

Original Language of Hebrews

Clement of Alexandria (150 - 212 C.E.)

In the work called Hypotyposes, to sum up the matter briefly he [Clement of Alexandria] has given us abridged accounts of all the canonical Scriptures,... the Epistle to the Hebrews he asserts was written by Paul, to the Hebrews, in the Hebrew tongue; but that it was carefully translated by Luke, and published among the Greeks.

(Clement of Alexandria; Hypotyposes (c. 200 CE) referred to by Eusebius in Eccl. Hist. 6:14:2)

Eusebius (315 C.E.)

For as Paul had addressed the Hebrews in the language of his country; some say that the evangelist Luke, others that Clement, translated the epistle.

(Eusebius (4th Cent.); Eccl. Hist. 3:38:2-3)

Jerome (382 C.E.)

He (Paul) being a Hebrew wrote in Hebrew, that is, his own tongue and most fluently while things which were eloquently written in Hebrew were more eloquently turned into Greek

(Jerome (4th Cent.); Lives of Illustrious Men, Book V)

In 1537 Munster published the Hebrew text of the Book of Matthew which he had obtained from the Jews (this Hebrew text was very similar to the Hebrew Matthew published in 1553 by Jean DuTillet). Twenty years later, in 1557, a second edition of Munster's Hebrew Matthew was printed, this time also containing the complete Hebrew text of the Letter to the Hebrews in an appendix. This second edition went largely unnoticed and soon forgotten.

Who Wrote Hebrews?

For a number of reasons it appears that Paul was the author of Hebrews:

1. The “Church Fathers”; Clement of Alexandria (150-212 C.E.) and Eusebius (315 C.E.) maintain Pauline authorship of the book.
2. The most ancient New Testament manuscripts place Hebrews with the Pauline Epistles, as does the Peshitta Aramaic New Testament.
3. From 2Peter 3:15 it appears that Paul had written a letter to the Hebrews (compare 2Pt. 1:1 and James 1:1).
4. Pauline authorship is supported by the fact that the author was in bonds (10:34) in Italy (13:24) and Timothy was one of his companions (13:23).
5. The author treats the subject of inheritance in detail, Paul had been commissioned to teach on the topic of inheritance (Acts 26:12-18) and only in the Pauline epistles is the concept of inheritance dealt with in such detail.
6. Finally, the authors' expert use of the Seven Rules of Hillel and complex forms of Homiletic Midrashic Exegesis point to Paul (Saul), who had been a student of Gamliel (Acts 22:3) the grandson of Hillel.

The Ebionite-Essene Audience of Hebrews

Paul opens the Epistle by showing that the Messiah is greater than angels. This is significant because the Essenes and Ebionites both had a high angelology. Moreover, the Ebionites held to a low Christology, while Paul argues in Heb. 1 for a very high Christology.

Paul goes on to present Yeshua as a priestly Messiah after the order of Melchizedek and gives an argument as to how one from the tribe of Judah could be in every way a priest. This is very significant because the Qumran community were anticipating two Messiahs, a priestly Messiah from the Aaronic line, and a Kingly Messiah from the Davidic line. Paul centers his argument strategically around Melchizedek, who was both a priest and a king. The Qumran community believed in a coming Melchizedek figure who would help Israel receive their inheritance and whose work is tied to the Day of Atonement. Moreover, the Qumran community identified this Melchizedek figure as EL, ELOHIM and as YHWH. Paul makes all of the same identifications with Yeshua.

Both the Essenes and the Ebionites repudiated the Temple ceremonies. The Essenes argued that the priesthood of the Temple were corrupt and refused to participate in the sacrificial offerings as a result. Ebionites maintained that Yeshua had come to abolish the sacrifices. Paul argues in favor of the Temple sacrifices apparently giving an alternate explanation of Ps. 40:6-8 which was likely an Essene and Ebionite proof text. Paul's Midrash on Psalm 40:6-8 ties in with two other passages of importance to the Qumran community: Jer. 31:31-34 and Hab. 2:3-4. The Qumran community believed that their community had become partakers of the New Covenant of Jer. 31:31-34. In Hebrews, Paul cites this passage as part of his midrash on Ps. 40:6-8 and argues that the New Covenant will not occur until the Messiah comes [again].

The Qumran community also used Hab. 2:3-4 as a proof text. They saw the "faith" (or as I translate: "trust") in this passage as being faith in the Teacher of Righteousness who had founded their sect. In Hebrews, Paul applies the same text to trust in Elohim and in the Messiah.

