	73	4.2%	1.6%
Galatians	24	1.4%	1.1%
Ephesians	33	1.9%	1.4%
Philippians	39	2.2%	2.4%
Colossians	24	1.4%	1.5%
1 Thessalonians	17	1.0%	1.1%
2 Thessalonians	9	0.5%	1.1%
1 Timothy	31	1.8%	1.9%
2 Timothy	36	2.1%	2.9%
Titus	18	1.0%	2.7%
Philemon	4	0.2%	1.2%
Hebrews	124	7.1%	2.5%
James	51	2.9%	2.9%
1 Peter	41	2.4%	2.4%
2 Peter	22	1.3%	2.0%
1 John	6	0.3%	0.3%
2 John	2	0.1%	0.8%
3 John	6	0.3%	2.7%
Jude	11	0.6%	2.4%
Revelation	138	7.9%	1.4%
	1,741	100.0%	

The claim that the number of unique words or roots found only in Hebrews indicates that Paul was not the author of Hebrews has no basis in fact.

Rhetorical Quality and Style

It is argued that because the rhetorical quality of Hebrews and its style differ markedly from Paul's epistles, this indicates that Paul did not write Hebrews. However, Hebrews is not primarily an epistle to known friends and associates. It is more of an apologetic for Christ's priestly office. Therefore, we would expect it to have a different style. As a personal example, I have written commentaries on Bible books, meditations, sermon notes, an historical adventure romance novel, computer software specifications, technical and application user manuals, technology articles and blogs, and personal letters. Each of these genera of writings have their unique styles, although coming from one author. The idea that all of Paul's writings must have followed a single style is unsustainable.

In addition, the argument that Paul states to the Corinthians that he would not use fancy rhetorical techniques with them (1 Cor 1.17; 2 Cor 2.1) does not validate the claim that he was not the author of Hebrews. Paul was a gifted communicator and knew how to address his audiences with different styles and techniques—consider, for example his sermon to the Athenians in Acts 17, the logically organized book of Romans, his rebuke of the Galatians, his fatherly advice to Timothy, and his passionate appeal to Philemon.

There is no other Christian writer from the 1st century, whose work is extant, who comes close to having the skills and knowledge of Paul as a writer and rhetorician.

Source for OT Quotations

It has been argued by some that when Paul quotes from the OT in his epistles he translates or paraphrases the Masoretic text (OT Hebrew). But the author of Hebrews quotes from the Septuagint (Greek translation of the OT). Thus, it is claimed that the author of Hebrews was a different person. We will not consider the historical anachronism of such a claim—the Masoretic text was produced about seven centuries after the NT was written, by Jews working toward production of a standard Hebrew text. Rather, we challenge the claim that Paul didn't use the Septuagint in his epistles, since there is clear evidence that he did (see for example, Rom 3.12-18; Rom 9.17, 25, 27, 29, 33; Rom 10.11, 18, 20, 21; 1 Cor 1.19; 1 Cor 15.55; among others).

Hebrews 2.3

The author of the previously mentioned blog on Zondervan Academic, states:

An even more persuasive argument that the apostle Paul was not the author of Hebrews is the way the author alludes to himself in Hebrews 2:3, stating that the gospel was confirmed “to us” by those who heard the Lord announce salvation.

It has been argued, based on Hebrews 2.3, that the author of Hebrews could not have received revelation directly from the Lord, as Paul states he did (Gal 1.11-12), and at the same time have had it “attested to us by those who heard” (Heb 2.3). This is a spurious argument. Paul was taught by the Lord and was also a witness to the resurrected Jesus (1 Cor 15.8). Yet, he appeals to eyewitness of the resurrection to further substantiate his teaching and argument (1 Cor 15.5-7). If Paul was the author of Hebrews, he is not contradicting himself, nor is he speaking of his initial conversion experience (i.e., attributing it to a mere human messenger) in Hebrews 2.3, but adding apostolic witness and weight to his arguments.

