

The Epistle to the Hebrews in the mind of ancient readers

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Before he was burned alive, the ancient Christian martyr Polycarp was recorded to have offered himself as a “rich and acceptable sacrifice” before the “eternal high priest Jesus Christ.” He proclaimed these words in the public stadium before tumultuous crowds of spectators. The man turned out inflammable, and when fire could not consume him, they pierced him with the sword.¹ The year was A.D. 155.

Of all the New Testament books, only one calls Jesus the eternal high priest and expounds on the title at length. That book is the Epistle to the Hebrews. Though the Hebrews-specific idea of Jesus as high priest had long sunk its roots into the church, and was even evoked by an early martyr in his last breath, important members of the early church diverged on whether Hebrews belonged to the Biblical canon. Mainly, the question turned on whether it was written by an Apostle. Those who accepted Hebrews into the Biblical canon believed that Hebrews was inspired by Paul. The problem was that its style of writing did not sound like Paul’s. But prominent church men of the East such as Origen or Clement of Alexandria explained that the work had been translated by Luke or Clement of Rome from Hebrew to Greek, thus accounting for why its style differed from that of Paul’s other letters.² Church men of the West were far less interested in providing a reason for why the work did not sound like Paul. Hippolytus and Irenaeus simply did not regard Hebrews as a work of Paul’s.³ Tertullian, Cyprian and Victorinus of Carthage wanted to preserve the fact that Paul had written

¹ Eusebius of Caesarea, “Ecclesiastical History,” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, trans. Arthur Cushman Gilbert, ed. Philip Scaff and Henry Wace (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1890), <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/2501.htm>, 4.15.

² Edmon L. Gallagher and John D. Meade, *The Biblical Canon Lists from Early Christianity: Texts and Analysis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 271.

³ L. Fonck, “Epistle to the Hebrews.,” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910), <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07181a.htm>.

to exactly seven churches, and rejected the possibility that Paul had written to an eighth group, the “Hebrews.”⁴

Over time, Hebrews came to be accepted into the Biblical canon even by church fathers of the West.⁵ However, modern scholarship has confirmed what both the East and the West suspected: it was likely not written by Paul. Some modern scholars date its composition between 60 and 100 AD,⁶ while others narrow the window to 64-68 AD, 10 years after Paul’s death.⁷ Modern scholars have also found that the rhetorical form of the work marks it as a homily, not a letter. With this in mind, a modern historian might wonder, ‘How then did the Epistle acquire the superscription “To the Hebrews” and who identified it as belonging to Paul?’

The ancient reader approaches the question of whether to include Hebrews into the Biblical canon, or even what to make of such a writing so full of wonderful ideas but painfully unattributable to Paul, with a different set of questions and premises. It is the ancient reader’s perspective that we are interested in, rather than a modern historical-critical inquiry. How did ancient readers think about a text’s place in the Biblical canon? What issues mattered most to ancient readers?

⁴ Tertullian in *De pudic.* c. 20, Cyprian in *De Exh. Mart. 11 med*, and Vict. ap. Routh, *Rell.* iii. p. 459 in Brooke Foss Westcott, *A General Survey of the History of the Canon of the New Testament: 2. Ed* (Cambridge: Macmillian, 1866), 418.

⁵ See L. Fonck, “Epistle to the Hebrews.” H. Denzinger notes that “While the Council of Carthage of the year 397, in the wording of its decree, still made a distinction between *Pauli Apostoli epistolae tredecim* (thirteen epistles of Paul the Apostle) and *eiusdem ad Hebraeos una* (one of his to the Hebrews), the Roman Synod of 382 under Pope Damasus enumerates without distinction *epistolae Pauli numero quatuordecim* (epistles of Paul fourteen in number), including in this number the Epistle to the Hebrews.” See Gallagher and Meade, *The Biblical Canon Lists from Early Christianity: Texts and Analysis*, 272, Ch. 4. By the fourth century, Latin writers like Jerome, Rufinus, Augustine, and Innocent put forth Biblical canon lists that accepted Hebrews as inspired by Paul.

⁶ Jon Laansma and Daniel J. Treier, eds., *Christology, Hermeneutics, and Hebrews: Profiles from the History of Interpretation* (New York: T & T Clark International, 2012), Introduction.

⁷ D. Jeffrey Bingham, “‘Clothed with Spiritual Fire’: John Chrysostom’s Homilies on the Letter to the Hebrews,” in *Christology, Hermeneutics, and Hebrews: Profiles from the History of Interpretation*, ed. John C. Laansma and Daniel J. Treier (New York: T & T Clark International, 2012).

To answer our questions, we will delve into Eusebius of Caesarea's *Ecclesiastical History*, a masterful 10-book work written between A.D. 312 and 324 that traced the development of the church from the time of Jesus' Apostles to Eusebius's own time. We consider Eusebius to be an "ancient reader;" Eusebius himself quoted "ancient" church men whom he considered to be informed and insightful readers, closer than he was to the time Hebrews was written. Thus, we have a handle on the premises and questions that were on the mind of the "ancients" as dubbed by Eusebius, and the premises and questions Eusebius himself was preoccupied with.

Historiography

Bart D. Ehrman articulates the idea of an ancient reader response in his work, *Forgery and Counterforgery: The Use of Literary Deceit in Early Christian Polemics*. In this volume, Ehrman examines how ancient readers of the first four centuries made sense of forgeries, works that made false claims to authorship. He argues that early Christians turned a critical eye on who wrote the works they read, contrary to the claims made by some historians that only the contents of a work mattered to ancient readers, that ancient readers willingly accepted the purported author of a text as long as "the contents of the work could be traced back to the views of the alleged authors."⁸ Armin Baum makes this argument with respect to the acceptance of Hebrews into the Biblical canon, saying that because the text contained ideas that sounded like Paul's, ancient authors accepted that the letter was Paul's creation.

⁸ Bart D. Ehrman, *Forgery and Counterforgery: the Use of Literary Deceit in Early Christian Polemics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 90.

