

Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews

by
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Excerpt from Introduction

"Authorship of the Letter to the Hebrews"

We come, then, next to inquire whether the *internal condition* of the epistle corresponds with and confirms this tradition. The evidence drawn from this may be divided into two kinds: first, *that which arises from circumstances mentioned or adverted to in the epistle*; and, secondly, *that which arises from the style and manner of it*.¹

Evidence that it was Paul's from circumstances mentioned or adverted to in the epistle.

As our epistle nowhere exhibits the author's name, we can appeal for internal testimony respecting the author of it only to accidental circumstances which are developed in it.

1. The most striking one is that contained in 13:23: "Know ye, that our brother Timothy is ἀπολελυμένον, with whom, if he come speedily, I will pay you a visit." From the first acquaintance of Timothy with Paul, he had been his intimate friend and constant companion. That he was with Paul at Rome during his imprisonment we know for certainty, because Paul has united him in the salutation prefixed to the epistles written to the Philippians, Colossians, and to Philemon, during his captivity in that city. Timothy was greatly beloved and confided in by Paul, as the manner in which he speaks of him in several of his epistles abundantly shows; and Paul often calls him (as here) his *brother*.

But the meaning of the word ἀπολελυμένον as applied to Timothy has been much contested, some rendering it *set at liberty*, i.e. from prison, others *sent away*, i.e. on some errand of Paul's. Giving to ἀπολελυμένον the first meaning assigned it, viz. *liberated*, objectors have said that "we have no account of Timothy's having been imprisoned during the life of Paul, and therefore, the occurrence of his imprisonment must have taken place after Paul's death; consequently the epistle must have been written by some *other* friend of Timothy, who calls him *brother*, in accordance with the usual style of the primitive Christians."

Nothing, however, can be more unsafe or uncritical than the supposition that the Acts of the Apostles or Paul's epistles give us a *full and complete* account of all which happened to

1 Only the first of these two evidences will be covered in this excerpt.

the various persons who are named in them. E.g. Aristarchus is called by Paul, in Col. 4:10, his fellow-prisoner, as is Epaphras in Philem. 5:23. But where is the history of their imprisonment? The supposition by Bertholdt, that another Timothy different from him who is so often mentioned in the sacred records may be meant here, is doubtless a *possible* one. But is it a *probable* one? Have we any kind of ecclesiastical voucher that there was another Timothy who distinguished himself in the apostolic age? It is *possible* that one Virgil wrote the Eneid and another the Georgics, yet who thinks it to be *probable*?

But if this be insufficient, Bertholdt alleges that a different person from Paul may have been the intimate friend and travelling companion of Timothy while Paul was imprisoned at Rome, and that the passage we are considering may have come from him. Eichhorn thinks it must have been written by such a friend of Timothy after the death of Paul, as, during his life, Timothy closely adhered to this apostle.

All this, no doubt, is *possible*; and a great many other hypotheses, which could be easily made, present no *impossibility*. But are they *probable*? And is not the language which we are considering more appropriate to the known relation of Paul and Timothy than to the relation of any other person of that period with Timothy concerning whom we have any knowledge? The spontaneous feeling of Christian readers in all ages has fully answered this question.

But what was the imprisonment which is adverted to by the word ἀπολελυμένον? To suppose with Schmidt (Hist. Antiq. Canon), and many others, that it was an imprisonment at Rome with Paul is evidently preposterous, for how, if Timothy were already at Rome, could Paul or anyone else there say *if he come, or return, speedily*? Must not Timothy have been *absent* when this was said? If Timothy had been imprisoned abroad and was then *liberated* (ἀπολελυμένον), would he not have been the immediate bearer of the news himself to the apostle? I do not allege this as a certain fact, for possibly there may have been circumstances to prevent it. But then it is not in itself very probable that Paul in confinement at Rome would obtain information about Timothy (who if absent was doubtless among some of the churches where Paul had been) any sooner than those to whom he wrote our epistle, and who, as it appears from the manner in which Paul speaks of him to them, had a special regard for him.

Why, moreover, raise up all these difficulties in order to maintain an interpretation of ἀπολελυμένον which accords no better with the *usus loquendi* of the sacred or classical writers than the rendering *dismissed* or *sent away*, a sense so exactly consentaneous [accordant] with the relation between Paul and Timothy? (See Schelus, in voc. ἀπολύω, No. 3.) In Philip. 2:19 (this epistle was written while Paul was a prisoner at Rome), the apostle speaks of sending Timothy to them shortly, so soon as he should see how it would go with him in respect to being liberated from prison (2:23), at the same time expressing a hope

that he should himself come to them shortly (ver. 24). What then is more natural than the supposition that he did send Timothy to them and that during his absence Paul wrote the epistle the Hebrews, in which he tells them that Timothy was sent away, that he is now assured that he himself would be speedily set at liberty, and that he intends to pay them a visit in company with Timothy if he should shortly return, viz. from Philippi? Many facts are believed by Bertholdt, and all other critics, which have less of verisimilitude [probability] to support them than this. Indeed, one cannot well see how mere circumstantial evidence could be better adapted to make the impression of *probability* than this.

