

THE AUTHORSHIP OF THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS

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The Authorship of the Epistle to the Hebrews.



It seems very unfortunate that the authorship of so important a portion of the Holy Scriptures as this Epistle, should be held by some scholars and critics to be uncertain.

If we could say with Luther, not only that it is a "strong, mighty, high Epistle," but also what Luther did **not say**, that it is undoubtedly the work of the Apostle Paul, it surely would serve to add not a little to its very important and impressive words.

But it is impossible to assert its Pauline authorship positively; although many strong reasons may be given, drawn both from the testimony of the early Christian Fathers, and from the internal evidence of the Epistle itself, for attributing its authorship to St. Paul.

Let us first look at some of the evidence that St. Paul wrote the Epistle, derived from the recorded opinions of eminent Fathers of the Church of the second and third centuries. Clement of Alexandria, presided over the Catechetical School in that city, near the close of the second century; and Eusebius, the Church Historian quotes from a work of Clement's, now lost, as follows, "He (that is Clement) says, that the Epistle to the Hebrews is Paul's; and was written to Hebrews in the Hebrew tongue; and that Luke diligently translated it and

published it for the Greeks. Paul very naturally, he says, did not prefix "Paul the Apostle" to it, as the Hebrews suspected and disliked him; and so he would not alienate them in the very beginning of his work. Notwithstanding Clement's persuasion, that the Epistle was put into Greek by Luke, he continually cites the Greek as the work of St. Paul. The consistent opinion of a writer of the weight of this Father, expressed within about a century and a quarter of the time of the writing of the Epistle (currently set as about A. D. 68), ought to carry great influence. He nowhere raises the question of its Pauline authorship, but assumes it to be a fact well known in his day. We next come, in the order of time, to Origen. Ordinarily in his writings Origen cites the Epistle as the work of Saint Paul. He distinctly ascribes fourteen Epistles to this Apostle; which must include that to the Hebrews.

But in a letter to a friend on quite a different subject, he mentions the traditional death of Isaiah, which, he says, is testified to by the Epistle to the Hebrews. He then adds: "But possibly some, who are pressed by this argument, may take refuge in the view of those who set aside the Epistle as not written by Paul: and to them," he adds, "we should have to use another argument to show that the Epistle is Paul's.

In two fragments of Origen's lost Homilies, on this Epistle, preserved by Eusebius, the latter quotes him as saying, that the thoughts appear to him to be those of the Apostle; but the diction and style those of some reporter or paraphraser of the things said by his Master."

And then follows this weighty, but not altogether clear sentence, quoted as the exact words of Origen: "If, then, any Church professes this Epistle as being Paul's, let it have credit for the circumstance. For not in vain have the "Ancients" handed it down as Paul's; but who wrote the Epistle, God alone knows the truth."

The words, "For not in Vain have the Ancients handed it down as Paul's". Dean Alford interprets this to

mean, "Origen's own conviction that the thoughts of the Epistle proceeded originally from Paul."

But the expression, God alone knows the truth, referring to the writing of the Epistle, "can only mean," says Alford, "that the authorship of the Epistle was regarded as utterly unknown." But is not this declaration of Dean Alford's rather strong, when he had just said that it was Origen's own conviction that the thoughts of the Epistle proceeded originally from the Apostle?

Among the witnesses belonging to the end of the second and the beginning of the third century, none, as Dean Alford writes, is of more weight than Irenaeus. He was by birth a Greek of Asia Minor, and became Bishop of Lyons and Gaul; thus representing the testimony of the Church in both countries. In his great work against Heresies, he expressly quotes twelve Epistles of St. Paul, not including that of Philemon, but nowhere in this work has he cited or referred to the Epistle to the Hebrews at all. Eusebius, however, speaks of a work of Irenaeus, extant in his time, in which he quotes passages from the Epistle to the Hebrews. But it is not stated that he mentioned any one as the author of the Epistle. Thus far the testimonies have been within about a century and a half to two centuries after the death of St. Paul; and from writers, excepting Irenaeus, of the Churches of Alexandria and Carthage.

