“The Author and Audience of the Epistle to the Hebrews”

I. Introduction

The epistle to the Hebrews has often been a source of mystery and disagreement in regards to authorship and intended audience. Since the first days of circulation, author and audience have been disputed, but early church father Jerome succinctly states the value and validity of Hebrews in AD 414, when he says that the epistle is, “the work of a church-writer and is constantly read in the Churches.” Therefore, even though speculations have been broad and contested there has always been general acceptance that Hebrews is an inspired work of God and useful for training and edifying the saints. Though no one can identify the original author and readers with full certainty it is possible to rule out candidates, establish needed criteria for candidacy, and make educated recommendations for authorship and destination. We shall consider the possibilities for audience and author followed by recommendations based on the internal and external evidence of the epistle.

II. Audience and Destination

Hypotheses of the intended destination vary between scholars and church historians, but the one point that gets the most common agreement is that the book of Hebrews was written to a specific group of Christians. This is derived from the familiar tone of the book and such personal notes as Hebrews 13:24 indicating that the author was well acquainted with the readers. Louis H. Evans, Jr states in his commentary three possible audiences: Gentile Christians, Jewish Christians living in Israel, and Jewish Christians of the Diaspora (Hellenistic Jews). We shall now treat these three options and the possible geographical destination.

a. Gentiles

The view holding to a gentile audience for the epistle to the Hebrews is a relatively new position held by many liberal scholars and also popular amongst some conservatives. Geerhardus Vos, in his treatment of Hebrews, defends the position of a gentile audience based on internal evidence with particular emphasis given to the interpretation of Hebrews 6:1 and Hebrews 13:9-13. Vos begins his argument by stating the obvious fact that the epistle was written in Greek and not Hebrew or Aramaic—the native tongue of Hebraic Jews. Additionally the Old Testament citations throughout the epistle are clearly taken from the Septuagint and not the Hebrew Old Testament. An argument used to promote a Jewish Christian audience is the usage of “the people of God” in addressing the readers. Vos is quick to point out that this is not conclusive evidence and likely a universal term used in writing to the church.

One of the main themes running throughout Hebrews in a warning against apostasy and not forsaking God. Evans in his commentary on Hebrews points out that apostasy to Judaism is never specifically mentioned and thus raises questions if the audience was Jewish. He also mentions that gentile use of the Old Testament was normal and therefore one should not jump to the conclusion that the audience was Jewish based on the regular referencing of Old Testament texts. Vos also mentions the use of the Old Testament in favoring a non-Jewish audience because the author never calls readers to move away from the old covenant and a greater commitment to the new (as would be called for in a Jewish
context) but only references the superiority of the New Testament. In agreement with Evans, Vos says they are not warned of the “folly” of falling back into Judaism and compliance to the Old Testament.

The two strongest defenses for a gentile destination perhaps come from the interpretations of Hebrews 6:1 and Hebrews 13:9-13. Hebrews 6:1 speaks of leaving elementary doctrines, going on to maturity, repenting of dead works, and putting faith in God. The “elementary doctrines” mentioned in verse one would have arguably been intended for a gentile readers since they would not have had the privilege of being trained in these doctrines as a Jewish person would have under the teachings of the Old Testament. Additionally Vos argues that the “dead works” in verse one are not in reference to works of the Law but rather works that are not worship of the true God. Again this interpretation on Hebrews 6:1 would then lend itself to favoring a gentile destination rather than a Jewish destination.

When Hebrews 13:9 mentions that it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace rather than by foods (or meats), one can interpret that to mean sacrificial meals. If properly read as meaning sacrificial meals then a Jewish audience is favored. But the Greek word for “foods” or “meats” is broomata which is not used in the Septuagint in reference to sacrifices but in reference to cleanliness. This then disarms an argument from internal evidence which would have supported a Jewish audience.