When it comes to authorship, Hebrews indeed presents a fraught question. On its face, Hebrews does not claim any authorship. It has no introductory greeting or ending benediction and nothing to indicate authorship in the text. Ancient Christians have approached this dilemma by either explaining away the lack of apparent authorship or by rejecting Hebrews altogether. In the East, Clement of Alexandria wrote that Paul omitted his name because the intended recipients “were prejudiced and suspicious of him” and because “on account of his modesty,” Paul “did not subscribe himself an apostle of the Hebrews.”⁹ Meanwhile, for most early Christians in the West, the absence of explicit identifying information and conservative notions of Scripture disqualified Hebrews from being accepted into the Biblical canon.

Our study of how Hebrews was viewed by ancient readers adds an unexpected twist to both Baum’s and Ehrman’s statements about how ancient readers evaluated claims to authorship. It must be noted that we specifically study how Hebrews was seen in relation to the Biblical canon; this may seem to be a narrower focus, but the inquiry is still about authorship. Authorship was the basis on which a text could be accepted into the Biblical canon. If Hebrews could be shown to be Paul’s, then it belonged in the Scriptures. We find that Baum’s claim that “what mattered was whether the contents of the work could be traced back to the views of the alleged authors” is partially true, as high regard for Hebrews’ ideas did lead ancient Christians to claim that Paul was somehow involved in its production. By this standard, another work full of fantastic ideas, the Apocalypse of John, should have been taken to be written by the Apostle John. However, it was not. We find that Hebrews’ acceptance into the Biblical canon rested not broadly on the fact that it had wonderful ideas, but narrowly on the belief that it was translated

⁹ Eusebius of Caesarea, “Ecclesiastical History,” 6.14.

by either of two authoritative church men personally acquainted with Paul. This “translation narrative” was as important to ancient Christians as what was in the Epistle itself. A case study of Hebrews highlights the polyglot nature of the early Church, that translation was seen as a necessary and legitimate way of transmitting ideas. So much could be accorded a reliable translator. As for Ehrman’s claims, it is true that early Christians cared to know who wrote a work and used rigorous pagan methods to evaluate a text’s claims to authorship. The acceptance of the “translation narrative” suggests that ancient Christians asked not only who a work was originally by, but who else was involved in its production. Ancient readers made a “double-layered claim” to authorship on behalf of Hebrews, calling it not only Paul’s, but Luke’s or Clement of Rome’s. It is this doubling up of authoritative men, Paul and Clement or Luke, that lended Hebrews its legitimacy and allowed it to be dubbed one of Paul’s creations, suitable to be integrated into the Biblical canon.

Discussion of Source

Eusebius’s *Ecclesiastical History* begins with an explanation of how Jesus was with the Father before the existence of the world, making Christianity ancient and making the history of the church a history of the world.¹⁰ It ends on a jubilant note as Eusebius heralded a new Era of prosperity and possibility for Christians because the Emperor Constantine had risen to claim the diadem.¹¹ To paint an accurate history of the church, Eusebius found himself unearthing the writings of ancient Christians, doing exactly the task that we are doing here, looking back to the past to gain understanding of an older perspective.

¹⁰ Eusebius of Caesarea, “Ecclesiastical History,” 1.2.

¹¹ Eusebius of Caesarea, “Ecclesiastical History,” 10.4.

As the bishop of Caesarea, Eusebius did not stand aloof as an uninvolved historian but weighed in on matters of doctrine and orthodoxy. Eusebius gave his own conception of Scripture in Book III of his *Ecclesiastical History*, where he defined the Scripture as the Gospels, Acts and the writings of the thirteen Apostles (the twelve disciples and Paul). Not all ancient Christians had such a conception. For example, Eusebius recorded that Irenaeus included the non-Apostolic Shepherd of Hermas as Scripture,¹² and Clement of Alexandria included the letter by Barnabas and the “Catholic Epistles” of James and Jude.¹³ In this study, we primarily outline Eusebius’s conception of the Scripture, though at times we discuss some of the alternate opinions that Eusebius chose to include. The boundary between Eusebius’s own voice and the voices he chose to include is not so firm. Eusebius’s quotations are his selection of what the ancient writers wrote. What he presented was a curated history. He received and sifted through the traditions of ancient Christians that preceded him. He reproduced a certain selection of these traditions onto the page.

For example, Eusebius devoted an extensive account to Origen. Originally from Alexandria, Origen was lionized across the churches of the East. There is no doubt that Origen had a profound impact on the tradition of Eusebius’ own church of Caesarea; he was said to have traveled there and been requested on multiple occasions to “preach and expound the Scriptures.”

¹⁴ In fact, it was in Caesarea that Origen was ordained as a presbyter and given authority over the local church.¹⁵ Eusebius made special note of what Origen said about the Epistle to the Hebrews:

¹² Eusebius of Caesarea, “*Ecclesiastical History*,” 5.8.7.

¹³ Eusebius of Caesarea, “*Ecclesiastical History*,” 6.14.1.

¹⁴ Eusebius of Caesarea, “*Ecclesiastical History*,” 6.19.

¹⁵ Eusebius of Caesarea, “*Ecclesiastical History*,” 6.23.

“If any church holds that this epistle is by Paul, let it be commended for this. For not without reason have the ancients handed it down as Paul’s.”¹⁶

Eusebius imbibed Origen’s opinion and regarded Hebrews as one of Paul’s fourteen epistles.¹⁷ He was also convinced that the Epistle had been translated into Greek by Clement of Rome, since “[Clement’s Epistle] and Hebrews have similar character in regards to style and because the thoughts contained in the two works are not very different.”¹⁸

To what extent was Eusebius aware of views divergent from his own? He disclosed the opinions of Eastern church fathers Origen and Clement of Alexandria when discussing Hebrews. Did he reference the ongoing discussion in the West where some opposed including Hebrews in the Biblical Canon? Eusebius was generally aware of the discussion in the West. He stated that “some have rejected the Epistle to the Hebrews, saying that it is disputed by the church of Rome on the ground that it was not written by Paul.”¹⁹ But he did not privilege Western voices on the matter. In the church history, Novatus of Rome, Irenaeus, Hippolytus of Rome, Cyprian of Carthage, and Caius of Rome²⁰ are all mentioned at some length. Eusebius even recorded the views that Irenaeus had towards Scripture. But Eusebius only sparsely recorded the views these men held regarding Hebrews. Of Caius, Eusebius recorded, “He mentions only thirteen epistles of the holy apostle, not counting that to the Hebrews with the others. And unto our day there are some among the Romans who do not consider this a work of the apostle.”²¹ Of Irenaeus, Eusebius recorded that he mentioned the Epistle to the Hebrews in his Dissertations and “[made]

¹⁶ Eusebius of Caesarea, “Ecclesiastical History,” 6.25.