Passing now to the Church of Rome, we find, belonging to the same early period, the testimony of the Presbyter Caius. Of him, Eusebius relates, "that in a dialogue, published by him (that is Caius), he speaks of thirteen Epistles only written by St. Paul, not numbering among them that to the Hebrews; because it is even till now (Eusebius' time was A. D. 264 to 340) thought by some at Rome not to be the Apostle's. The words "thought by some" seem fairly to imply that a great many at Rome thought just the other way. Dean Alford, who seems to be strongly against the Pauline authorship of the Epistle,

in summing up the result of the various testimonies down to this point, remarks: "Nowhere, except in the Alexandrian Church, does there seem to have existed any idea that the Epistle was St. Paul's."

"The fair account of opinion," proceeds Dean Alford, "in the latter part of the second century, seems to be this: That there was then as now great uncertainty regarding the authorship of the Epistle. That the general cast of thoughts was recognized as Pauline; and that the Ancients had not unreasonably handed it down as St. Paul's; but on what grounds we are totally unable to say; for Ecclesiastical tradition does not bear them out. The result is, he concludes, that modern scholars are left "unfettered by any overpowering judgment of antiquity to examine the Epistle for themselves, and to form their own opinion from its contents."

Thus far Dean Alford. And yet it must not be forgotten,—may I be allowed to say? that the very earliest of the traditions,—that which comes to us through Clement, as reported by Eusebius, dates within about forty years of the writing of the Epistle and the death of St. Paul; and that this witness explicitly declares, in so many words.—The Epistle to the Hebrews is Paul's; and was written to Hebrews in the Hebrew language, and diligently translated and published for the Greeks by Luke, Paul's reporter, throughout most of his missionary and much of his prison life.

From Clement's time the same tradition persists—with a vigor and credibility but little abated, for two or more generations of active Church life, when Christians were very much in earnest, and when a precious document like this Epistle would be cherished and studied and copied,—and the story of its first delivery and to whom and where and how the original manuscript was preserved, would be well known and frequently talked about in that extensive community of Christian Jews, and their unconverted fellow Jews, and also those not far

away in Carthage. And thus, for a considerable period after Clement's time, the same general belief as to the authorship prevails, to which Origen of Alexandria, as we have already seen, gives expression:—

First, By citing the Epistle as the work of St. Paul.

Second, In distinctly ascribing fourteen Epistles to that Apostle, which must include that to the Hebrews.

Third, In saying, when called to controvert the position of those who were disposed "to set aside the Epistle as not written by Paul;"— "We should have to use another argument to them to show that the Epistle is Paul's."

Coming down a few years further, in the early part of the third century, we find such weighty names as Tertullian and Irenaeus ranged on the anti-Pauline side of the question. The Carthaginian (Tertullian) for his part, gives his voice in favor of Barnabas as the writer of the Epistle; while he of Asia Minor, and later of the See of Lyons in France, utters no voice, indeed, but simply withholds his endorsement of the Pauline authorship;—renders, in fact, a Scotch verdict,—if you will pardon the anachronism of the phrase—"Not proven."

Passing over from Africa to Europe, and from the seat of Greek and Christian learning and culture, to the Capital of the Empire, and soon to be Capital of Christendom,—we find the great first Historian of the Church telling us of one Caius, a presbyter, who has omitted the Epistle to the Hebrews from his category of the writings of St. Paul. But to balance this, the Historian of the Church himself says, with far more of affirmative than of negative force in his words: "It is even till now (A. D. 300 to 340),—thought by some not to be the Apostle's,—which would imply plainly that the great majority were thinking just the other way.

And just here may I be indulged briefly in what may be called an argument from probability. Is it not reasonable to think that Paul would be inclined to address just

such a letter as this to the Hebrews in behalf of "his Brethren, his kinsmen according to the flesh," as he calls them? He was "a Hebrew of the Hebrews," he tells us, and gloried in the fact. He was anxious about them, and had great longing of heart for their salvation. Was it a piece of mere rhetoric, that terrible declaration in his letter to the Romans? "I say the truth in Christ, I lie not; my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Ghost, that I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart. For I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my Brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh"—concluding with these beseeching words: "Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel, is, that they might be saved."

Might not the Epistle to the Hebrews be the fruit of such intense longing as this for the salvation of his Brethren?