Though Vos and others highlight some points that support a gentile audience there is also much evidence found in the epistle to suggest otherwise. For instance, the author’s usage of the Psalter in chapter one indicates that the author is writing to a group familiar with the Psalms and who have report with the Psalms. Likewise the author makes Moses a central figure of the book of Hebrews and even references him as a priest. Such emphasis on Moses and priesthood would have only been of interest to a predominantly Jewish audience. Specifically there is also reference to angels in Hebrews 2:2 as the mediator of the old covenant—another element of the Old Testament that would have been wasted on a gentile audience. In fact the prominence of prophets, priests, patriarchs, angels, and rituals in Hebrews would have all been foreign to gentiles. It has been said that the “whole ethos” of the book of Hebrews is written to the Jewish mind and committed to proving the superiority of Jesus over Judaism. John MacArthur perhaps makes the clearest observation to why a gentile audience cannot be possible. He points out that at no time during the epistle does the author reference gentiles, thus making it unlikely that gentiles are the intended readers.

b. Israelite Jews

Among options for the destination and audience of the epistle to the Hebrews is Israel. Israel, Jerusalem in particular, seems to be an obvious candidate due to the epistles strong emphasis on the Old Testament themes such as priests, rituals, and sacrifices. With such traditional Jewish overtones the holy city of Jerusalem seems to be a natural fit for destination. The position of an Israelite destination is further bolstered if one adopts a pre-AD 70 writing of Hebrews. If written before AD 70 the temple would have been standing and converts from the Qumran sect (sect of the Jewish priesthood) may have been a natural audience. With great interest in ritual details and a high
understanding of the Old Testament those converted from the Jewish priesthood make a likely target for the author.

Although there seems to be a natural fit when considering Israel as a destination there turns out to be very little evidence supporting this view. For instance a late-dating of Hebrews (circa AD 90) is most likely and thus makes Jerusalem and the Qumran sect an impossible destination. Sufficient internal evidence suggests that an Israelite audience is unlikely as well. For instance the language of the epistle is Greek but the most natural language to write Hebraic Jews residing in Jerusalem would have been Aramaic. Further, Hebrews 2:3 indicates that the readers are all second generation believers and this would not have been true for those living in Jerusalem. There likely would have been several people still in the church that would have crossed paths with Jesus’ ministry. Additionally Hebrews 6:10 commends the readers for their generosity shown to the saints. Generosity and abundance were not the mark of the Jerusalem church for they were an extremely impoverished group of believers without the ability to minister to other churches. Lastly the author, amongst many references to rituals, never mentions the Temple and its role in worship. This would be highly unlikely if the destination was Jerusalem.

c. Hellenistic Jews

The view that the original recipients were Hellenistic Jews receives the most support amongst scholars throughout all ages. Defense for a Hellenistic Jewish audience begins with the title of the epistle: Hebrews. This title obviously has Jews in mind and if one believes Jerusalem is not the destination the logical conclusion then is that the epistle is generally written to Hellenist. It is also natural to assume the readers are Jewish based on the background knowledge of the Old Testament required to follow the author’s argument throughout the epistle. F.F. Bruce points out in his commentary that the readers must not have been Jews from Israel but from the dispersion because their presupposed knowledge of Levitical rituals was not learned first hand at the temple in Jerusalem but from the scriptures. Lane in his commentary also points out that the Old Testament references used by the author are from the Greek translation of the Old Testament and not take from the Hebrew text. The Septuagint was used as the standard Old Testament scriptures for Hellenistic Jews therefore the Jewish audience with all likelihood must have been Hellenistic.

Internal evidence from the epistle itself strongly supports a Hellenistic destination. Two particular passages provide evidence that the original readers were Hellenistic Jews: Hebrews 2:3 and 13:24. Hebrews 2:3 attests to the fact that the readers were not first hand recipients of the gospel but they received the good news second hand, by way sound preaching. If they are all supposed to be second generation then the destination could not have been Jerusalem because first generation believers lived there, thus the letter was meant for Jews outside of Palestine. Likewise, Hebrews 13:24 provides a personal note indicating that the original readers were not Jews in Palestine but rather Jews likely living in Rome, Italy. In the salutation the author passes greetings on to the audience from those who come from Italy thus indicating the original destination was somewhere in Italy.

Arguments against a Hellenistic Jewish destination are generally few and objectors primarily focus on arguing that the audience was made up of gentiles rather than Jews. The arguments for a gentile
audience against a Jewish audience can be found in the previously treatment of this argument in section II. sub-point a.

d. Destination Considerations

Proposed geographic destinations for the epistle include Asia Minor, Antioch, Alexandria, Palestine, and Rome with the final three receiving the most support. William Barclay also adds that there are certain characteristics of the destination of which we can be certain. He lists that the destination cannot be one of the great churches of the first century, it must be a long established church (5:12) that suffered persecution of some sort (10:32-34), it must a church with tremendous leadership (13:7), and it must have been prosperous (6:10).