Parallels between Hebrews and Paul's Epistles

1. Heb 1.3: “He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power.” expresses the same idea as what Paul writes in Colossians, “He is the image of the invisible God ... and in him all things hold together.” (Col 1.15, 17).
2. Heb 1.3, 13; Heb 8.1; Heb 10.12; Heb 12.2: “sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high” is a concept that Paul expresses more than once (Rom 8.34; Eph 1.20; Col 3.1). Only Peter (1 Pt 3.22; see also, Acts 5.31) among the other NT epistle writers also mentions the concept—although Psalm 110.1 is quoted by Jesus and reported in the Synoptic Gospels (Mt 22.44; Mk 12.36; Lk 20.42-43; see also, Lk 22.69)
3. Heb 2.4: “distributed according to his will” is a parallel thought to “apportions to each one individually as he wills” (1 Cor 12.11).
4. Heb 6.12: The word “imitators” (μιμηταὶ) is a Pauline term. Paul uses the word five times (1 Cor 4.16; 1 Cor 11.1; Eph 5.1; 1 Thess 1.6; 1 Thess 2.14) in his epistles. He also uses ‘imitate’ (μιμεῖσθαι) in 2

Thess 3.7, 9, which also occurs in Heb 13.7 (as μιμῆσθε). No other NT writer uses this word, except for John, in 3 Jn 11.

5. Heb 10.30: “vengeance is mine” from Deuteronomy 32.35, is only quoted elsewhere in the NT, by Paul in Romans 12.19.
6. Heb 10.38: The quotation is from Habakkuk 2.4. Paul is the only NT writer who uses this reference (Rom 1.17; Gal 3.11) and is the apostle who most strongly emphasized justification by faith. Romans emphasizes ‘the just’, Galatians focuses on ‘shall live’, and Hebrews pivots on ‘by faith’.
7. Heb 12.1: The word “run” (τρέχωμεν) is only used by Paul (Rom 9.16; 1 Cor 9.24-26; Gal 2.2; Gal 5.7; 2 Thess 3.1) with reference to the Christian life. Paul alone in the NT, uses athletic imagery, likely inspired by his time in Corinth, which hosted the bi-annual Isthmian Games. It is used once by John in a different context (Rev 9.9).
8. Heb 13.3: The writer of Hebrews asks his readers to remember Christians in prison (see also, Heb 10.34), and appears to have been in prison when this letter was written (Heb 13.18). The only writers of NT epistles who mention imprisonment are Paul (Eph 3.1; Eph 4.1; 2 Tim 1.8; Philem 1, 9) and John (Rev 2.10). Paul was imprisoned a few times (Acts 16.25-34; Acts 23.18; Acts 25.14, 27; Acts 28.17) for the cause Christ and knew intimately what imprisonment meant: loneliness, hunger, and cold (2 Cor 6.5; 2 Cor 11.23).
9. Heb 13.5: ‘not a money lover’ (Ἀφιλάργυρος). Only Paul uses this word (1 Tim 3.3; ἀφιλάργυρον). He also uses the positive form of the base word (φιλαργυρία) as being a root of all kinds of evil (1 Tim 6.10).
10. Heb 13.15: “[P]raise to God, that is, the fruit of lips.” Paul speaks of how praise in the church on earth should be offered to God (1 Cor 14.26; Eph 5.19; Col 3.16). Luke mentions Paul’s singing Psalms (Acts 16.25). The only other NT writer to mention praise in song is James (James 5.13; which should be translated as “let him sing a *psalm*”).
11. Heb 13.18: “Pray for us” (Προσεύχεσθε περὶ ἡμῶν). Paul alone among NT writers uses this expression (Col 4.3; 1 Thess 5.25; 2 Thess 3.1).
12. Heb 13.18: “clear conscience”. Paul alone among NT writers speaks of his own conscience being clear (Acts 23.1; Acts 24.16; Rom 9.1; 2 Cor 1.12; 1 Tim 1.5; 2 Tim 1.3).
13. Heb 13.19, 22: “I appeal to (urge) you.” Paul alone among NT writers uses this expression (Rom 12.1; Rom 15.30; Rom 16.17; 1 Cor 1.10; 2 Cor 6.1; Philem 9, 10).
14. Heb 13.22: Timothy worked with Paul. There is no indication that he worked with any other evangelist.
15. Heb 13.25: “Grace be with you.” Paul closes many of his epistles with ‘grace’ (1 Cor 16.23; 2 Cor 13.14; Gal 6.18; Eph 6.24; Phil. 4.23; Col 4.18; 1 Thess 5.28; 2 Thess 3.18; 1 Tim 6.21; 2 Tim 4.22; Titus 3.15; Philem 25). Peter does once (2 Pt 3.18). Paul was the apostle of grace (Eph 2.5, 8).

Conclusion

The arguments against Paul’s authorship of Hebrews are weak. Claims that someone other than Paul was the author are mere speculation. The internal evidence within the book itself supports Paul’s authorship. The weight of historical evidence supports the claim, namely the Church’s acceptance, until recently, of Paul’s authorship of the book. Thus, we can conclude that Paul wrote the book of Hebrews.