In Hebrews, Paul twice cites Ps. 2:7 in reference to the Messiah. Paul seems to tie this verse to the idea of Messiah as priest. This passage is also applied to Yeshua in the Ebionite version of the Goodnews according to the Hebrews in the account of Yeshua's immersion by John the Baptist. This is significant for two reasons. This immersion took place when Yeshua was approximately thirty years old, the same age at which priests were immersed as part of their initiation into the priesthood. It is also significant that the Ebionites used this story to argue for a low Christology. They argued that Yeshua was a man who was entered into by the Spirit of Messiah at that time. In Hebrews chapter one Paul uses this verse in a chain of references to argue for a high Christology. Paul in Hebrews also cites 2Sam. 7:14 as a Messianic prophecy. While Rabbinic Jewish documents never cite this text as a messianic prophecy, the Dead Sea Scrolls do use this verse as a messianic prophecy.

Paul did not sign the Epistle to the Hebrews because his signature would add only negative weight to the proto-Ebionite audience he hoped to reach. Paul was a Pharisee but his target audience were of the rival Essene background. Moreover, in later years the Ebionites would repudiate Paul's writings altogether.

Date and Occasion of Hebrews

The probable occasion for the writing of Hebrews was the martyrdom of Ya'akov HaTzadik (James the Just) in 63 C.E.

1. In 63 C.E. Paul was in bonds (10:34) in Italy (13:24) (Acts 28).
2. Paul's audience in 63 C.E. at the martyrdom of their leader Ya'akov HaTzadik, could have viewed themselves as oppressed (10:32-34; 12:4) and been in need of Exhortation (13:22), endurance and confidence (10:35-36).

Theme of Hebrews

Paul's topic is the Blood Covenant and Inheritance. He shows that the Messiah was "made heir of all things" (1:2, 4) and the "firstborn" (1:6;12:23) (an inheritance term, see note to 12:23). He shows that the oath which made Abraham's seed the chosen people was a covenant (6:13-14), and that the oath which makes the Messiah a priest after the order of Melchizedek (7:20-22) is the New Covenant (Heb. 7:22; 8:6-13). He also shows that this is a blood covenant sealed with the Messiah's blood (Heb. 8 & 9). Paul argues that because of this covenant relationship, we have an inheritance (9:11-22). Since we are blood covenantors with the Messiah who is heir of all things (i.e. the Kingdom (1:13; 2:5-9) we inherit with him (1:14; 2:10-18; 9:11-22; 12:23). To Paul this inheritance is the "rest" of Ps. 95:7-11 (Heb. 4:9). A rest which has not yet been entered (4:9-10), an inheritance covenant promise like that of the Abrahmic Covenant (6:13-20) but with its promise yet to be received (11:39-40).

Outline of Hebrews
As an Extended Proem Homiletic Midrash on Psalm 110

I. THE MESSIAH HUMBLD AND EXALTED (1:1-3:6)
(YHWH said to my Adonai, sit at my right hand. Ps. 110:1a)

A. Initial texts: (Heb. 1:5-13)(Ps. 2:7; 2Sam. 7:14; Deut. 32:46/Ps. 97:7; Ps. 104:4; Ps. 45:6, 7; Ps. 102:25-27; Ps. 110:1)

B. Exposition (1:14-2:5)

C. Second Text: (2:6-8a) (Ps. 8:4-6)

D. Exposition: (2:8b-3:6)

II. THE WORLD YET TO BE SUBJECT TO HIM (3:6-4:13)
(until your enemies are made your footstool Ps. 110:1b)

A. Initial text:(3:7-3:11) (Ps. 95:7-11)

B. Exposition (3:12-4:3)

C. Second text (4:4) (Gen. 2:2)

D. Exposition (4:5-14)

III. A MIDRASH ON MELCHIZADEK (4:14-7:28)
(A priest forever after the order of Melchizadek Ps. 110:4)

A. Introductory exposition (4:14-5:5)

B. Initial text: (5:6) (Ps. 110:4)

C. Exposition (5:7-11)

D. Parenthetical (5:12-6:12)

E. Second text (6:13-14) (Gen. 22:17)

F. Exposition (6:15-7:28)

IV. THE PRIEST AT THE RIGHT HAND OF YHWH (8:1-9:28)
(Ps. 110:1 and Ps. 110:4 brought together)

- A. Introductory exposition (8:1-7)
- B. Initial text (8:8-12) (Jer. 31:31-34)
- C. Exposition (8:13-9:19)
- D. Second text (9:20) (Ex. 24:8)
- E. Exposition (9:21-9:28)

V. IN DEFENSE OF THE TEMPLE CEREMONIES (10:1-11:40)

- A. Introductory exposition (10:1-4)
- B. Initial text (10:5-7) (Ps. 40:6-8)
- C. Exposition (10:8-14)
- D. Second text (10:15-17) (Jer. 31:33-34)
- E. Exposition (10:18-35)
- F. Third text (10:36-38) (Hab. 2:3-4)
- G. Exposition (10:39-11:40)

