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OUR BROTHER TIMOTHY

A Suggested Solution to the Problem of the Authorship of the Epistle to the Hebrews

by JOHN D. LEGG

MR. LEGG turns to a fresh consideration of the authorship and life-setting of the Epistle to the Hebrews, and finds a clue in the reference at the end of the Epistle to the recent release of "our brother Timothy". The view that the last three or four verses are a postscript added in another hand has been expressed before (e.g., according to F. J. Badcock, verses 23-25 were appended by Paul to a letter which was substantially the work of Barnabas), but not quite in the form propounded by Mr. Legg.

EFFORTS to unravel the mystery of the authorship of the epistle to the Hebrews have proved so contradictory or indecisive that most modern scholars have relegated all discussion of this subject to the status of mere speculation. For William Neil, for instance, it has "no greater interest than a parlour-game". Yet the letter was clearly not intended to be anonymous, for writer and readers are very well known to each other; the lack of a signature, therefore, can only indicate that one was not considered necessary. The despair of modern scholarship, however, has not prevented each new generation from trying again. I am encouraged to offer yet another suggestion by the knowledge that it arose, not from speculation or deliberate enquiry (following the usual process of elimination), but from following the implications of the text as they arose in the course of ordinary reading. I hope, therefore, that the present attempt has the merit of having some basis in the actual text of Hebrews rather than beginning from a list of all the "possibles" mentioned in the New Testament as in the method mentioned above.

I. THE EVIDENCE OF HEBREWS 13

1. The argument for Pauline authorship has foundered, it appears quite conclusively, not merely on the sandbanks of style but also and especially on the rock of 2: 3-4, where the author explicitly disclaims first-hand knowledge of the gospel—the very opposite of Paul's consistent attitude. This, however, is not the end of the matter, for the question must arise (although it seems usually to have been avoided): "What is to be done with all the evidence that would, apart from contra-indications, support the Pauline author-

ship?" For such evidence there is. We can leave aside the so-called Pauline ideas as being in any case common Christian property and concentrate on chapter 13. The typical reference to Timothy, the characteristic greetings (cf. Rom. 16: 21f.), and benediction (cf. exactly Titus 3: 15), all speak of Paul. If they had occurred at the end of Ephesians nobody would have dreamed of ascribing them to anyone else. However, all attempts to detach chapter 13 from the rest of the epistle, either as a fragment or a letter of commendation, have failed, because the chapter, although more "bitty", clearly continues the main thesis of the epistle. Then the exhortations and requests for prayer follow on perfectly naturally. The present suggestion is that we should detach merely vv. 22-25, and this not as a fragment, but as a covering letter to the main epistle. The epistle would thus end quite naturally with the first benediction; the covering letter would end with the Pauline benediction, no name being needed as it was written in Paul's own handwriting (cf. 2 Thess. 3: 17). This would fit the "Pauline" evidence of these verses, but we must ask whether there is any *evidence* that this theory could be correct.

2. The reference in 13: 22 to "few words" (διὰ βραχέων) has never been satisfactorily justified as referring to the whole epistle. If, however, we refer ἐπέστειλα to vv. 22-25, i.e. as an epistolary aorist, then we have indeed something brief. The "word of exhortation" is clearly the whole of the epistle—a sort of treatise or written homily, but to say that a long letter can still be a short homily savours of playing with words, especially when ἐπέστειλα would normally refer to an ἐπιστολή. Thus Paul exhorts the readers to bear with the homily on the grounds of his brief letter in commendation of it. This would also account for the marked difference between the somewhat apologetic plea of 13: 22 and the bold command, "See that ye refuse not him that speaketh", of 12: 25.

3. Perhaps the strongest argument for postulating two writers is the otherwise strange fact that one, who in v. 19 asks prayer for his restoration to them apparently because of some restraint, should write so confidently in v. 23 of being able to visit them shortly. It is much better to see two writers, one in some sort of difficulty, the other free.