Is it reasonable to think that he would rest satisfied with mere longings and prayers, and with declarations to Romans, of his great anxiety in their behalf? And would not, during the tedious days and months of either his first or second imprisonment address to them just such a powerful, logical and earnest appeal, urging them to believe on and accept Jesus as their Messiah and Saviour? What was there to prevent him from thus pouring out the fullness of his heart to them: reinforcing his appeals with arguments drawn from their own Scriptures, and setting before them the significance of their rites and ceremonies,—and of the Priesthood which pointed forward to and centred in Christ as both Priest and Sacrifice. What other Apostle or Apostolic man, would be so likely to write them just such a letter?

And then, having determined to prepare and forward it to them, is it not probable that it would be a very different Epistle in style and form and spirit from one addressed to Roman, or Ephesian, or Corinthian Christians, to whom he had gone preaching the Word, and who were

his own Children in the Faith? Especially if, laying aside the familiar Greek, in which he had been accustomed as a missionary to address his audiences in the great cities of the Empire, and which he used in his letters to his Churches to employ, use instead the sacred Hebrew of his Fathers?

Moreover, would he not naturally, and with that prudent regard to circumstances and relations, which he always showed, according to his principle of "being all things to all men," both in what he withheld and in what he revealed, veil as much as possible his personality from them, not naming himself at all as the writer of the Epistle,—nor employing any sanction of a personal or official kind,—which he would know might be offensive to some of them.

May it not then be reasonably held, that St. Paul would be inclined to write, and circumstances favoring, would write to the Hebrews, just such a letter as this? And is not this a consideration of great weight? There was no Church of the Hebrews,—or even a Church at Jerusalem, that St. Paul had anything to do with as an Apostle, or a pastor; and he could not address the Epistle to the Hebrews as a definite body of Christians, among whom he had labored, as he could address "the Church of God which is at Corinth;" or "the Churches of Galatia;" or "the Saints which are at Ephesus;" or the "Church of the Thessalonians." This fact, of the peculiar position of the Hebrews, scattered among the cities of the Empire, as well as gathered in small numbers as associations, or synagogues of believers, or non-believers, in many cities and towns of their own land, would create an entirely different objective in the mind of the Apostle,—and lead him to adopt an entirely different mode of presenting the subject of the Great Salvation; and in the language used, and the figures and illustrations employed to a quite different style of writing as compared with his other Epistles. Those who first saw the letter must

certainly have known from whom it came. And how should that early tradition have grown up, that it was St. Paul's, unless it really was? And granted that it was, cannot its peculiarity of style and matter, be satisfactorily accounted for? It is only when men do not know that they begin to theorise in a very wise manner.

But let us proceed with some further notices of the opinions of early Christian writers, on the question of St. Paul's authorship. We are now in the fourth century. The Roman Empire, through the conversion of Constantine the Great, has become nominally Christian. Passing by testimonies of minor importance, we may mention that of the Historian Eusebius himself. He died about A. D. 340. In many passages throughout his works, and more especially in his Commentary on the Psalms, he cites the Epistle to the Hebrews, and always as the work of St. Paul, or "the Apostle," or the "Holy Apostle," or the "Divine Apostle." He enumerates among the New Testament Books which are "received by all," fourteen Epistles of St. Paul. And it appears from a certain passage in one of his works that Eusebius himself believed the Epistle to have been written in Hebrew by St. Paul, and translated by Luke into Greek or "more probably by Clement, whose style it resembles." But elsewhere he seems to assume that the Epistle was written in Greek by the Apostle himself.

Now and then there is a dissenting voice but the consensus is almost universal for St. Paul.

Jerome, who died in A. D. 420, usually quoted the Epistle as St. Paul's; but he admits that doubts have been expressed as to its authorship. In his catalog of Ecclesiastical writers, speaking of Paul, he uses this language, —evidently reporting the opinions of others: "But the Epistle addressed to the Hebrews is not believed to be his on account of the difference of style and diction; but is thought to be either Barnabas' according to Tetullian, or Luke's the Evangelist according to some, or Clement's,

—who is reported to have arranged and adorned Paul's thoughts in words of his own.