Proponents of Alexandria favor this destination because during the late first century many Jews lived in Alexandria. Additionally it is believed that the author himself writes with an Alexandrian style that suggests he writes to those he is familiar with. Though this destination garners some favor it does not gain much attention due to the fact that none of the early church historians or scholars considered Alexandria to be the location.

Previously we discussed Israel as a potential destination for the letter but since the letter is likely meant for Hellenistic Jews this position is weakened. The church in Jerusalem was very needy, not generous as Hebrews 6:10 suggests. Additionally the lack of temple references paired with a likely late-dating of the epistle leaves Palestine as an unlikely candidate.

Finally the destination that gets the most support is that of Rome. Rome is a likely candidate because it meets all the criteria listed above by Barclay and additionally boasts other strong pieces of evidence. A Roman destination is supported by the fact that there was a strong Jewish presence in the churches of Rome and they indeed suffered persecution. Additionally there were several small house churches throughout the city of Rome that were lead by strong leaders such as Aquila and Priscilla. Roman Christians received the gospel second hand by way of Paul’s letters and thus meets the criteria of Hebrews 2:3. A Roman audience also seems to perfectly fit the likely interpretation of Hebrews 13:24 meaning “from Italy” (see II. c.). Lastly, Rome seems to be the likely destination of Hebrews because it is in Rome the Clement of Rome first quotes the epistle in his own church writings. It is most likely the first person to quote the epistle would have been one hailing from the destination city where the letter was sure to have been circulated. Rome as a destination is weakened by two arguments: First, if one interprets Hebrews 13:24 as “those in Italy” then Alexandria and Palestine both become a potential destinations. Secondly, if one finds that the epistle to the Hebrews was intended for gentiles then places like Asia Minor become a possibility.

III. Author

Like the audience of Hebrews the author is also unknown. Due to the lack of historical knowledge and consistent tradition of authorship it is impossible to identify the author with absolute certainty. What can be determined from the epistle are the characteristics of the author that might lead us to a likely candidate. Though several people have been recommended as the potential author of Hebrews we will consider the four most popular nominees for authorship.
a. Priscilla and Aquila

One potential source of the epistle that has been held forth most recently and gained attention is Priscilla, along with her husband Aquila. There is merit for the Priscilla and Aquila possessing the ability and skill of teaching for authorship since we know that they taught the young Apollos in Acts 18:26. A team of authors also gains some favor in explaining the back and forth usage of “we” and “I” in the letter. The internal evidence from Hebrews (13:23) requires that the author(s) to have known Timothy, which they did. They also hosted a house church in Rome that would be very similar to the destination of this epistle. Finally Adolph von Harnack, the German scholar suggests that the letter remains unknown because Priscilla was the author and female authorship was not championed by the early church.

With many points of support for Priscilla and Aquila the epistles source there is some damaging internal evidence for this position. Many scholars point out that in the original Greek language of Hebrews 11:32 the writer uses a participle with a masculine ending to refer to himself. Therefore Priscilla cannot be a likely candidate for authorship. Additionally the reference to self by the author is singular therefore ruling out a combination of authors.

b. Paul

During the first four centuries of the early church Pauline authorship gained the most support and still remains the author of choice for many. The strongest defense for Pauline authorship is perhaps that the early church credited Paul as the author. Support for Paul always existed in the Eastern Church, especially in Alexandria. By the fourth century the Western Church adopted the Pauline position formally and stood behind the opinions of church fathers such as Jerome and Augustine. Along with early church support Pauline authorship is defended by pointing out that the Apostle Paul had the most Old Testament training of all New Testament authors—a skill set needed to compose the book of Hebrews. A lack of Pauline signatures in the epistle are explained by McGee as methodology used to relate to the audience. Likewise a greeting and identification are left out in an effort to ensure he is not a stumbling block to the Jews.

