

THE GENRE OF HEBREWS

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....1

HEBREWS AS A LETTER2

HEBREWS AS AN EPISTLE4

HEBREWS AS A SERMON6

CONCLUSION.....8

BIBLIOGRAPHY 10

INTRODUCTION

There are a large number of unanswered questions concerning the background of Hebrews: who is the author, who is the audience, when was it written, and is the thought primarily Hellenistic or Jewish? Among the unanswered questions is the question of genre in Hebrews. Is Hebrews a sermon? Is Hebrews a letter? Is Hebrews an epistle? Is Hebrews a treatise? Is there another genre that Hebrews should fit into? An attempt to answer these questions will be the focus of this paper.¹

Simplistically, there are three main categories for the genre of Hebrews: a letter, an epistle or a sermon. For the categories of epistle and sermon, there are a number of option to further subdivide the category. Some will argue that a few of these options could be considered separate categories. While arguments for additional categories have merit, the limited scope of this work will only have three categories with some different options in the categories of epistle and sermon.

Each of these three categories, and main issues in the categories, will be discussed. There will be a brief discussion of the overlap between a letter and an epistle. The different options for (or different ways of dividing) the categories of epistle and sermon will also be

¹ It almost seems as if God has intended all the background information of Hebrews to be obscured. Given the divine providence of obscurity perhaps God intended that Hebrews should stand on its own without having to know all the background details. Perhaps divine providence should move people to read, understand and proclaim the obvious eternal truths of Hebrews, as much as (if not more than) they argue and debate over what is not known.

discussed. One of the goals is to show the difficulty and complexity in definitively defining the genre of Hebrews. However, the genre of Hebrews is probably a letter that contained a number of elements that the author had previously preached to the readers of Hebrews. However, given of the complexity genre in Hebrews plus all the other unknowns about the background of Hebrews, it is best not to be dogmatic about the genre of Hebrews being a letter, which has elements that were previously preached.

HEBREWS AS A LETTER

A letter, in general, is considered a personal nonliterary work that is written to convey some information. Characteristic of letters is an introduction and closing which normally identifies the author and audience and contains some personal interaction. Hebrews has a clear closing that resembles one of a letter, however it has no introduction.

A number of ideas have been purposed concerning the possibility of an introduction to Hebrews. It is possible that the introduction to Hebrews was lost or damaged. Perhaps there was an introduction that introduced the author and audience that was lost or damaged. Given the lack of textual variants with the beginning of Hebrews if there was an introduction it must have been lost or damaged very early in the copying of Hebrews. Also, the beginning of Hebrews appears to be a beginning. Most of the time when a text has been damaged or the beginning lost it is obvious because of a lack of a clear starting point or text starting in the middle of a thought or sentence. However the start of Hebrews is a coherent starting point it does not seem likely that the beginning was damaged or lost.

If there was a lost introduction it seems more reasonable to conclude that the introduction was attached to the outside of the scroll and fell off.² This would explain the clear and coherent beginning of Hebrews and allows for a lost introduction as the book was copied from scrolls to codices.

Another key idea about the possibility of an introduction to Hebrews is that it was intentionally not copied. Perhaps those copying the book felt that knowledge of who the author was would taint someone's view of the book so the introduction was omitted or edited. Once again as pointed out above, this would have happened very early in the transmission of Hebrews. This view makes sense when thinking about the book being a part of the canon and not having apostolic authorship. However, at the time when Hebrews was written and copied, the scribes would not have been thinking about the canonization of the book because there was not a canon. Nor were there thoughts about there being a canon in the future to be part of. If it was later when scribes omitted the introduction there would be variant textual readings. Again as mentioned above there are no significant textual variants in the beginning of Hebrews.

It is also possible that the scribe left out the introduction in order to give the impression that Paul or someone more important wrote the book to give the book more clout. Perhaps as the book was copied the author was an obscure individual and the scribes wanted to give the impression of Pauline authorship. The problem is that if the scribes are going to

² For further discussion see Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, Mich. and Carlisle, Cumbria: W.B. Eerdmans and Paternoster Press, 1993), 61-2.

intentionally alter or omit to give an impression of Pauline authorship why not just change the introduction to say Paul wrote it.

An interesting twist to the idea of the introduction being altered or purposefully omitted is if one holds to Priscilla being the author of Hebrews. It would make sense for early scribes to purposefully alter or omit the introduction because of a women author. Or even for Priscilla to forego writing an introduction and identifying herself so that the letter would have widespread acceptance, for it would not have had widespread acceptance had the early Jewish Christian known that Hebrews was written by a female.

HEBREWS AS AN EPISTLE

Before discussing the possibility of the genre of Hebrews being an epistle, it should be remembered that these two options of written genre can significantly overlap. Some have argued that the distinction between an epistle and a letter is one that should not be emphasized too much.³

An epistle, in general, is considered to be impersonal and literary, a great example of this 1 John. It is not addressed to any specific person or group nor does it contain any personal information or news. It would be possible to divide an epistle into the three different options: an epistle, a theological treatise, and a book; they all share the idea of an impersonal literary work. There is great merit in further subdividing epistle, however, keeping to the scope of this paper, the simplistic approach of grouping these together will be taken.

³ For further discussion see *Ibid.*, 59.

The beginning of Hebrews matches that of an epistle, however the ending has personal information that is targeted to a specific audience that the author obviously knew, and hoped to see again. Some ideas have been suggested concerning some possibilities for the ending of Hebrews. It is possible that Hebrews was written as an impersonal epistle to be distributed to a number of various groups and when a copy was prepared for a group that the author knew a personal ending was added. The problem with this view is that there are no significant textual variants to the ending of Hebrews.

