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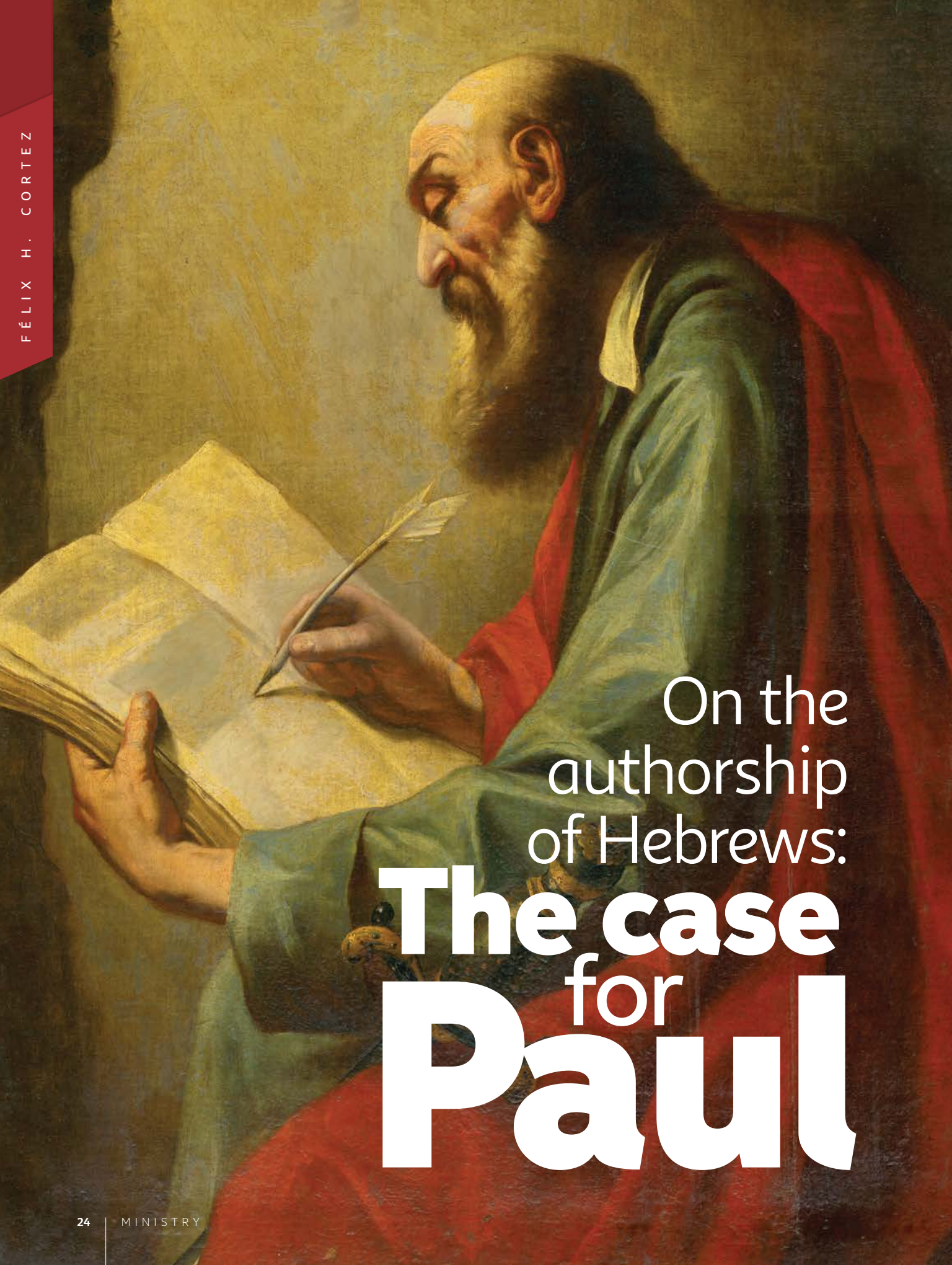


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On the
authorship
of Hebrews:
**The case
for
Paul**

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SCAN FOR AUDIO

The authorship of the book of Hebrews can be a sensitive issue.¹ The New Testament places Hebrews among the letters of Paul, but Hebrews itself does not identify the author; most scholars think it was someone close to him but not Paul himself.