Though Paul enjoyed early support for authorship he has fallen out of favor with many students of the epistle to the Hebrews. One should be aware that early support for Paul’s pen was established on the powerful opinions Origen, Jerome, and Augustine. Unfortunately these men self-admittedly have doubts about Paul as the source but supported him as author to ensure the canonicity of this great epistle. Recently very few scholars have favored Paul as the author because the vocabulary, style, themes, rhetoric, and the sole use of the Septuagint are unlike Paul. Additionally Paul’s normal practice of identifying himself and giving greetings are not found in Hebrews.

c. Barnabas

When the early church had doubts about Pauline authorship the only other potential author offered as a potential candidate was Barnabas. In AD 225 Tertullian suggested Barnabas as the author of Hebrews because he was a Levite (thus he knew Jewish rituals well), a Hellenistic Jew, a ministry partner of Paul, and had a good knowledge of the Septuagint. He was also known as the “Son of
Encouragement” (Acts 4) which some suggest fits well with the author who wrote a “word of exhortation” (Hebrews 13:22).

Barnabas fits some basic qualifications for authorship but this hardly identifies him as the author. We have no other writings from Barnabas that support such an epistle and his role in the church was “encouragement”, not “exhortation. When Tertullian suggested Barnabas as author in AD 225 no many approved and few have approved since.

d. Apollos

After the Protestant Reformation began the book of Hebrews was once again examined to determine the author. One of the most popular suggestions was that of reformer Martin Luther. Luther seems to be the first theologian to suggest Apollos as the source of Hebrews. The reason the Apollos position has gained so much favor is because he is a natural fit for authorship and supported by his description in Acts chapter eighteen quoted below.

Acts 18:24-26: Now a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was an eloquent man, competent in the Scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord. And being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue, but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately.

From the passage above one can match the qualifications for authorship of Hebrews with the characteristics of Apollos. The requirements of authorship met by Apollos include the following: He is a Hellenistic Jew, he is a man, he is eloquent in speech, he knew Greek, he knew the Scriptures (Septuagint since he is Hellenistic), he is from and trained in the Alexandrian style (scholars maintain the style of Hebrews follows that of Philo of Alexandria), he has been equipped for ministry, he is familiar with the synagogue system (able to speak about rituals from a literary position only), he is familiar with house churches in Rome, he received the gospel message second hand, and he was an able teacher.

The major weakness of Apollos’ candidacy for authorship is that he was never recommended by the earliest readers as the author. Apollos meets the requirements for authorship but this is far from decisive in determining the author of Hebrews.

IV. Recommendations

After considering the internal and external evidence of the epistle we will now state the requirements for the audience and the author followed by recommendations for each.

a. Recommendation of Audience and Destination

The original audience would need to be a smaller church comprised of Hellenistic Jews residing most likely in Italy. Further the audience would need to be well acquainted with Old Testament rituals based on an understanding derived from the Septuagint. The readers would need to have been
generous in the past, lived amongst sound teachers, suffered, and be in danger of apostasy. Lastly the audience would have been acquainted with Timothy and the author.

Based upon the given requirements and the internal evidence from the epistle I recommend that the destination of Hebrews was a small house church in Rome where Jewish Christian house churches were many. If I were to be more speculative I would consider Priscilla and Aquila’s house church to be the particular destination.

b. Recommendation of the Author

The author of Hebrews would have to first and foremost be a Hellenistic Jew who is well educated (likely educated in Alexandria) and skilled in writing Greek. Further the author must also be a man very familiar with the Old Testament scriptures, the sacrificial system, and Jewish traditions. He must also be a second generation believer with gifts of teaching and insight. Lastly he must have been acquainted with Timothy, the audience, and other churches around the Mediterranean Sea.

Considering the above requirements I recommend Apollos as the author of Hebrews. Though one cannot be absolutely confident about authorship Apollos meets the requirements of authorship and also has the background (lived in and likely educated in Alexandria) and natural relationships (Priscilla and Aquila, Timothy, Paul) to write such a letter. Thus I believe Apollos wrote the epistle sending it to the house church of his close friends Priscilla and Aquila.

V. Summary

Though the evidence might most comfortably fit authorship by Apollos and an audience of Jews in Rome one cannot be absolutely certain. But absolute certainty is not important. As McGee says in his commentary, “the fact that the epistle to the Hebrews is part of God’s inspired Word is important”. Furthermore, in agreement with the majority of scholars, I concur with Origen in saying that “who wrote the epistle God only knows certainly”.