¹⁷ Eusebius of Caesarea, “Ecclesiastical History,” 3.3.

¹⁸ Eusebius of Caesarea, “Ecclesiastical History,” 3.38.

¹⁹ Eusebius of Caesarea, “Ecclesiastical History,” 3.3.5.

²⁰ These are all men who voiced their opinions of Hebrews in their writings, see *Introduction* of this paper.

²¹ Eusebius of Caesarea, “Ecclesiastical History,” 6.20.

quotations”²² from it: Stephen Gobar suggested that Eusebius tacitly recognized that Irenaeus did not accept Hebrews to be Paul’s.²³ Eusebius knew that the church at Rome and other church fathers of the West did not accept Hebrews, and he made no record of any church fathers of the West who did accept Hebrews.

Context and Significance of Scripture

The church was made up of men. As Eusebius stated at the very beginning of his *History*, the living religion was the “great and convincing proof” of the faith; Greeks, Barbarians and Jews “throughout the world” worshiped him who is called Christ.²⁴ Accordingly, Eusebius and his predecessors approached Scripture not for a “rediscovery” of what was bygone, but to hear again from their forerunners, those who had passed the mantle of orthodoxy on to them.

Thus, the very first Scriptures were said to have been written at the request of peoples who had to bid farewell to their leaders. Matthew “was led to write only under the pressure of necessity,” recorded Clement of Rome, “for Matthew, when he was about to go [from the Hebrews] to other peoples, committed his Gospel to writing in his native tongue, and thus compensated those whom he was obliged to leave for the loss of his presence.”²⁵ The people of Rome “besought Mark, a follower of Peter, that he would leave them a written monument of the doctrine which had been orally communicated to them” because they “were not satisfied with hearing once only.”²⁶ They wanted a text that could teach them as Peter had taught them. The Scriptures were written to hold fast doctrine as a living teacher would. Thus a contemporary of

²² Eusebius of Caesarea, “Ecclesiastical History,” 5.26.

²³ *Steph. Gobar ap. Photius, Cod.* 121, 232 in Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: the Greek Text with Notes and Essays* (London: MacMillan., 1892).

²⁴ Eusebius of Caesarea, “Ecclesiastical History,” 1.3.19.

²⁵ Eusebius of Caesarea, “Ecclesiastical History,” 3.25.

²⁶ Eusebius of Caesarea, “Ecclesiastical History,” 2.15.

Polycarp and an eye-witness of John, Papias, was not so out of place when he said that he preferred to hear the truth from followers of the apostles, rather than their writings. "If anyone came who had been a follower of the elders, I questioned him in regard to the words of the elders — what Andrew or what Peter said, or what was said by Philip...or by any other disciples of the Lord...I did not think what was to be gotten from the books would profit me as much as what came from the living and abiding voice."²⁷

The early Christians had a penchant for living teachers, but it is for this reason that Scripture became necessary. The church was made of living men, imperfect men, and Scripture served as an anchor for orthodoxy. After all, the men of Rome asked Mark to write down his Gospel because they were absolutely aware of their own tendency to err, stray and stumble. The schism of Nepos, as described by Eusebius, reveals Christianity as the story of men hashing out their faith together, with Scripture guiding and establishing their steps. Dionysius recounted that a schismatic group used the work of a man named Nepos as a “weapon and fortress impregnable” to support their erroneous interpretation of the Apocalypse of John. Taking Nepos’ work as the basis for their beliefs, these schismatics “regard[ed] the law and prophets as of no consequence and do not follow the Gospels and treat lightly the apostolic epistles.”²⁸ Dionysius and his comrades, however, were determined to give Nepos’ work a fair trial because they “approve[d] and love[d] Nepos, for his faith and industry and diligence in the Scriptures.” These men were “not ashamed to change their opinions and agree with others” if what Nepos had written held truth. Though “they love[d] and honor[ed] the truth most of all,” Dionysius and his men left open the possibility that Nepos had a piece of that truth that they did not. As for the

²⁷ Eusebius of Caesarea, “Ecclesiastical History,” 3.39.4.

²⁸ Eusebius of Caesarea, “Ecclesiastical History,” 7.24

process of evaluating whether Nepos' work really did contain truth, Dionysius wrote that "with hearts laid open before God," the men "accepted whatever was established *by the proofs and teachings of the Holy Scriptures*."²⁹ Here, Scripture stood as a homing base to which church fathers could return, a stable retainer for orthodoxy. As men dared to depart from what they previously held true, straying in order to consider the opinion of their brother Nepos, the Scripture anchored them and provided the final say.

By Eusebius's time, the reading of Scripture marked out a Christian of authority from just any Christian, a Christian community from just any community. It went without saying that ancient Christians readers were well-versed in Scripture. As aforementioned, Dionysius wrote that he greatly respected Nepos for his "faith and industry and diligence in the Scriptures" and was willing to be corrected by Nepos.³⁰ As for a community of believers, Eusebius posited that the ascetics of Egypt described by Philo were actually Christians. They were not called Christians because "the name of Christians" was not yet known to Philo, Eusebius explained.³¹ Philo recorded that the ascetics had "writings of ancient men, who were the founders of their sect...these they use as models, and imitate their principles." "It is highly probable that the works of the ancients...were the Gospels and the writings of the apostles," Eusebius interjected. Otherwise, Eusebius seems to suggest, there was no way that these ascetics could have been Christians. No Christian community would take any other writings to establish a model and principle for how to live.

Bounds of Scripture

²⁹ Eusebius of Caesarea, "Ecclesiastical History," 7.24

³⁰ Eusebius of Caesarea, "Ecclesiastical History," 7.24

³¹ Eusebius of Caesarea, "Ecclesiastical History," 2.17

Eusebius's explicit discussion of Scripture comes in Book III. He separated writings into three categories: On one side were heretical writings, on the other were "canonical and accepted writings," and in between were works "not universally acknowledged."³² Because Scripture was formulated over time, by men living out orthodoxy, a semi-permeable boundary stood between what could definitively be called Scripture and what was "not universally acknowledged." Indeed, some disputed works would later land in the "accepted and canonical" camp. This allowance of a gray area between heresy and absolute canon throws into bold relief the challenge of maintaining and protecting orthodoxy in a living religion which held together men of different textual traditions.

