THE EPISTOLARY CLOSING OF HEBREWS AND PAULINE IMITATION

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Introduction

The Epistle to the Hebrews is an anonymous document that makes no direct claims to the identity of its author. Apart from an epistolary closing, Hebrews lacks many of the typical features of the letter-form that are demonstrated in several other New Testament writings, including an introductory greeting—especially features exhibited in the Pauline corpus. Its epistolary closing in 13:20–25 offers little help in identifying its author or audience but seems to follow fairly standard ancient conventions. The text of Hebrews itself offers little information about its author beyond what can be gleaned indirectly from his composition—skilled in rhetoric, knowledgeable of the Old Testament (LXX), etc. That a composition like Hebrews is anonymous is not unheard of among ancient documents. Several compositions within the New Testament canon (the four Gospels, Acts, the Johannine epistles) are formally anonymous. What is unique about Hebrews is that from early in its reception it was connected to


2 On epistolary closings, see Jeffrey A. D. Weima, Neglected Endings: The Significance of Pauline Letter Closings (JSNTSup 101; Sheffield: JSOT, 1994).

3 Many commentaries attempt this type of helpful, yet general, reconstruction of the author’s “identity.” See, for example, David A. deSilva, Perseverance in Gratitude: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle “to the Hebrews” (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 23–39. I refer to the author as a male because of the use of the masculine participle διηγοομαιν in Heb. 11:32. Ruth Hoppin has argued for a female author, namely Priscilla, of Hebrews (“The Epistle to the Hebrews is Priscilla’s Letter,” in Amy-Jill Levine [ed.], A Feminist Companion to the Catholic Epistles and Hebrews [London: T&T Clark, 2004], 147–70).
Paul—often circulating as a part of a corpus of Paul’s letters. Hebrews then is the only anonymous document to be associated with Paul. All other canonical books attributed to Paul (regardless of their status concerning pseudepigraphy) clearly identify with his name. Later Pauline pseudepigraphy (e.g., 3 Corinthians, Epistle to the Laodiceans) similarly write using Paul’s name within the composition.

If, as is something of a scholarly consensus, Paul did not write Hebrews, how did it come to be ascribed to him despite any direct appeal to his name? This is where the issue of pseudepigraphy comes into play. Many scholars writing on New Testament—especially Pauline—pseudepigraphy consider Hebrews to be a case of “mistaken attribution,” in which the connection to Paul happened after its composition and reception. Most in this group would argue that the epistle was never intended to be attributed to Paul but its parallels to Paul’s letters, or possibly a connection to a Pauline school, led to this false attribution. Others leave Hebrews out of their definition of pseudepigraphy because of its anonymity. Still others have maintained that Hebrews should be understood as Pauline pseudepigraphy by arguing that its author, or some later editor, intentionally attempted to connect the epistle to Paul’s name. Those arguing for Pauline pseudepigraphy usually focus on the epistle’s closing (13:20–25) as an intentional appeal to Paul’s identity and authority.

4 Rom 1:1; 1 Cor 1:1, 16:21; 2 Cor 1:1, 10:1; Gal 1:3, 5:12; Eph 1:1, 3:1; Phil 1:1; Col 1:1, 4:18; 1 Thess 1:1, 2:13; 2 Thess 3:17; 1 Tim 1:1; 2 Tim 1:1; Titus 1:1; Phlm 1, 19.