Three scholarly positions regarding the authorship of Hebrews exist. One is that Paul could not have been the author. A second asserts that we do not know the author. The third, similar to the second, says that though we do not know who wrote it, Paul is, nevertheless, most likely the author. This article provides biblical and historical evidence for the second and third positions.

The case against Paul

Most scholars believe that the book of Hebrews had long circulated independently before being accepted into the New Testament (NT) canon, and it was accepted “only through the fiction” that Paul had written it.² There are several reasons for this position. First, why did Paul not claim authorship as he did in every letter he wrote? The anonymity of the document does not seem accidental. The first sentence of Hebrews (Heb. 1:1–4), where Paul would normally identify himself, is so beautiful and balanced from the perspective of its Greek construction that the author spent considerable time and effort writing it. Certainly Paul, if he had wanted to, could have named himself as the author.

Second, early on, there were doubts about the authorship of Hebrews. In the first half of the second century AD, Marcion rejected the book of Hebrews. It is reported that Irenaeus, later in the century, rejected the Pauline authorship. The Muratorian Fragment, a list of New Testament books likely created toward the end of the second century AD, did not include Hebrews. Around the beginning of the third century AD, Tertullian attributed Hebrews to Barnabas. Also in that same century, Gaius of Rome, Hippolytus, and the Arians rejected the Pauline authorship of Hebrews. The perception in antiquity was that the churches of the East apparently accepted

the Pauline authorship of Hebrews, a position rejected by churches in the West.³

Third, church scholars early recognized differences in style between Hebrews and the letters of Paul. Clement of Alexandria, around the beginning of the third century, suggested that Paul had written Hebrews originally in Hebrew and that Luke had translated it into Greek. Origen suggested that Paul probably was the author of the ideas but that another person had taken notes and published them. Only God, he concluded, knew.

Fourth, and importantly, some argue that Paul could not be the author because the author includes himself among those to whom the gospel had been confirmed, having heard it from those who had heard Jesus in person (Heb. 2:3). Paul, however, argued in Galatians that he had not received the gospel from anybody but directly from God instead (Gal. 1:11, 12).

Finally, there are important theological differences between the letters of Paul and the book of Hebrews. One example is that no letter of Paul refers to Jesus as High Priest, an idea central to the argument of Hebrews.

For these basic reasons, most scholars today reject the idea that Paul wrote Hebrews.⁴

The case for Paul

These arguments, however convincing they might sound on the surface, are not really very strong.

First, Hebrews does not identify the author, as Paul’s others letters do, because the book most likely is *not a letter*. Hebrews identifies itself as a “word of exhortation” (Heb. 13:22), an expression that—both in the synagogue and in the church—referred to sermons.⁵ Hebrews is, therefore, probably a homily intended for a specific congregation to which a postscript was added, and then, it was sent as a letter. Hebrews is anonymous to us but not to the original audience. The author requests them to pray for him so that he may be restored to them sooner (vv. 18, 19), which indicates they knew who was writing to them.

Furthermore, though rejecting the authorship of Paul for other reasons, Harold Attridge has identified 33 parallels between the postscript of Hebrews 13:20–25 and the letters of Paul—several very striking.⁶ For example, the expression “God of peace” (v. 20) is found in Romans 15:33; 16:20; 2 Corinthians 13:11; Philippians 4:9; and 1 Thessalonians 5:23 but does not appear in any other New Testament epistolary postscript. The expression “from the dead” (*ek nekron*, Heb. 13:20) appears 17 times in Paul’s letters but only two times elsewhere among the NT epistles. Finally, the author refers to a Timothy, who must have been known both by the author and the audience (v. 23). The only Timothy known in early Christian sources was the companion of Paul. Thus, unless this document were a forgery, the original audience should not have had any problem identifying the author.