Scripture was bounded in theory but malleable in practice. There were certain books that everyone agreed were canonical, such as the four Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, the Acts of the Apostles, thirteen Epistles of Paul, 1 John and 1 Peter. However, Eusebius tended to refer to Scripture in general "categories," calling the Scripture the "Gospels and the writings of the apostles,"³³ with the exact books not strictly delineated. Ancient Christians agreed that Apostolic works in the general sense were an integral part of Scripture. Heretics were often accused of omitting certain categories: the followers of the schismatic Nepos "regard[ed] the law and prophets as of no consequence, and [did] not follow the Gospels, and treat[ed] lightly the apostolic epistles."³⁴ The followers of the heretic Severus "[abused] Paul the Apostle and [rejected] his Epistles."³⁵ The omission of Paul's writings was seen as a rejection of Scripture

³² Eusebius of Caesarea, "Ecclesiastical History," 3.3.

³³ Eusebius of Caesarea, "Ecclesiastical History," 2.17

³⁴ Eusebius of Caesarea, "Ecclesiastical History," 7.24

³⁵ Eusebius of Caesarea, "Ecclesiastical History," 4.29

itself.³⁶ By the same logic, if a work could be shown to belong to an Apostle, then it was accorded authority and could be considered Scripture. The issue was which writings could be proven to belong to an Apostle. Churches disputed whether some alleged works of the Apostles, like the second and third epistles of John or the second epistle of Peter, could be considered authentic.³⁷ Hebrews belonged to this category, “disputed by the church of Rome on the ground that it was not written by Paul.”³⁸ The inclusion of Hebrews in the Biblical canon rested ultimately on whether it could be shown to have been written by Paul.

Some ancient Christians had more inclusive notions of Scripture: they accepted non-Apostolic writings into the Biblical canon. Eusebius seemed to reject this notion. He divided writings “not canonical but disputed, yet at the same time known to most ecclesiastical writers” further into two camps: disputed and rejected writings.³⁹ A possible but imperfect explanation for what distinguished “disputed” writings from “rejected” writings was that the “disputed” writings included Apostolic writings not universally accepted by the church, whereas the “rejected writings” included non-Apostolic writings or writings wrongly attributed to the Apostles. For example, included in Eusebius’s “rejected” writings was the Shepherd of Hermas; Also “rejected” was the Teachings of the Apostles to which Eusebius prepended the qualifier,

³⁶ By Eusebius’s time, Scripture was “intratextual,” not only congruous in imparting a unified orthodoxy but integral in the sense that individual works contributed differently to a composite whole. For example, Eusebius refuted a criticism that the Gospel of John was “at variance with” the other Gospels and explained that John’s Gospel contains the first acts of Jesus while the other Gospels contain the latter part of his life. Eusebius challenged these critics to see the Gospels are not only congruous but even complementary to one another, as John purposely gave an account of the beginning of Jesus’ life because John felt that this vital time period “had been omitted by the earlier evangelists.” “One who understands [where John’s Gospel fits into the account of Jesus’ life] can no longer think that the Gospels are at variance with one another, inasmuch as the Gospel according to John contains the first acts of Christ.” Eusebius of Caesarea, “Ecclesiastical History,” 3.24.

³⁷ Eusebius of Caesarea, “Ecclesiastical History,” 3.25

³⁸ Eusebius of Caesarea, “Ecclesiastical History,” 3.3, 3.25

³⁹ Eusebius of Caesarea, “Ecclesiastical History,” 3.25

“so-called,”⁴⁰ suggesting he doubted the work was actually of Apostolic origin. This distinction in terminology between “disputed” and “rejected” suggests that Eusebius took seriously the notion that, besides the non-Apostolic Gospels and Acts which were already universally accepted, Apostolicity was the criteria by which a writing could be admitted into the Scripture.

Eusebius denounced heretical writings. Many bore the name of an Apostle, but were in fact “fictions of the heretics” which “are not to be placed even among the rejected writings, but are all of them to be cast aside as absurd and impious.”⁴¹ What clued ancient readers into the fact that these writings were not in fact by the claimed author, but “fictions of the heretics”? Later, we undertake a discussion of what methods ancient Christians used to evaluate the authenticity of a work, but to preempt the discussion: The heretical books were dubbed as heretical because “the character of the style [of the heretical writings] [was] at variance with apostolic usage” and “both the thoughts and the purpose of the things that [were] related in them [were] so completely out of accord with true orthodoxy.”⁴² Ancient Christians compared the ideas of the work with the orthodox views espoused by the author, and they evaluated whether the style of the work matched other writings by that author. Discrepancies in style or content could raise red flags.

Sometimes, a work could be seen as benign or useful but later fall into the heretical camp. The Gospel of Peter is an apt illustration of how ancient Christians tolerated the gray area between heretical and accepted works, but only as long as readers did not run up against orthodoxy. Serapion learned that his churches in Pontius and Caricus were divided over the Gospel “which they put forward under the name of Peter.” He recommended that “if this is the

⁴⁰ Eusebius of Caesarea, “Ecclesiastical History,” 3.25

⁴¹ Eusebius of Caesarea, “Ecclesiastical History,” 3.25

⁴² Eusebius of Caesarea, “Ecclesiastical History,” 3.25

only thing which occasions dispute among you, it should be read.”⁴³ After all, other disputed works had been found to be useful and edifying for the church to use.⁴⁴ Serapion seemed to abide by the general principle that a work could be read if others desired to read it and if it bore the mark of Apostolicity, just as Eusebius conceived of Scripture as bounded by Apostolicity but permeable in the exact works. However, Serapion quickly found that the Gospel of Peter began to lead people astray, towards heretical beliefs. As he discovered later, the Gospel of Peter contained some statements extraneous to the “doctrine of the Savior.” In the end, Serapion rejected the Gospel as falsely ascribed to Peter.⁴⁵

Methods of Evaluating Authorship

Apostolic writings were accepted as Scripture. But what methods did the ancient Christians use to evaluate the authenticity of a text and its claims to authorship? The Christians used many of the methods of classical Greco-Roman scholarship to evaluate their texts.⁴⁶ Eusebius mentions looking for the text’s lineage of usage and comparing its ideas and style with that of works written by the same purported author.