He is the Brightness of His Glory

What does this mean “He is the Brightness of His Glory”? In the original Hebrew as found in the Munster Hebrew text of Hebrews this word is “ZOHAR”. Of course many know that there is a book known as the Zohar, but fewer know the original significance of the term. The Hebrew word ZOHAR appears only twice in the Tanak. One of these is in the Book of Daniel:

And they that are wise, shall shine as the brightness [Zohar] of the firmament, and they that turn the many to righteousness, as the stars; forever and ever.
(Daniel 12:3 HRV)

The other is in the Book of Ezekiel as part of Ezekiel’s description of the “Likeness” of Elohim:

Then I beheld, and behold, a likeness as the appearance of fire. From the appearance of his loins and downward, fire: and from his loins and upward, as the appearance of brightness (Zohar), as the color of electrum.
(Ezekiel 8:2 HRV)

This brings us to Ezekiel’s vision of the Merkavah (Divine Throne-Chariot):

22 And over the heads of the living creatures there was the likeness of a firmament; like the color of the terrible ice, stretched forth over their heads above.
23 And under the firmament were their wings conformable, the one to the other. This one of them had two which covered, and that one of them had two which covered, their bodies.
24 And when they went, I heard the noise of their wings like the noise of great waters; like the voice of Shaddai—a noise of tumult like the noise of a host. When they stood, they let down their wings.
25 For, when there was a voice above the firmament that was over their heads, as they stood, they let down their wings.
26 And above the firmament that was over their heads, was the likeness of a throne, as the appearance of a sapphire stone. And upon the likeness of the throne was a likeness as the appearance of a man, upon it; above.
27 And I saw as the color of electrum, as the appearance of fire round about enclosing it, from the appearance of his loins and upward. And from the appearance of his loins and downward, I saw as it were the appearance of fire, and there was brightness round about him.
28 As the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud in the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness round about. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of YHWH. And when I saw it, I fell upon my face, and I heard a voice of one that spoke.
(Ezekiel 1:22-28)

The “firmament” mentioned by Daniel is that which is above the four living creatures in Ezekiel 1:22. The Zohar is the brightness of the likeness seated on the Merkavah (Throne-Chariot).

It is this brightness which is the namesake of the book known as the Zohar. This is what the book called the Zohar says about the ZOHAR:

It is written: And they that are wise, shall shine as the brightness [Zohar] of the firmament, and they that turn the many to righteousness, as the stars; forever and ever (Dan. 12:3). There was indeed a “brightness” (Zohar). The Most Mysterious struck its void, and caused this point to shine. This “beginning” then extended, and made for itself a palace for its honor and glory. There it sowed a sacred seed which was to generate for the benefit of the universe, and to which may be applied the Scriptural words “the holy seed is the stock thereof” (Is. 6:13). Again there was Zohar, in that it sowed a seed for its glory, just as the silkworm encloses itself, as it were, in a palace of its own production which is both useful and beautiful. Thus by means of this “beginning” the Mysterious Unknown made this palace. This palace is called Elohim, and this doctrine is contained in the words, “By means of a beginning (he) created Elohim.”

The Zohar is that from which were created all the creative utterances through the extension of the point of this mysterious brightness. Nor need we be surprised at the use of the word “created” in this connection, seeing that we read further on, “And God created man in his image” (Gen. 1:27).

A further esoteric interpretation of the word Bereshith is as follows. The name of the starting-point of all is Ehyeh (I shall be). The holy name when inscribed at its side is Elohim, but when inscribed by circumscription [i.e. between the two Ehyeh's. v. Ex. 3:4.] is Asher, the hidden and recondite temple, the source of that which is mystically called Reshith. The word Asher (i.e. the letters, Aleph, Shin, Resh from the word Bereshith) is anagrammatically Rosh (head), the beginning which issues from Reshith. So when [15b] the point and the temple were firmly established together, then Bereshith combined the supernal Beginning with Wisdom. Afterwards the character of that temple was changed, and it was called “house” (beit). The combination of this with the supernal point which is called rosh gives Bereshith, which is the name used so long as the house was uninhabited. When, however, it was sown with seed to make it habitable, it was called Elohim, hidden and mysterious. The Zohar was hidden and withdrawn so long as the building was within and yet to bring forth, and the house was extended only so far as to find room for the holy seed. Before it had conceived and had extended sufficiently to be habitable, it was not called Elohim, but all was still included in the term Bereshith. After it had acquired the name of Elohim, it brought forth offspring from the seed that had been implanted in it. (Zohar 1:15a-15b)

In the book called the Zohar the Zohar is likened to a “seed” which is elsewhere called the “Son of Yah”. The Zohar says that the Most Mysterious (the Infinite One) created a palace for himself called Elohim into which he placed his Zohar (brightness) like a seed sowed of himself, in much the same way that a silkworm encloses itself in a cocoon.