Second although some doubts about the authorship of Hebrews began early, the evidence of the authoritative reception of Hebrews and its identification with Paul are also very early. Beginning with the most ancient manuscripts, Hebrews always appears as part of the Pauline collection. In fact, among his earliest manuscripts, only Romans is better attested to than is Hebrews. Similarly, Hebrews carried a title from the earliest extant manuscripts (“to the Hebrews”) that is similar to the title of the letters of Paul and different from the titles of the Catholic Epistles.

Hebrews was accepted very early as authoritative. First Clement, the oldest extant work of early Christian literature, composed around AD 96, alludes to Hebrews (1 Clem. 36:1–5) and other writings of Paul (e.g., 1 Clem. 35:5, 6), holding them in high esteem, even though, with one exception, he does not identify any author in those references.⁷ The Shepherd of Hermas, produced in Rome in the second century AD, was believed to have been trying to answer questions raised by Hebrews 6:4–8 and 10:26–31. The position that claims a wholesale rejection of Hebrews in the West is, really, overstated. By the end of the fourth century, Ambrose, Pelagius, and Rufinus, all in the West, had attributed Hebrews to Paul; 10 other Christian writers in the



West cite or allude to Hebrews as authoritative, even without mentioning authorship.⁸

Closer scrutiny shows that rejection of the Pauline authorship of Hebrews is less significant than often depicted. Marcion, who rejected Hebrews, also rejected the God of the Old Testament (OT) as well as all of the OT. He probably rejected Hebrews because of its abundant use of the OT. He also rejected most of the NT. The view that Irenaeus and Hippolytus rejected the Pauline authorship of Hebrews came from a comment made by Gobarus more than 300 years later than their time (ca. AD 600), according to the report made by Photius in AD 800! The Muratorian Fragment did not include Hebrews among the letters of Paul, but it did not reject Hebrews as it did “The Epistle to the Laodiceans” and “The Epistle to the Alexandrians,” which were forged in the name of Paul. Tertullian said that Barnabas wrote Hebrews but thought Barnabas was communicating the ideas of Paul. Gaius of Rome rejected the Pauline authorship of Hebrews but also thought that the Gospel of John and the book of Revelation had been written by Cerinthus, the gnostic heretic. The Arians, meanwhile, probably rejected the Pauline authorship of Hebrews because of its high Christology.

Third, matters of style and vocabulary are unreliable in determining whether Paul wrote Hebrews. We do not have a clear style to compare with Hebrews. Eight of Paul’s letters mention coauthors alongside Paul.⁹ These coauthors must have had at least some influence on the contents and style of each letter. Paul also used secretaries (e.g., Rom. 16:22), who probably impacted the style of his letters. E. Randolph Richards has shown that secretaries often functioned as editors—in rare cases, even as coauthors.¹⁰ Finally, the rhetorical ideal in the Hellenistic world was *prosōpopoiia*, meaning “to write in character.” In other words, writers were expected to write in different styles according to what the situation required.¹¹ Thus, it was expected that not all letters of Paul would have the same style.

Fourth, the fact that the author includes himself among those to whom the gospel was confirmed by those who heard Jesus (Heb. 2:3) does not disqualify Paul. The argument of the passage is

not that the author and the audience “received” (*parelabon*) or were “taught” (*edidachthēn*) the gospel by the apostles but that the gospel was “confirmed” (*ebebaiōthē*) to them by the apostles—those who heard Jesus (Heb. 2:3). Paul acknowledged that he received the gospel from God through revelation (Gal. 1:11, 12), and 14 years later, he sought confirmation from the apostles about the gospel he preached (Gal. 2:1, 2).

Fifth, despite differences in the theological emphasis between Hebrews and Paul’s other letters, there is no contradiction. In fact, a difference in theological emphasis should be expected. Paul’s letters were written to address specific concerns. Also, there are unique similarities between Hebrews and Paul’s other writings. For example, Hebrews 10:16 quotes Jeremiah 31:31–33 but abbreviates the formulation “‘with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah’” (NKJV) to “with them.” Romans 11:27 has the same abbreviated formula. The quotation of Habakkuk 2:4 in Hebrews 10:37, 38 differs from the wording of both the Hebrew and the Greek texts (LXX) but is similar to Paul’s quotation of Habakkuk 2:4 in Romans 1:17. Paul plays with the dual meanings of the Greek word *diathēkē* (“testament” and “covenant”) in Galatians 3:15–18 in the same way that Hebrews 9:15–18 does.