As Ehrman explains, writings with established patterns of usage were more likely to be written by the purported author. This is why forgers invented discovery narratives to explain why a text they tried to pass off as authentic had never been referenced previously: the text had been

⁴³ Eusebius of Caesarea, “Ecclesiastical History,” 6.12

⁴⁴ For example, the Shepherd of Hermas was “considered quite indispensable” for some, and Irenaeus even counted it as Scripture, but Eusebius disputed its suitability for the Biblical canon. Eusebius of Caesarea, “Ecclesiastical History,” 3.3.6.

⁴⁵ Eusebius of Caesarea, “Ecclesiastical History,” 6.12.3.

⁴⁶ According to Bart Ehrman, classical criterias of detection included style, anachronisms within the text, internal inconsistencies, and established patterns of usage. The Christians also added “theological sachkritik” to the list: Writings wrongly attributed to the apostles were disqualified on the basis of heterodoxy, since “writings out of line with orthodox Christian thinking cannot be associated with authors who stand at the foundation of the orthodox church” (See Ehrman, *Forgery and counterforgery: the use of literary deceit in early Christian polemics*, 137-148).

hidden in a cave or tucked away in a forgotten library and miraculously found again.⁴⁷ Eusebius took special care to note if a work was read by or accepted as authentic by ancient readers. The Shepherd of Hermas had been used by “some ancient writers.”⁴⁸ Only one writing of the Apostle Peter was known to be genuine and acknowledged by ancient elders, said Eusebius. That was his first epistle, which “ancient elders used freely in their own writings as an undisputed work.”⁴⁹ Eusebius recorded that Origen said of Hebrews: “Not without reason have the ancients handed [the Epistle to the Hebrews] down as Paul’s,” making it more likely that indeed, Hebrews belonged to Paul.⁵⁰ Clement of Rome’s second Epistle was not to be held in the same esteem as the first, said Eusebius, because the ancients made no use of it.⁵¹ An ancient reader indicated the existence of a tradition, and this made it more likely that a text was authentic, as well as profitable to be read.

When examining a text’s patterns of usage, Christians were specifically interested in tracing a textual lineage back to the Apostles.⁵² Eusebius used what I call “cross-verification”: an Apostle or an immediate successor to the Apostles verified the authenticity of a text by endorsing the text in their writings or speech. Eusebius used cross-verification to prove the authenticity of the accepted Gospels not written by one of the twelve Apostles, the Gospel of Mark and the Gospel of Luke.⁵³ Eusebius wrote that Clement of Alexandria and Papias of Hierapolis both recorded that Peter was pleased with the Gospel of Mark and gave his authority “for the purpose

⁴⁷ Ehrman, *Forgery and counterforgery: the use of literary deceit in early Christian polemics*, 137-148.

⁴⁸ Eusebius of Caesarea, “Ecclesiastical History,” 3.3

⁴⁹ Eusebius of Caesarea, “Ecclesiastical History,” 3.3

⁵⁰ Eusebius of Caesarea, “Ecclesiastical History,” 6.25

⁵¹ Eusebius of Caesarea, “Ecclesiastical History,” 3.38

⁵² Ehrman, *Forgery and counterforgery: the use of literary deceit in early Christian polemics*, 137-148.

⁵³ Eusebius of Caesarea, “Ecclesiastical History,” 6.25.

of [it] being used in the churches.”⁵⁴Eusebius recorded that Paul “meant to refer to Luke’s Gospel...as if speaking of some gospel of his own,” giving it its authority and making it reliable.

⁵⁵ Both the Gospel of Mark and the Gospel of Luke had been ‘cross-verified’ by the Apostles Peter and Paul. Eusebius used cross-verification for Hebrews, too: Eusebius stated that Clement of Rome showed that Hebrews was “not a recent production” by quoting extensively from it.⁵⁶ Clement’s temporal proximity to the Apostles, as Clement was a “fellow-worker” with Paul,⁵⁷ locked down the timeline and made it reasonable to reckon Hebrews with the other writings of Paul.

A writing was also evaluated on the basis of what it said. Eusebius disqualified a text if it did not preserve the orthodox views a writer was known to hold. For example, Clement of Rome could not have been the author of certain “wordy and lengthy writings” because “[the writings] do not even preserve the pure stamp of apostolic orthodoxy.”⁵⁸ Hebrews, on the other hand, was seen as a creation of Paul’s because “the thoughts of the epistle are admirable and not inferior to the acknowledged apostolic writings, any one who carefully examines the apostolic text will admit.”⁵⁹ The sophistication of the Epistle’s thought matched that of Paul’s other works. In this way, the ideas presented in a text could reinforce its claims to authorship.

Finally, a text was evaluated on the basis of how it said what it said, its style. This included verbosity, diction, rhythms, eloquence or charm.⁶⁰ In Dionysius the Areopagite’s discussion of the Apocalypse of John, Dionysius concluded that the text was most likely not

⁵⁴ Eusebius of Caesarea, “Ecclesiastical History,” 2.15

⁵⁵ Eusebius of Caesarea, “Ecclesiastical History,” 3.4.8.

⁵⁶ Eusebius of Caesarea, “Ecclesiastical History,” 3.38.

⁵⁷ Eusebius of Caesarea, “Ecclesiastical History,” 3.15.

⁵⁸ Eusebius of Caesarea, “Ecclesiastical History,” 3.38

⁵⁹ Eusebius of Caesarea, “Ecclesiastical History,” 6.25

⁶⁰ Ehrman, *Forgery and counterforgery: the use of literary deceit in early Christian polemics*, 137-148.

written by John on the basis of its style, though Dionysius admired the “concealed and wonderful meaning” of the work and believed it to be the work “of a holy and inspired man.”⁶¹ Specifically, Dionysius noted that in the recognized works by John, the writer either identified himself as the “beloved disciple of the Lord,” “the brother of James,” “the eyewitness and hearer of the Lord,” as in the Gospel, or left no claim to authorship, as in the Epistle. However, in the Apocalypse, the writer called himself, simply, “John.” Dionysius also noted that whereas the Gospel and the Epistle were elegant in speech, “far from betraying any barbarism or solecism,” the dialect and language of the Apocalypse “were not accurate Greek.”⁶² The diction and perceived lack of eloquence indicated that the Apocalypse was not written by John the Apostle.