I do not feel the weight of the objection made by alleging that Timothy was unknown to the church in Palestine and that they could have no special interest with respect to the information in question. For, first, Timothy was the well-known and beloved companion of Paul in all his journeyings during his later years, and must have been known as such wherever Paul was known. Next, there can be no reasonable question that he was with Paul during his last visit to Jerusalem previously to the apostle's captivity for two years at Cesarea. Is there any probability, even if he were not with Paul during his journey to Jerusalem, that he did not frequently visit him in his afflictions? And would not the church at Cesarea, therefore, be well acquainted with him, specially so as Timothy would be the more acceptable to the Palestine Jewish Christians on account of his having received the rite of circumcision after he became a convert to Christianity?

Now, as all these circumstances do plainly accord with Paul's situation while a prisoner at Rome with his relation to Timothy and with the manner in which he employed him, and as we have not a syllable of testimony that they are applicable to any other person, I do not see how we can be justified in denying that the evidence deducible from them is sufficient to render it quite probable that Paul was the author of our epistle.

2. In Heb. 13:18, 19 the writer asks the prayers of those whom he addressed that he might speedily be restored to them, and in Heb. 13:23 he expresses a confident expectation of "speedily paying them a visit." From these passages it is clear that the writer was then in a state of imprisonment, and also that he was assured of a speedy liberation which would enable him to pay the visit that he had encouraged them to hope for.

Compare this now with the situation of Paul at Rome during the latter part of his imprisonment there. In his epistle to the Philippians (written during that period), he expresses his entire confidence that his life will be prolonged so that he shall yet promote their religious profit and joy: τοῦτο πεποιθῶς οἶδα, ὅτι μενῶ καὶ συμπαραμενῶ πᾶσιν ὑμῖν, εἰς τὴν ὑμῶν προκοπὴν καὶ χαρὰν τῆς πίστεως, Phil. 1:25. Again, in Phil. 2:24, he says, πέποιθα δὲ ἐν Κυρίῳ, ὅτι καὶ αὐτὸς ταχέως ἐλεύσομαι, *I trust in the Lord, that I myself shall speedily come [to you.]* In the epistle to Philemon (also written during the same imprisonment), he says,

ἐλπίζω γὰρ, ὅτι διὰ τῶν προσευχῶν ὑμῶν χαρισθήσομαι ὑμῖν, *for I hope, that by your prayers I shall be restored to you*, ver. 22. So confident was Paul of this that he bids Philemon *prepare lodgings for him*, ἐτοίμαζε μοι ξενίαν, ver. 22.

It appears very plainly, then, from these passages that the writer had a satisfactory assurance in his mind of being speedily set at liberty, although it is probable a *formal* declaration of his acquittal had not yet been made by the Roman emperor. This last conclusion I gather from Phil. 2:23, where Paul declares to the church whom he is addressing "that he shall send Timothy to them immediately, ὡς ἂν ἀπίδω τὰ περὶ ἐμὲ, *whenever I shall know how my affairs issue.*" By this it appears that he was in daily expectation of receiving *official* notice of the determination of the emperor in respect to his case, but that he had not yet received it. That he had private information, however, of the way in which his case was likely to terminate, and information which pretty fully satisfied his mind, is evident from the manner in which he speaks in the passages quoted above of his intended visit to the Philippians and to Philemon.

Supposing, now, as soon as an intimation was made by the Roman emperor that Paul would be set at liberty, that intelligence respecting it was immediately communicated to the apostle by *those of Cesar's household* (Phil. 4:22), who were his Christian friends, and supposing that agreeably to his promise made to the Philippians (2:23) he then immediately sent away Timothy to them, and supposing still further (which surely cannot be regarded as improbable) that there was some little delay in *formally* making out his sentence of acquittal and carrying it into execution by actually liberating him from prison, then how obviously easy and natural is the expression in Heb. 13:23, "Know that our brother Timothy is sent away, with whom, if he speedily return, I shall pay you a visit."

On the supposition that the *close* of the epistle to the Hebrews was written at this juncture of time, nothing can be more probable than that the promised mission of Timothy adverted to in Phil. 2:23 is referred to in Heb. 13:23, and consequently that ἀπολελυμένον here means *sent away, dismissed* (as all must acknowledge it *may* mean) and not *liberated* or *set at liberty*.