Finally, the view that Hebrews circulated independently for a long time before being accepted into the NT canon and was accepted only “through the fiction” that Paul had written it is unlikely for several reasons. First, there is no manuscript evidence that Hebrews ever circulated alone. Second, considering that Hebrews does not claim to be written by Paul and is different in style and theological emphasis from his other writings, on what basis should Hebrews have been included in the collection of Paul’s writings? Paul himself warned his readers against receiving letters “seeming to be” from him but were not (2 Thess. 2:1–3, ESV). This is why he signed his letters. Hebrews and Paul’s other 13 letters had postscripts, which functioned as signatures (2 Thess. 3:17, 18).¹²

Another obstacle to including Hebrews among the Pauline Epistles is that Hebrews was written to Jewish Christians; Paul, however, was the apostle to the Gentiles (Gal. 2:6–9; Eph. 3:1–10). If very early on it was believed that the epistle was not written by Paul, why was the book of Hebrews not included among the Catholic, or General, Epistles, which were written by apostles sent to the Jews (Gal. 2:6–9)? Third, the practice among ancient writers was to keep copies of the letters they sent

to other people.¹³ This would explain why Hebrews is part of the collection of Paul’s letters, which he kept for himself, despite its anonymity and other differences from the rest of his letters.

Conclusion

In summary, biblical and historical evidence supports the idea that Paul could have written Hebrews. Thus, the position that he *did* write it is based on very solid grounds.



- 1 A version of this article was first published February 9, 2022 on spectrummagazine.org.
- 2 Charles P. Anderson’s summary in “The Epistle to the Hebrews and the Pauline Letter Collection,” *Harvard Theological Review* 59 (1966): 429, is still the current view.
- 3 For example, Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 3.3 (*The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers [NPNF]*, 2nd ed., 1:134, 135); 6.20 (268); Augustine, *De peccatorum meritis et remissione* 1.50 (*NPNF*, 1st ed. 5:34); Jerome, *Epistulae* 129.3.
- 4 Clare K. Rothschild, *Hebrews as Pseudepigraphon: The History and Significance of the Pauline Attribution of Hebrews*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 235 (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 6.
- 5 Acts 13:15; 1 Timothy 4:13. See also 1 Maccabees 10:24, 46 and 2 Maccabees 15:8–11.
- 6 Harold W. Attridge, *Hebrews*, Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1981), 404, 405.
- 7 Clement alludes to Romans, Galatians, Philippians, and Ephesians, but only when referring to Corinth, toward the end of the letter, does he refer to Paul as the author (1 Clem. 47). See Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon, 1987), 40–43.
- 8 First Clement, probably Shepherd of Hermas, Polycarp, Justin Martyr, Epiphanius, Hilary of Poitiers, Victorinus, Lucifer of Cagliari, Faustinus, and Gregory of Elvira. See Rothschild, *Hebrews as a Pseudepigraphon*, 31; Attridge, *Hebrews*, 2. For a comprehensive survey of witnesses to the Pauline authorship of Hebrews in the church fathers, see Otto Michel, *Der Brief und die Hebräer*, Kritisch-exegetischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament (Meyer-Kommentar) 13 (Göttingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966), 38, 39.
- 9 First Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, and Philemon. See E. Randolph Richards, *Paul and First-Century Letter Writing: Secretaries, Composition, and Collection* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 141–155.
- 10 Richards, 33–36.
- 11 See Luke Timothy Johnson, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy: A New Translation With Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 35A (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 60.
- 12 For an introduction to the different ways Greco-Roman letters were signed, see Richards, *First-Century Letter Writing*, 171–175.
- 13 Richards, 156–165; Rothschild, *Hebrews as Pseudepigraphon*, 148, 149. For example, Cicero’s collection of letters published after his death was produced from Cicero’s own copies kept by Tiro, Cicero’s secretary; see Cicero, *Epistulae ad Atticum* 13.6.3.

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