On Hebrews

Hebrews was evaluated using these methods. It was found to have a solid textual lineage and brimmed with wonderful ideas. In it, the Christians are exhorted to have the same faith as great Israelite prophets and leaders in the promise of a heavenly Kingdom.⁶³ The letter is interlaced with the Jewish Scripture. The writer quotes freely from the Prophets, from Isaiah, Habakkuk, Jeremiah, and 2 Samuel and even from the Psalms. Its crowning image is its exposition of Abraham’s priest Melchizedek as a Christ-type: the Epistle suggests that Melchizedek’s priesthood anticipated the high priesthood of Jesus.⁶⁴ Ancient readers wanted to attribute these ideas to Paul. But the Epistle was not in Paul’s style. Paul was “rude in speech,”

⁶¹ Eusebius of Caesarea, “Ecclesiastical History,” 7.25. Modern scholars now agree that this text was itself a forgery, so the forger was aware of the tools others had used to detect fakes. As Professor Grafton stated, this is a nice irony.

⁶² Eusebius of Caesarea, “Ecclesiastical History,” 7.25.

⁶³ Hebrews 11.

⁶⁴ Hebrews 7.

whereas the diction of Hebrews was “purer Greek.”⁶⁵ A warm reception of Hebrews by the ancient Christians depended on its association with an auxiliary writer who was recorded to have a strong personal connection to Paul. It was the eminent Clement of Rome or Luke’s personal associations with Paul, as well as the church’s acculturation to translation as a necessary and viable way of transmitting knowledge, that made it possible for Hebrews to be regarded as one of Paul’s creations.

Everything about the content of the Hebrews seemed to suggest that Paul wrote it. Considered together, Paul’s writings were seen as a genre uniquely concerned with expositing the Old Testament. Eusebius posited that the ascetics in Egypt had the “expositions of the ancient prophets such as are contained in the Epistle to the Hebrews and in many others of Paul’s Epistles.”⁶⁶ Hebrews fit in nicely with Paul’s other epistles that were “expositions of the ancient prophets.”

The rich ideas in Hebrews about priesthood and other questions impressed Eusebius, as they had others before him. Ancient Christians thought a text so rich in ideas was worthy of being classed among the other writings of Paul. As Origen wrote, “the thoughts of the Epistle are admirable and not inferior to the acknowledged apostolic writings, any one who carefully examines the apostolic text will admit.”⁶⁷ They also believed that Paul was uniquely capable of coming up with such worthy ideas. As Clement of Alexandria wrote:

The apostles were uncultivated in speech. They did not attempt to proclaim the doctrines of their teacher in studied and artistic language...paying little attention to the composition of written works. ...They were assisted in their ministry by one greater than man. Paul, who surpassed them in all vigor of expression and richness of thought, committed to writing no more than the briefest of epistles, although he had innumerable mysterious

⁶⁵ Eusebius of Caesarea, “Ecclesiastical History,” 6.25.11.

⁶⁶ Eusebius of Caesarea, “Ecclesiastical History,” 2.17.12.

⁶⁷ Eusebius of Caesarea, “Ecclesiastical History,” 6.25.

matters to communicate, for he had attained even unto the sights of the third heaven, had been carried to the very paradise of God, and had been deemed worthy to hear unspeakable utterances there.⁶⁸

Paul stood preeminent among the Apostles for the “richness of his thought.” He was appreciated all the more by the learned ancient Christians Clement of Alexandria and Origen, who were acutely conscious of the other Apostles’ lack of education and otherwise “uncultivated” speech. Ancient Christians believed so strongly that the ideas presented in Hebrews were Paul’s that 1 Clement, which contained “thoughts” that were similar to Hebrews,⁶⁹ was said to have been inspired by Paul. How else would Clement have come up with the ideas presented in 1 Clement? Eusebius concluded that Clement of Rome most likely translated Paul’s writing.

Clement of Rome and Luke played an incredibly important role in the acceptance of Hebrews as Paul’s creation. If the content of the epistle was impressive, its style did not match that of Paul’s other writings.⁷⁰ Clement or Luke became known as the trusted transmitters of Paul’s ideas. Clement “[gave] many thoughts drawn from the Epistle to the Hebrews, and also [quoted] verbally some of its expressions,” Eusebius noted, and “Clement and Hebrews [had] similar character in regards to style.”⁷¹ Eusebius concluded that Clement of Rome translated the Hebrew letter into Greek and adopted Paul’s ideas for his own epistle. He noted that Clement of Alexandria, by contrast, thought that the Epistle had “the same style of expression” as the Acts written by Luke. Eusebius quoted Clement of Alexandria’s opinion that “the Epistle to the Hebrews is the work of Paul, and that it was written to the Hebrews in the Hebrew language, but

⁶⁸ Eusebius of Caesarea, “Ecclesiastical History,” 3.24.4.

⁶⁹ Eusebius of Caesarea, “Ecclesiastical History,” 3.38

⁷⁰ Eusebius of Caesarea, “Ecclesiastical History,” 6.25.11.

⁷¹ Eusebius of Caesarea, “Ecclesiastical History,” 3.38

that Luke translated it carefully and published it for the Greeks.”⁷² In either case, ancient Christians argued that the Epistle to the Hebrews did not sound like Paul because it had been translated by another preeminent ancient Christian from the original language of Hebrew into Greek.

Broadly, Hebrews had a lineage of usage. As Origen said of Hebrews, “Not without reason [had] the ancients handed [the Epistle to the Hebrews] down as Paul’s.”⁷³ Eusebius had received the Epistle as one such descendant in the lineage of usage, specifically as the work of Luke or Clement of Rome. These were not just any men. Eusebius had attributed the ideas in Clement’s first epistle to Paul, showing that some of Paul’s preeminence rubbed off on Clement. Yet the relationship was symbiotic: In the opposite direction, Hebrews borrowed legitimacy from Clement. The same can be said of Hebrews’ association with Luke. As a reliable translator, Luke boosted the legitimacy of the claim that Hebrews was Paul’s creation.