The circumstances adverted to or implied in Heb. 13:23, Phil. 2:23, and Philem. ver. 22 have other correspondencies which deserve particular notice. In the two latter passages it is plain that the writer *expects* his liberty and means to send away Timothy to Philippi. In the former he is *assured* of his liberty and only waits for the return of Timothy in order that he may set out to visit the Hebrews whom he had been addressing. In case Timothy did not return *speedily* (τάχιον), it is plainly implied in Heb. 13:23 that the writer meant to set out on his journey without him. There was, then, some uncertainty in his mind respecting the time when Timothy would return. How well all this accords with the journey of Timothy to a place so remote from Rome as Philippi cannot fail to strike the mind of every considerate

reader.

Now laying aside all favouritism for any previous opinions respecting our epistle, can it be reasonably doubted that here is a concurrence of circumstances so striking as to render it highly probable that Paul wrote it? More especially so when we consider that the epistle must have been written about the same period of time when these circumstances happened, for it proffers internal evidence of being written before the destruction of Jerusalem and yet written so late that the period when the Hebrews were first converted to Christianity is adverted to as being already a considerable time before (Heb. 5:12) and is called τὰς πρότερον ἡμέρας (10:32). Now the imprisonment of Paul at Rome happened probably A.D. 62 or 63, which was some thirty years after the gospel had begun to be preached abroad and about seven years before the destruction of Jerusalem.

Taking all these circumstances together, it must be acknowledged that there is an extraordinary concurrence of them which cannot but serve much to increase the probability that our epistle was written by Paul near the close of his liberation at Rome.

The objections which Bertholdt makes against the arguments just presented do not seem to be weighty. "Would *Paul*," he asks, "promise to revisit Palestine when the people of that very country had sent him into captivity at Rome? A very improbable circumstance, indeed!"

But a nearer consideration of the circumstances attending Paul's case will remove the appearance of so great improbability. For, first, Paul had been kept a prisoner at Cesarea two years before his removal to Rome (Acts 24:25-27), and at Rome he lived two years more in a similar condition (Acts 28:30). These, with the time occupied by his going to Rome and returning from it, would make nearly a five years' interval between his leaving Palestine and revisiting it. Might not some of his fiercest persecutors have died during this period? Or might they not have laid aside their furious, persecuting zeal?

But in the next place, supposing our epistle to have been sent to the church at Cesarea where Paul had been treated with so much kindness during his imprisonment, could there have been any fear in his mind with respect to paying them a visit? And even if we suppose that Cesarea was not the place to which the letter was directed but that it was sent to the Christians at Jerusalem, yet the objection brought forward by Bertholdt will not be of much validity. Paul was not to be deterred from going to Jerusalem by the prospect of persecution. From the time when he first made his appearance there after his conversion, the Jews had always showed a bitter enmity against him and persecuted him. Yet this did not deter him from going again and again to that city. And why should it now deter him any more than formerly? Besides, he was now liberated from the accusations of the Jews by the sentence of the emperor himself. Would they venture to do again the very thing which the court of Rome had decided to be unlawful? Might not Paul well expect, with the

decision of the emperor in his hand, to find his personal liberty for the future respected?

"But," says Bertholdt, "we have no account that Paul paid a visit to Palestine after his liberation." True, but what argument this can furnish against the probability that he did pay such a visit I do not perceive. Bertholdt himself, in the very paragraph which contains this objection, says, "Who does not know that the accounts of what befell the apostles and primitive teachers of Christianity are very incomplete?" Everyone knows that Luke breaks off the history of Paul with the account of his imprisonment at Rome. Has any writer given us a well-authenticated *supplement* to this? And can the want [lack] of any history of Paul after the period of his imprisonment at Rome be a proof that he never travelled to any particular place or that he did not live and preach there? Surely this cannot be urged with any show of propriety.

I add only, that analogy would lead us to suppose that Paul, when liberated, would go to Palestine and then to the other churches in Asia Minor. Such was the general course of his travels (see Acts 18:22, seq.). It is altogether consonant, then, with the usage of Paul to suppose that he would visit the church at Palestine after his imprisonment at Rome, and therefore natural to suppose that Heb. 13:23 refers to such an event.

3. If the reading in Heb. 10:34, "for ye had compassion *on my bonds*" (τοῖς δεσμοῖς μου), be correct, it is another argument that Paul is the author of our epistle, for his bonds in Palestine, whither the letter was sent, are well known. That he obtained compassion there, particularly during his two years' imprisonment at Cesarea, will not be questioned. But as the reading δεσμοῖς μου is controverted and δεσμίους (*the prisoners*) is preferred by some good critics, I do not think proper to urge this argument, although the evidence is about equally in favour of δεσμοῖς μου, δεσμοῖς, and δεσμίους.