Another idea that has been suggested is that the ending was purposefully added to give it the appearance of being written by Paul or another apostolic figure. The problem with this suggestion, as mentioned above, is if a scribe is going to purposefully alter the book to give the impression of apostolic literature why not just claim it is being written by Paul.

One key argument for Hebrews not being either a letter or an epistle is large usage of verbal language in Hebrews. If Hebrews was a letter or an epistle, one would expect to find *γράφω* used to describe the book; however the only usage of *γράφω* in Hebrews is referencing an Old Testament writing (Hebrews 10:7). Hebrews 8:10 and 10:16 use *ἐπιγράφω* referring to God writing on the hearts of His people. Instead of using *γράφω* to refer to the work the writer uses *λέγω*. Hebrews 8:1 says *Κεφάλαιον δὲ ἐπὶ τοῖς λεγομένοις* (Now the main point in what has been said)⁴, notice that is the main point that has been said, not the main point that has been written. Hebrews 13:6 says *ὥστε θαρροῦντας ἡμᾶς λέγειν* (so that we confidently say),

⁴ All Greek quotes are from *The Greek New Testament*, ed. Barbara Aland et al., 4th ed. (Federal Republic of Germany: United Bible Societies, 1993). and all English quotes are from *New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update*, (LaHabra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995).

once again speaking type language is used rather than writing language. Other places where λέγω is used of the author to describe the delivery method is Hebrews 5:11 and 11:32.

Also the writer of Hebrews in closing says Παρακαλῶ δὲ ὑμᾶς, ἀδελφοί, ἀνέχεσθε τοῦ λόγου τῆς παρακλήσεως (But I urge you, brethren, bear with this word of exhortation) Hebrews 13:22. The writer of Hebrews is claiming this to be an oral word.

The writer's use of oral language does not dictate that Hebrews is a sermon. It is quite possible in a letter or epistle to use oral language stylistically. Some have gone as far to claim that Hebrews is literary art.⁵ If Hebrews is literary art, then what prevents the artist from being stylistically creative and use oral language when writing? Also Hebrews is distinguished by rhythmical cadences which effects the stylistic choices.⁶

The length and complexity of Hebrews also seem to indicate that Hebrews was either a letter or an epistle. However, more will be said about this in the next section, which considers the possibility of Hebrews being a sermon.

HEBREWS AS A SERMON

A sermon, in general, is a work that was an oral presentation. As with the epistle category, the sermon category could be further divided into a work that was first orally presented then written down or into a work that was specifically prepared to be read as a homily. Many times these homilies would be prepared for some special occasion or celebration

⁵ Adolf Deissmann, *The New Testament in Light of Modern Research: The Haskell Lectures, 1929* (London: Hodder and Stoughton Limited, 1929), 51-2.

⁶ For further discussion about rhythmical cadence in Hebrews see James Moffatt, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1968), lvi-lix.

like baptism or Pentecost. Once again these different categories have merit, however, simplicity and scope will dictate treating these different options primarily as one category. There are a number of places where comments will have to be made about these different options within the main category of a sermon.

If Hebrews were a sermon it would explain the lack of an introduction like one would expect in a letter. Further, if Hebrews was a sermon that was preached and the listeners requested that the speaker write the sermon down and mail it to them it would explain the personal closing remarks. It would be very similar to some one in the 21st century hearing a sermon and ordering the tape of the sermon. Instead of ordering the tape the first century listeners requested a manuscript of the sermon.

Alternatively, if Hebrews was a sermon that was prepared to be read to one specific group of the people the personal ending is well explained. This might be the case if the writer wanted to give a sermon to the audience but was unable to deliver the sermon personally so the sermon was written down for another to deliver.

However, if Hebrews is viewed as a sermon that was to be read at special occasions then the personalized ending is out of place. It could be argued that a personalized ending was added to the copy that was going to those who the author personally knew. However this argument has the same problems as the argument that Hebrews was an epistle with one copy having a personalized ending, see above discussion for details.

While viewing Hebrews as a sermon also relieves the tension of all the oral type language being used and can explain the introduction and ending nicely (given that it was a

preached sermon and Hebrews is a manuscript of that sermon). Viewing Hebrews as a sermon does have a number of problems.

Hebrews would be too long and too complex to be a sermon. The length and complexity of Hebrews casts doubts as to whether the listeners would have been able to comprehend all the information that is presented, it is hard enough to comprehend Hebrews when reading it slowly. Hebrews would definitely fail the three points and a poem motif as a sermon. The length and complexity would seem to point to Hebrews being a written work. Because of this and because of the oral language used in Hebrews it is possible that parts of Hebrews had been preached to the audience. This would make Hebrews primarily an epistle or letter that was quoting part of what the author had preached at one time or another.

Another factor that works against Hebrews as a sermon is the fact that it is written and it appears to have been written at an early date (as far as early Christian writings go). Hebrews was not passed down as oral tradition and then written at a later date. No matter how one thinks about Hebrews it was put on papyri with ink. Hence the enormous question hinges on the past events leading up to the writing (if Hebrews was first preached) or the motives of the author when writing.

If the author, audience and date of Hebrews was known, the motives of the author might be easier to figure out. As it stands the genre of Hebrews is almost as mysterious as the author of Hebrews.

CONCLUSION

First and foremost, and as stated in the introduction, opinions to the background of Hebrews, including questions of genre should not be held dogmatically. With that said, it

seems best to see Hebrews as a letter that was written to a specific audience and this letter contained a number of points that the author had previously preached to this audience. This option seems to bring to balance many of the tensions found when considering Hebrew genre.

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