"He had written," proceeds St. Jerome, "as a Hebrew to the Hebrews in Hebrew," that is in his own mother tongue, most eloquently, and those things which were written eloquently in Hebrew, were still more eloquently turned into Greek. And this is the reason why it seems to differ from the rest of Paul's Epistles.

Yet this writer, Jerome, in other parts of his works, uses such expressions as these: "the Epistle to the Hebrews by Paul; or by whomsoever else you think it written." "The Epistle to the Hebrews, which all the Greeks receive, and some of the Latins."

In another place he uses the words, "Paul, or some one else who wrote the Epistle."

From all which it seems clear, that, however well assured Jerome may have been in his own mind, that St. Paul was the author of the Epistle, he was well aware that doubts on the subject existed in the minds of others, and so in his writings he would not assume absolute certainty in the matter.

And now another great name in the History of the Church comes before us, that of St. Augustine,—who died in A. D. 430. It was his lot to take part in several Synods, in which the canon of the New Testament came into question. There were differing individual opinions among members of these Synods on the authorship of our Epistle, but the overwhelming weight of opinion was for St. Paul; and with this St. Augustine strongly coincides. Dean Alford, who throughout his rather lengthy treatise on the authorship of the Epistle, impresses me as decidedly partisan against the Pauline party, using much special pleading on occasion and resorting sometimes to the finest hair-splitting,—Alford gives the substance of a "remarkable passage from Augustine,—where he enjoins his reader in judging of canonical writings to put those first which are received by all Catholic Churches, etc. And

having said this he proceeds to enumerate the canonical Books of the Old and New Testament, saying how the whole canon of Scripture to which the foregoing consideration applies, is the following: (I omit the list) giving fourteen (14) Epistles of Saint Paul. Among which he places the Epistle to the Hebrews last, that not being its usual place at that time. Some other citations from this Father seem to show that at times he was led to feel that the question of the authorship of the Epistle was still **in lite**. But generally his judgment seemed to be clear that Paul and no other was the writer of the Epistle.

And from this time on to the period of the Reformation, with only here and there a dissentient voice, the Church uniformly pronounced for St. Paul. But when we strike the times of the great awakening in the sixteenth century, when men were disposed to go to the roots of things and to examine for themselves into all matters connected with religion and theology,—and to receive nothing merely on the authority of antiquity, or the endorsement of great names; we find some of the leading Reformers adopting very independent views as to the authorship of the Epistle to the Hebrews. Erasmus gives it as his decided opinion that the Epistle was not written by St. Paul. Luther spoke still more plainly. He maintains in his introduction to his version of the Epistle that it cannot be St. Paul's nor indeed the writing of any Apostle. In another place he uses the words, "the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews whoever he is, whether Paul, or as I think, Appolos."

Calvin's opinion was equally unfavorable to the Pauline authorship. "Who composed it," he writes, "is hardly worth caring about. Some have thought him to be Paul, some Luke, Barnabas, or Clement." Further on in the same connection he adds, "Nothing will induce me to acknowledge St. Paul as its author—The manner of teaching and style betoken another than Paul. And the writer confesses himself to have been one of the disciples

of the Apostles,—which is repugnant in the last degree to the habit of Paul.”

At the same time the Protestant writers who held these views were all opposed and condemned by the Romanists. Erasmus was attacked by the theologians of the Sarbonne in a censure which concludes thus: “Wonderful is the arrogance and pertinacity of this writer, in that when so many Catholic doctors, pontiffs and councils declare that this Epistle is Paul’s; and the universal use and consent of the Church approve:—this writer still doubts it as being wiser than all the world.—And finally the Council of Trent in 1646 closed up the question for Romanists by declaring that “of the New Testament, there are fourteen Epistles of Paul the Apostle, enumerating them through from Romans to Hebrews.”

Coming down to still later times, we find a very large proportion of the more eminent German Theologians and commentators not only discrediting but utterly disputing the Pauline authorship, among them, Eichorn, De Wette, Tholuck (who leans towards Appolos as the author), Bleek (who is also for Appolos), Delitzsh, who holds St. Luke to have been the writer, Wiesler (who supports Barnabas).

In England, Dean Alford tells us that “most of the recent theologians and commentators are to be found on the Pauline side. Among these may be mentioned Doddridge, Lardner, Conybeare and Howson, Davidson, (introduction to New Testament) and Dr. Wordsworth.