4. The salutation in Heb. 13:24 agrees with the supposition that Paul wrote this epistle: ἀσπάζονται ὑμᾶς οἱ ἀπὸ τῆς Ἰταλίας. Paul, writing from Rome, which had communication, of course, with all parts of Italy and with the Italian churches, may very naturally be supposed to have sent such a salutation. Indeed, the circumstances render this quite probable. The objections made against this do not strike me as forcible. Eichhorn alleges that οἱ ἀπὸ τῆς Ἰταλίας must mean *people who had come from Italy*, i.e. who had left Italy and were *locally* out of it when the writer sent a salutation from them. Consequently he concludes the writer of the epistle could not have been Paul during his imprisonment at Rome.

This interpretation, however, is not founded in the *usus loquendi* of the Greek language. From the many proofs of this which might be offered I select only a few cases. Matt. 21:11: Ἰησοῦς . . . ὁ ἀπὸ Ναζαρέτ, *Jesus the Nazarene*; οἱ ἀπὸ Θεσσαλονίκης Ἰουδαῖοι, *the Thessalonian*

Jews. In this last case, the *Jews at Thessalonica*, not *out of it*, are meant, as is plain from the last part of the verse which speaks of them as going to Berea *after* they had heard the report of Paul's preaching there. So οἱ ἀπὸ Ἱεροσολύμων γραμματεῖς, *the Jerusalem scribes* (Matt. 15:1).

In the same manner other prepositions of the like signification with ἀπὸ are used with the article: e.g. [1] οἱ ἐκ ἐριθείας, *the contentious* ; [2] οἱ ἐκ νόμου, *sticklers for the law* ; [3] τὸ ἐξ οὐράνου, *heavenly* ; [4] οἱ ἐκ τῆς Καίσαρος οἰκίας, *Cesar's domestics*.

So far is Eichhorn's remark from being well founded in regard to the meaning of such a phrase as οἱ ἀπὸ τῆς Ἰταλίας, that one may venture to say it is incapable of such a meaning as he gives it. It is only when ἀπὸ, in such a connexion, is preceded by ἀφίστημι, ἀναβαίνω, ἐξέρχομαι, ἔρχομαι, καταβαίνω, &c. that it denotes *being out of a country*. Οἱ ἀπὸ denotes *belonging to*. Consequently the salutation in Heb. 13:24 means simply *The Italians* [i.e. Italian Christians] *salute you*.²

But here again it is asked, "How came Italians to salute a church in Palestine? If Paul wrote our epistle at *Rome*, why did he not say ἀσπάζονται ὑμᾶς οἱ ἀπὸ τῆς Ῥώμης? What acquaintance had the *Romans* with the church at Palestine?

This objection, however, will not bear examination. The Romans surely were *Italians*, and it is a matter of indifference whether the writer at Rome said οἱ ἀπὸ τῆς Ῥώμης or οἱ ἀπὸ τῆς Ἰταλίας if he meant to send only the salutation of Christians who resided at Rome. But is it at all probable that there were not Christians often at Rome from various parts of Italy who were acquainted with Paul and who cherished a friendly interest for the church whom he was addressing? If these also, as well as the *Romans*, wished to send the expression of their friendly regards to the Hebrews, what other phraseology could Paul have adopted that would be more appropriate than οἱ ἀπὸ τῆς Ἰταλίας, which would embrace Christians in general who lived in the country where the writer was?

Then why should this be thought so strange when an example of the very same nature may be produced from the acknowledged writings of Paul? This apostle, writing from Ephesus (1 Cor. 16:8) to the church at Corinth says, *The churches of Asia salute you* (16:19). May not the same questions be urged here as objectors urge in the case above? May we not ask, How could the Asiatics be *personally* known to the Corinthians? And why should Paul speak of *the churches of Asia* and not of that at Ephesus? Plainly, the reason of this was that Christians from different parts of Asia Minor (which is here meant) were collected together in Ephesus, its capital, where they had intercourse with Paul, and knew that he was

² Brackets are original here.

addressing the Corinthians, and desired an expression of their brotherly affection toward them. What is more common every day than for single individuals, or societies of men, who have never had any personal intercourse together to exchange friendly salutations? Could not Paul as well send the salutation of οἱ ἀπὸ τῆς Ἰταλίας as of οἱ ἀπὸ τῆς Ἀσίας?

Such are the various circumstances adverted to in our epistle which serve to render it probable that Paul was the author of it. From its nature, this evidence is *indirect*; but evidence of such a kind is not unfrequently as convincing as that which appears to be more direct. The prefixing or suffixing of a writer's name to an epistle is a more easy and obvious method of interpolation than the insertion of minute circumstances, which imply a very intimate acquaintance with a writer's condition and circumstances.

Will anyone undertake to show that the circumstances which are brought into view above may be more probably attached to some other person than to Paul? If not, then the probability from them is in favour of Paul as the author of our epistle.