4. If then we ask who, from internal evidence, is a likely author of the homily, we are confronted immediately by the reference to Timothy in v. 23. The link between Paul and Timothy was obviously so strong that this mention has been very influential in leading scholars to attribute the whole to Paul. We, however, can

argue in the reverse direction and say that there is no one for whom Paul is more likely to have written this sort of note than Timothy. The picture would then be as follows:¹ Timothy, in prison, writes his word of exhortation, which is brought to Paul, who sends it on with his own addition. By then word has reached him also of Timothy's release from prison, so he adds this to his brief letter.

5. We shall consider Timothy's suitability for the authorship of Hebrews below, but we may pause to notice the advantages of this suggestion in accounting for certain facts.

(a) It accounts for the Pauline characteristics of these last four verses of the epistle.

(b) It suggests an author for whom there is some internal evidence. What better reason could there be for mentioning Timothy than the fact that he had written the preceding treatise?

(c) It provides an adequate explanation of the two benedictions.

(d) It explains to some extent the early ascription of the epistle to Paul.

II. TIMOTHY AND HEBREWS 1: 1-13: 21

Timothy has usually been excluded from the lists of possibles which scholars have drawn up, because he is mentioned in the text and obviously would not have written about himself in this way. The present theory, however, removes this obstacle which has, for the most part, prevented scholars from even considering Timothy. The fact which usually rules him out is really the best reason for considering him. In fact the characteristics usually listed for the author of Hebrews, apart from any derived from 13: 22-25, all fit Timothy.

1. He was clearly well acquainted with Pauline thought (if we must deal in these terms).

2. He was a Jew (Acts 16: 1; 2 Tim. 3: 15), but moreover a Jew of the dispersion, a Hellenistic Jew. Timothy, the son of a Jewess and a Greek father (Acts 16: 3), more than adequately fulfills Alford's criterion, that the author of Hebrews was "brought up in Greek habits of thought and in the constant use of the LXX version".

3. He was a second-generation Christian, probably converted on Paul's first missionary journey (Acts 14: 6f.), thus fitting Heb. 2: 3-4. (Incidentally, the much-favoured Apollos does not fit this part, as he was a hearer at third-hand.)

¹ Note that Paul writes of coming with Timothy, not of bringing Timothy with him. This links quite clearly with the author's intention of coming to them in v. 19.

4. There is sound evidence that the author of Hebrews was in prison. This is the most likely reason for his request for prayers, "that I may be restored to you the sooner", and v. 18 with its reference to "a good conscience" gives his innocence of any crime as grounds for his hope of a speedy release. (Heb. 10: 34 should almost certainly read *θεοφίλοις*, not *θεοφοίς*, and therefore does not affect the argument either way.) Hebrews bears the marks of having had some time spent on it, such as would not be available in ordinary life, and further gives evidence that the author has learned how to deal with affliction and suffering, a lesson which he is concerned to pass on to his readers (cf. 5: 7-8; 11: 25; 13: 6). We have no other mention of an imprisonment for Timothy, but this of course is a problem for any theory. In any case, there are plenty of gaps in the history of Timothy before Paul's death and even after the implied prophecies of 1 Timothy, especially 6: 13-15.

III. FURTHER SUGGESTIONS

Anything further cannot, of course, be construed as proof, but it may be helpful to make some suggestion as to how this theory can fit into the picture of New Testament times—as far as we have it. The readers of the homily are clearly those among whom Timothy has been working before his imprisonment (cf. "restored" in 13: 19). If we date Hebrews, as many do, around A.D. 63-64, then the most likely destination must be Ephesus, where Timothy had spent a considerable time, according to the Pastoral epistles. Acts 19-20 make it clear that the Ephesians had suffered persecution after their conversion, but give no evidence of martyrdoms. This fits Heb. 10: 32f. and 12: 4 (if we take this literally, as is dubious).

"They of Italy", if we take this as meaning from Italy, are possibly the bearers of the epistle to Paul, in which case we must place Timothy's imprisonment in Rome or elsewhere in Italy. They may, of course, be Aquila and Priscilla, who were not only from Italy (Acts 18: 2) but were also very well known to the Ephesians, having lived there for some time (Acts 18: 18-19; 2 Tim. 4: 19). All these, however, are mere conjectures but they do show the sort of picture which can be deduced—one at least as convincing as most that are fabricated round the anonymous author of Hebrews.

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