After all, not just anyone could be relied on to reliably transmit Paul’s ideas. One of the acts of abomination committed by the heretic Tatian was that he “ventured to paraphrase certain words of the apostle Paul in order to improve their style.”⁷⁴ In contrast, Clement of Rome could be seen as having reliably transmitted Paul’s ideas because of his personal association with Paul and because his own writings were highly accorded by the church. Clement was known to be a “co-laborer” with Paul,⁷⁵ temporally, it would make sense that Clement translated the Epistle. Further, Clement’s own letter, which contained many “thoughts drawn from Hebrews,” had a lineage of usage of its own: Eusebius recorded that Clement’s letter was “accepted by all,” was

⁷² Eusebius of Caesarea, “Ecclesiastical History,” 6.14

⁷³ Eusebius of Caesarea, “Ecclesiastical History,” 6.25

⁷⁴ Eusebius of Caesarea, “Ecclesiastical History,” 4.19

⁷⁵ Eusebius of Caesarea, “Ecclesiastical History,” 3.4

“acknowledged to be genuine and is of considerable length and of remarkable merit” and was “publicly used in a great many churches both in former times and in our own.”⁷⁶

Similar things could be said of Luke. Hebrews’ association with Luke was a boon; Luke’s reputation as a fruitful writer and as Paul’s personal acquaintance increased the possibility that Hebrews was Paul’s creation. Luke was “especially intimate with Paul and well acquainted with the rest of the apostles,” so much so that Paul “meant to refer to Luke’s Gospel wherever, as if speaking of some gospel of his own.”⁷⁷ Again, the timeline matched; given that Paul and Luke were contemporaries, it was possible that Luke would have translated one of Paul’s letters. Further, Luke had written two inspired books already, these writings were “proof of that spiritual healing art which he learned from the [Apostles],” said Eusebius.⁷⁸ In his Gospel, Luke had already shown himself to be a trustworthy transmitter of what the Apostles had taught him. The Acts were already regarded as an indisputable part of the Biblical canon.⁷⁹

Did these auxiliary translators really matter? They did. Not just anyone translated Paul’s ideas, but either of two highly regarded, lionized men who were personally acquainted with Paul. We might compare Hebrews to the Apocalypse of John to highlight the effect of the auxiliary translator. Hebrews and the Apocalypse sported the same strengths and suffered from the same weaknesses: Both were loved for their ideas, but both were written in a style that disqualified them from being written by the author they were purportedly written by. Because of the Apocalypse’s discrepancy in style,⁸⁰ Dionysius rejected the thesis that the Apocalypse had been

⁷⁶ Eusebius of Caesarea, “Ecclesiastical History,” 3.16

⁷⁷ Eusebius of Caesarea, “Ecclesiastical History,” 3.4

⁷⁸ Eusebius of Caesarea, “Ecclesiastical History,” 3.4

⁷⁹ Eusebius of Caesarea, “Ecclesiastical History,” 3.4

⁸⁰ As explained earlier, the language in the Apocalypse of John “[was] not accurate Greek,” whereas the other writings of John the Apostle were “far from betraying any barbarism or solecism.” Eusebius of Caesarea, “Ecclesiastical History,” 7.25

written by the Apostle John, though it was likely written by a John. Meanwhile, anyone who could distinguish the “diction” and “differences of phraseology” in Hebrews knew that it was not written by Paul, but it certainly could have been written by Luke or Clement of Rome. For multiple reasons, this was possible: Both men were personally acquainted with Paul and had reliably transmitted Apostolic ideas in other writings, and the “purer” style of Greek found in Hebrews resembled the other writings of Luke or Clement of Rome.

That a translation narrative could be used to establish the authenticity of a text was a Christian innovation. We do not see the likes of this in pagan scholarship, simply because pagan readers did not deal much in translation. The narrative of the auxiliary translator highlights how the church viewed translation: as a necessary and acceptable way of transmitting knowledge. After all, the church was always translating. It dealt in multiple languages, from Greek and Jewish Christians alike reading Hebrew Scriptures in Aramaic and Greek versions, to early Christians translating the Scriptures into contemporary languages in order to accommodate new believers of far-flung places. The very preaching of the Gospel was an act of oral translation: Shortly after Jesus was caught up in a cloud and returned to Heaven, his followers received the gift of tongues from the Holy Spirit. There were Jews gathered in that cosmopolitan city of Jerusalem from every nation under heaven that heard Jesus’s followers speak in their own languages. The first day, three thousand souls were saved.⁸¹ God had given Jesus’s disciples the means to preach good news to the whole world. If translation were unacceptable, then it would not be possible to fulfill Jesus’ original commission: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”⁸²

⁸¹ Acts 2:1-13

⁸² Matthew 28:19.

The story of the Septuigint is a fine example of the place that translation had in the early Christian mind. Ireneaus gave an account of how the Jewish Scriptures were translated into Greek; the act was nothing short of miraculous. Ptolemy, the ruler of Egypt, received seventy elders who were skilled in Hebrew and Greek to provide the translation for his library in Alexandria, but to test their translations, he had them work separately.

But when they came together in the presence of Ptolemy and compared their several translations, God was glorified and the Scriptures were recognized as truly divine. For all of them had rendered the same things in the same words and with the same names from beginning to end, so that the heathen perceived that the Scriptures had been translated by the inspiration of God.⁸³

Translation was aided by God, and the Scriptures could not be tainted. For the early Christians, texts could be translated and retain their integrity.

Conclusion

Hebrews checked many boxes. It had wonderful ideas, which the ancient Christians savored. It had a textual lineage, as Origen recorded that it had been handed down by the ancients. But ancient Christians still found it necessary to explain why the style of Hebrews differed from Paul's other writings. As Ehrman said, the Christians tried to verify the authorship of a text with rigor, doing more than simply checking if its ideas squared with the orthodoxy the Apostles were known to espouse. It was too risky to decide if something should be included in Scripture on the basis of its ideas alone. After all, Scripture held the line. It was used to contest heretical beliefs; the heretics of Artemon refused to be corrected by the Scriptures.⁸⁴ It set

⁸³ Eusebius of Caesarea, "Ecclesiastical History," 5.8.14.