Professor Stuart (an American) makes this statement: “I cannot hesitate to believe, that the weight of evidence from tradition is altogether preponderant in favor of the opinion, that Paul was the author of the Epistle.”

If the matter of the authorship were to be determined by the number of names, and the weight of personal authority, or of the scholarship and ability of those who have been recognized as leaders of thought in theology,—

taken in connection with length of time during which one or the other side of the controversy has prevailed in the Church at large,—there would be little doubt as to the result. St. Paul would have the Epistle by an overwhelming majority. But such questions are not settled by a show of hands. Facts are not voted up or voted down. Paul wrote the Epistle, or he did not.

The testimony or the tradition, of those living nearest the time of its writing ought to be conclusive,—unless there is good reason to doubt their reliability, or the truthfulness and fidelity of the Historian who transmits their testimony.

If Clement and Origen are to be believed, and if Eusebius, the Church Historian, reported correctly their writings, which he had seen, but which are now lost, Saint Paul was the author of the Epistle. But modern critics do not accept this testimony as conclusive. At least they demand that the internal evidence,—that which the Epistle itself, in its language, style and some of its statements show concerning its author, ought to be considered. Paul's style, they argue, as shown in his letters to the Romans, Corinthians, etc., is well known. The style of the letter to the Hebrews is very different. But may not the subject, the time and place of writing, the language in which he wrote, and the age of the writer, account for much of this variance of style? Let us take another writer to illustrate. It is generally thought that John is the author of the Gospel that bears his name, and also his first Epistle; and most Commentators hold the "Book of the Revelation" also to be his. But do not these productions differ as much in style and peculiarity of phrase from each other as the Epistle of the Hebrews differs from that of the Ephesians or the Thessalonians, or of Timothy?

Origen, as quoted by Eusebius, held strongly and apparently without any hesitancy, that Paul was the writer of the Epistle, either in the very language in which it has

come down to us, that is in Greek, or in Hebrew, afterwards translated into Greek by one of his well known friends and followers. Yet he says this: "That the character of the style has not the individual peculiarity of that of the Apostle." This seems to mean that though St. Paul was the real author, the peculiarity of the phraseology, in some places, must have been imported into the Epistle by the translator, or if written at the dictation or under the direction of the Apostle,—say by Luke or Barnabas,—that the unPauline phrases may have taken their peculiar form in passing through the mind of the amanuensis or translator.

Calvin and others lay great stress on the passage occurring in Chapter Second, verse third of the Epistle; namely: "How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation? Which began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by them who heard Him."

"The difficulty," says Dean Alford, "that Saint Paul should thus include himself among those who had received the Gospel only at second hand;" whereas in Galatians first and twelfth he says, "For I received it, not from man, neither was taught it, but by revelation of Jesus Christ, has been felt both in ancient and modern times."

But are we to believe that St. Paul learned nothing from those who were Apostles before him? Must he not have frequently met Disciples who had seen the Lord Jesus in the flesh and heard His words; and who were eye-witnesses of His Crucifixion; and who met and conversed with Him as his Disciples after His Resurrection? And would Paul the Apostle make no inquiries of these disciples about the Great Teacher and learn nothing from them of His gracious words and mighty works? Was it in vain that Paul abode with Peter, as he tells us in the Epistle to the Galatians, for fifteen days in Jerusalem? Is it possible that in all that time the chief Apostle Peter who had companied with the Lord during all the time of

His Public Ministry, would not communicate many things to his guest, concerning the person and manner, the teachings, doings, sufferings, resurrection and final utterances of their common Lord and Saviour?

Does it stand to reason that Paul would not learn,—in fact, endeavor to learn all he could, from one who had been an Apostle before him, and for three years a companion of Jesus the Saviour of Men, and now their ascended and adored Lord?

Surely it will not do to press this apparent contradiction too far. It is neither according to reason nor common sense to undertake to settle the question of the authorship of this Great Epistle, by such an apparent contradiction in statement by the authorship of two different pieces of writing,—produced perhaps many years apart: one of the passages in question being personal and particular and the other general in its terms.

