

Hebrews Class

Introductory Material

October 1, 2007

Author, Audience and Date of Composition

Simply put, we do not know who wrote this book called “Hebrews.” Nowhere within the letter is there an indication of who wrote it, as there is with the letters from Paul. Some in the Ancient church thought it was written by the apostle Paul, but in the other Pauline letters, the apostle gives personal greetings, making sure that folks know the letter is from him. Some ancient church fathers, such as Origen, doubted that Paul himself wrote the letter, though Origen thought that a disciple of Paul’s may have been the author. Tertullian thought that Barnabas, who accompanied Paul on some of his missionary travels may have written Hebrews. Martin Luther did not think it was from Paul, especially due to the verses in chapter six that say “it is impossible to restore to repentance those who have once been enlightened...and have fallen away.” For Paul and Luther, this sentence would have negated the grace of God, and for this reason Luther argued that Hebrews was one of the lesser books of the New Testament (more on those verses when we study chapter 6.) But the author of Hebrews was concerned about those who were falling away. He (or she) was clearly of the second generation of Christians, those who had believed in Christ and awaited the second coming, and who were becoming discouraged as Christ had not returned and the church faced prosecution. This means the letter was written no earlier than about A.D. 60. However, the letter was certainly in written form by the 90s when Clement quoted from it in some of his writings (though some scholars believe Clement wrote this letter and was merely citing his own work). The best guess for date of composition is sometime between A.D. 60 and 90.

The letter was called “the Letter to the Hebrews” because of the heavy emphasis on Israelite cultic practice as a key to understanding the person and work of Jesus Christ. However, instead of relying on the scriptures in Hebrew, the author relies on the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Old Testament. A faithful Jew would have known Hebrew and may not have used the Septuagint as the preferred translation when writing to Hebrew people. And while the opening of the book refers to “our ancestors,” Christians of the second generation saw themselves as the true descendants of Abraham (following the teaching of Jesus in the gospel of John, and of Paul in Galatians). So the book may have been written to Gentile, rather than Jewish Christians. One thing is sure – the author relies heavily on the Old Testament and all who read and understand the Old Testament as the word of God can benefit from a study of the book of Hebrews.

Outline and Themes

The book of Hebrews is in roughly three sections. The first is from chapters 1-4 and deals with Jesus as being greater than Moses or the angels. The second from chapters 5-10, develops the image of Christ as our great high priest and mediator of the new covenant. Chapters 11-13 are an exhortation to hold fast to, and live by, faith.