⁸⁴ When they were approached with a passage of Divine Scripture, the heretics were said to disregard the true teaching and "see whether a conjunctive or disjunction form of syllogism" could be made from the Scripture. They "treated the Divine Scriptures recklessly and without fear." Eusebius of Caesarea, "Ecclesiastical History," 5.28.13.

orthodoxy in stone and could keep the church united under the same beliefs, from the ascetics in Egypt to the church at Rome. Given its importance, much was at stake if the Christians accepted the wrong works into the Scripture. Better if the text could be verified to be the work of an Apostle, for Apostles could not put forth falsehood.

The ancient Christians received a “translation narrative” as a legitimate explanation for why the style of Hebrews differed from Paul’s other writings. Ancient Christians not only suggested that Hebrews had been translated, but that it had been translated by one of two men who had known Paul personally and had authored reputable works of their own. Luke’s Gospel and Acts were already considered to be Scripture, indisputably. Clement’s Epistle was widely used in the churches and accorded great merit. To be associated with these men gave Hebrews legitimacy as one of Paul’s creations.

For the ancient Christians, it mattered that these translators lived and breathed alongside Paul. The closer they were to Paul, the more likely the text they translated preserved the thoughts of the original Apostolic work. This temporal dimension mattered. Eusebius made a point of quoting Origen when Origen said, “Not without reason have the ancients handed [the Epistle] down as Paul’s.” A textual lineage suggested proximity to the Apostles; the early Christians could be assured that the Epistle had been produced closer to the time of the Apostles than their own times.

The early Christians may have borrowed pagan methods to evaluate their texts, but their mindset and purpose departed from that of the pagans. The ancient Greeks revised and criticized each other and their teachers. Each believed that he could contribute towards an understanding of the truth. The Christians, by contrast, were intent on preservation rather than innovation. God

had given them truth, and this truth had to be guarded from meddling human hands. The Good Teacher and his followers, the Apostles, were not to be argued with.

This was not easy for the Christians. They were certainly attracted to new ideas, to innovations of thought. The reader remembers that Clement of Alexandria extolled Paul for his richness of thought, which compensated for the fact that the rest of the apostles were uneducated and uncultivated in speech.

Many of the ancient Christians were schooled in the Greek pagan literary tradition. Origen was recorded to have abandoned teaching the Greek classical tradition in order to undertake that which was infinitely more important, the Divine instruction of Scripture.⁸⁵ Yet when he had opportunity, he instructed those catechumens of “superior intelligence” in the secular branches of geometry, arithmetic, and philosophy.⁸⁶ This was the means by which the classical culture of the elite passed to the average man in Late Antiquity.⁸⁷ Eusebius struggled to impart the right message. Did or did not the Scriptures stand on their own? On the one hand, Origen’s abandonment of his grammatical school for the catechesis demonstrated the obvious: instruction in the Scriptures was crucial. Yet it appeared that Origen could not keep himself from using Greek classical learnings to supplement the Scriptures. Eusebius recorded that Porphyry lambasted Origen for applying the “Grecian mysteries to the Jewish Scriptures.” Porphyry was of the opinion that such a man of learning should not even have been swayed to follow such a primitive tradition: Origen was compelled to use Greek philosophy in order to “find a solution of

⁸⁵ Realizing that there were many students desiring instruction at the catechetical school of Alexandria, Origen “immediately gave up his grammatical school as unprofitable and a hindrance to learning,” sold his ancient texts, and “gave himself to the study of Divine Scriptures.” Eusebius of Caesarea, “Ecclesiastical History,” 6.3.

⁸⁶ Eusebius of Caesarea, “Ecclesiastical History,” 6.18.

⁸⁷ Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1989), 93.

the baseness of the Jewish Scriptures,” when really he ought to have “abandon[ed]” them altogether.⁸⁸ Porphyry’s account reveals that ancient Christians, especially those learned in the Greek classical tradition, wanted to add to the faith. Their minds abounded. Their story is always one of treading the line between orthodoxy and fantastic ideas that could lead believers astray. Eusebius recorded that the heretics of Artemon were accused of using the writings of Euclid, Aristotle and Theophrastus to inform their beliefs, using “the arts of unbelievers for their heretical opinions and adulterating the simple faith of the Divine Scriptures.”⁸⁹ On the one hand, Origen “considered it especially necessary for himself to be skilled in secular and philosophic learning.”⁹⁰ On the other hand, Greek classical thought could corrupt an ancient Christian’s understanding of the “simple faith.” The ancient Christians had to remind themselves that truth came from God, not from man.

If it is true that Hebrews was originally delivered in Hebrew, the fact that it was translated into Greek means that Clement or Luke wanted to make its ideas available to all. They believed it was worthwhile for the whole church, not just the Jewish-Christian community, to hear this exposition of the Old Testament passages regarding Melchizedek, the wanderings of the Israelites in the wilderness, and the faith of the Jewish ancestors. With Jesus, Hebrew history became significant to the world. It no longer belonged to the Jewish community alone. In Acts 8, it is recorded that the Apostle Philip met an Ethiopian, a eunuch of the court of the queen, on the road between Jerusalem and Gaza. The Ethiopian was reading the book of Isaiah, of the Jewish Prophets. Philip was led by God to ask the Ethiopian if he understood what he was reading. The Ethiopian said, “How can I?” and Philip was invited to sit beside him and explain how the

⁸⁸ Eusebius of Caesarea, “Ecclesiastical History,” 6.19.

⁸⁹ Eusebius of Caesarea, “Ecclesiastical History,” 5.28.

⁹⁰ Eusebius of Caesarea, “Ecclesiastical History,” 6.18.4.

Scripture had to do with the man Jesus. Coming alongside some water as they went along the road, the Ethiopian exclaimed, “See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?” Thus, a Ethiopian man read the Jewish Scripture and found that it now meant the world to him. He was baptized as a follower of Christ. “He went on his way, rejoicing.”⁹¹

God had flung out his arms to all the world. At Jesus’ crucifixion, an inscription placed at the foot of the cross read, “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews” in Hebrew, and Greek, and Latin, so that all might marvel at the great mystery that was this man Jesus, hung on a tree.⁹² Not even Jesus’s disciples understood then that this was the man of whom it was written, “Let all God’s angels worship him.”⁹³

⁹¹ Acts 8:26-39

⁹² John 19:20

⁹³ Hebrews 1:6

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