Certainly St. Paul could say truthfully that the great Salvation was confirmed to us, meaning himself and his readers,—those to whom he was writing his Epistle,—members of the Church who heard it read, or who read it themselves. And yet he could say, as in Gallations, just as truthfully, "the Gospel which was preached of me is not after man. For I neither received it of man, neither was I taught it, but by revelation of Jesus Christ."

But Dean Alford, who is still the special pleader against St. Paul's authorship throughout his treatise, says: "I must own that the words appear to me quite irreconcilable with that hypothesis."

Dr. Philip Schaff does not declare positively for St. Paul as the author of the Epistle; yet in his "History of the Christian Church," he uses this language: "The Epistle stands so completely on Pauline ground, particularly in regard to the relations of Christianity to Judaism: it is so uncommonly rich and full of the unction of the spirit; and it teaches and reports with such a tone of authority that we cannot be satisfied to ascribe it even to a disciple

of Paul, like Luke, or Apollos, or Clement, without allowing the Great Apostle an indirect concern with its contents: though not with its literary form.

In referring to the Apostle Peter, Dr. Schaff says: St. Peter, in his second Epistle, speaking of "the elect, who are sojourners of the Dispersion, (that is Hebrews) in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia," etc., uses this language in Chapter 3.15th verse, "And account that the long suffering of our Lord is Salvation: even as our beloved Brother Paul, also according to the wisdom given unto him, hath written unto you."

What other Epistle but that to the Hebrews, could Saint Paul have written, that Saint Peter would refer to as addressed to the same Christians that he himself was also addressing? That is the Hebrews.

In conclusion I can truly say that while I am well convinced that Saint Paul was strongly influenced to write the Epistle on account of his extreme anxiety for the conversion of the Hebrews, his "kindred according to the flesh," yet putting aside the consideration of that argument, I feel assured that the great preponderance of proof abides in the testimony of the early Christian writers on the subject.

But taking all the proofs together, the strong influence on the Apostle himself, his intense personal feeling in behalf of his own brother Jews resting continually in his heart, sounding as the very voice of the Holy Spirit prompting him not to delay his duty of writing a most faithful and earnest Epistle to his fellow Hebrews.

To repeat: Eusebius, the earliest Christian Historian, tells us that Clement, a distinguished "Father of the Church," born, it is believed, at Athens, flourished about the beginning of the third century, held without any doubt or hesitancy, that Paul was the author of the Epistle. The same Historian writes that Origen, born at Alexandria, A. D. 185, died A. D. 254, an eminent Christian and scholar, and a distinguished teacher of Latin and Greek hand-

ed down as a well known fact, derived from the Ancients, that Paul was the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews. Dr. Philip Schaff says: "The Epistle stands so completely on Pauline ground, that we cannot be satisfied to ascribe it even to a disciple of Paul's.

The Council of Trent, the last in order of the assemblies, regarded by the Catholic Church as ecumenical, or general, held in the seventeenth century, running for twenty years through many sessions, and finally coming to an end in 1663, pronounced unanimously for St. Paul. The Church of Rome has held and still holds, that the authorship of the Epistle to the Hebrews is the Apostle Paul.

Allow me to close with one more fact, which, it seems to me, carries great weight. According to an arrangement between the Apostolic missionaries, in an early part of their career,—Paul was to go to the Gentiles, while Peter was to preach to the Circumcision; stated in the words following, in Gallations second and ninth: "And when James, Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given unto me (that is Paul), they gave to me and Barnabas the right hands of fellowship; that we should go unto the Gentiles and they unto the Circumcision."

Peter's first Epistle, and it is presumed the second likewise, was addressed to the Dispersion (meaning the dispersed), the strangers scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bythynia," meaning the Jews in those parts.

The Apostle Peter in his second Epistle, speaking of the scattered Hebrews, in Chapter 3, 15, uses this language: "And account that the long suffering of our Lord is Salvation: Even as our beloved brother Paul also according to the wisdom given unto him, has written unto you."

What other Epistle but that to the Hebrews could St. Paul have written, which Saint Peter would refer to

as addressed to the same people that he himself was addressing? Can we fail to conclude from this direct reference of the Apostle Peter to what his brother Paul had written, as closing the matter finally in behalf of Saint Paul, as the Author of the Epistle to the Hebrews.

